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## A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF BLACK AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Maame Coleman

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [maamecoleman1394@gmail.com](mailto:maamecoleman1394@gmail.com)

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A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF BLACK AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS' RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

by

Maame Esi A. Coleman

B.A., University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, 2015  
M.A., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2019

A Dissertation  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

School of Psychological and Behavioral Sciences  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
August 2021

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF BLACK AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS' RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Psychology

Approved by:

Dr. Kathleen Chwalisz Rigney, Chair

Dr. Tawanda Greer Medley

Dr. Pamela Smoot

Dr. Jose Arroyo

Dr. Joseph Brown

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 7, 2021

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Maame Esi A Coleman, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Counseling Psychology,  
presented on May 7, 2021 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF BLACK AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS' RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Kathleen Chwalisz, Ph.D.

This study was designed to explore how Black African international students develop an understanding of their racial identity within the U.S. context. Although there has been considerable previous theoretical and empirical work examining the process of racial identity development (e.g. Cross, 1971; Sellers et al.1998), which has provided foundation for how we continue to understand how U.S. racial minorities develop their racial identities. However, there is a paucity of research on the racial identity development process of non-U.S. born Black people (Hocoy, 1999; Asante, 2012). Even less is known about the role that intersectionality of other identities plays in the racial identity development of non-U.S. Black groups. Thus, this study was intended to provide information about the racial identity development process within the U.S. context of Black African international students at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Grounded Theory method was implemented in this study to analyze qualitative data from nine individual interviews. Findings highlight the complexity of navigating racial identity in a different cultural context. The final analysis revealed seven axial coding categories that comprised of 22 open-coding categories and subcategories. A Grounded Theory model emerged from the analysis, racial identity development as a flowing river, which depicts how participants developed their racial identity within the U.S. cultural context.

These Black African international students' racial identity development process was

characterized by individual understanding of race, race-related incidents and events, constructivist nature of race, and impact of other group identities. At the center of the theoretical structure was the understanding of racial identity development as a journey, rather than a step-by-step process. Participants typically begun the process with the understanding of race within their home country context, and then gradually navigated how to adjust to the U.S. context of what it means to be Black. The process was like traveling down a flowing river, littered with rocks and ripples, and African identity served as a safe vessel in which to navigate the river's flow. The study's conclusions have implications for mental health providers in college counseling centers, international student office personnel, and researchers. Prior to providing services to Black African international students, stakeholders are encouraged to be mindful of the personal and cultural needs of individual students, as well as where they might be in their racial identity development journey.

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my uncle, William B Coleman. Uncle Ato, I truly could not have done any of this without your willingness to invest in my education since birth! Thank you so much for planting this dream of getting a doctorate in me, and supporting me in my journey to becoming the first psychologist in our family. When I get my diploma, it'll be just as much yours as it is mine!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

According to the Institute of International Education, the number of international students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States in the 2016/2017 school year increased by about 3.4 percent from the previous school year (IIE, 2019). The majority of international students who study here are undergraduate students, with most of them enrolled in 4-year institutions. Although the total number of international students enrolled in undergraduate studies rose in the 2017-2018 school year, the number of graduate international students decreased in the 2017-2018 school year (IIE, 2019). The majority of international students enrolled in the 2017-2018 school year were enrolled in an engineering major, which is consistent with the increase of foreign-born students and workers within the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields within the United States (IIE, 2019). The states with the highest number of international students in the U.S are California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, and Illinois, possibly due to the presence of large metropolitan cities within these states. For most international students pursuing higher education in the U.S., about 65%, funding is from international sources (e.g., family and personal funds, sponsorship from home countries, private sponsors from home countries), and about 35% of funding is from U.S. funding sources (e.g., U.S. government funds, student employment, American sponsors).

International students who choose to study in the U.S contribute substantially to their host culture, including providing cultural enrichment to American classrooms and adding to the growth in technical and scientific research. International students are often the most competitive scholars on their campuses, due the higher standards of educational attainments required for eligibility as an international student in many American colleges and universities (Hegarty,

2014). They make cultural exchange experiences possible in institutions of higher learning, through their interactions with other students and hosting of events that celebrate non-American cultures and groups (IIE, 2019). International students also contribute to the economic development of the society. IIE reported that international students in the U.S contributed about \$42 billion dollars to the economy in 2017 (IIE, 2019). In 2012, international students in the U.S contributed more than \$20 billion to the economy. Because international students are classified as non-immigrants, they are expected to return to their home countries upon completion of their degrees. Although there are some employment opportunities for international students who remain in the U.S., fewer than 15% remain as permanent workers. Even though international students contribute a substantial amount of money to the U.S. economy, they do not benefit from the resources and services that American citizens and nationals receive (Hegarty, 2014). For example, international students are unable to receive federal loans, are unable to work off-campus without special authorization, and are unable to receive social security benefits like Medicare and Medicaid.

Although international students contribute substantially to the host country, they do not always experience a smooth transition into the new culture. Researchers have documented international students' acculturative process, as well as the challenges that they experience during this process. Sandhu (1994) theorized that acculturative stress, which is the stress resulting from a challenging acculturative experience, could lead to negative consequences such as depression, generalized anxiety and adjustment-related disorders. This prompted further research on the acculturative experiences of international students. Yeh and Inose (2003) explored age, gender, reported English fluency, social support satisfaction and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress among a large sample of 359 international

students. The researchers found that European international students experienced lower levels of acculturative stress than students from Asia, Africa and Latin America. International students who were also more fluent in English, had close social connections, and were satisfied with their social support reported lower levels of acculturative stress. Yeh and Inose's (2003) findings also highlighted international students' experience of language difficulties, even for students who speak fluent English.

Wilson and Constantine (2003) also examined cultural adjustment and psychological distress among 190 Asian and Latin American international students. Results of the study indicated Latin American students experienced higher levels of psychological distress, compared to their Asian counterparts. The duration of stay in the U.S was also negatively associated with psychological distress symptoms, in that the longer an international student lived in the U.S., the lower their psychological distress. This could be due to students' increasing comfort with seeking social and professional help the longer they lived in the U.S (Wilson & Constantine, 2003). More recently, Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) examined the relationship between different acculturative styles, social support, and acculturative stress in 104 undergraduate and graduate international students. The researchers reported that international students experienced culture shock, language difficulties, a lack of familiarity with the academic system and a loss of close social support.

For some international students, their adjustment process may not be stressful and may actually increase their help-seeking behaviors. For example, Zhan and Dixon (2003) examined the relationships between acculturation and attitudes toward psychological help seeking in a sample of 170 Asian international students. Results indicated that the more acculturated to White culture the Asian international student was, the more positive were their attitudes toward seeking

psychological services for their adjustment-related concerns. Frey and Roysircar (2006) conducted a similar study where they also examined the relationships of perceived prejudice and acculturation and the frequency of the utilization of resources, with a sample of 110 South and East Asian international graduate students. For South Asians, the frequency of utilization of resources increased as their acculturation to U.S. culture increased. However, for East Asians, the relationship between acculturation level and frequency of utilization of resources remained relatively stable over time. The researchers explained the positive correlation between acculturation level and utilization of resources as a result of these students' acceptance of cultural and ethnic differences, given the cultural diversity of their home countries (Frey & Roysircar, 2006).

Despite the growing number of Black African international students in the U.S, there is only a small body of literature focused on their experiences. In the 2017-2018 school year, the enrollment of African international students in American institutions of higher education increased by 4.6% (IIE, 2019). The majority of African international students come from Nigeria, the most populated country on the continent. The existing literature suggests that Black African international students have unique acculturative experiences. Boafo-Arthur (2014) indicated in her theoretical paper that along with experiencing language barriers, homesickness and loneliness, Black African international students also experienced discrimination and racism related to their racial identity. These racism experiences impact their sense of belongingness on their campuses and overall acculturation to the U.S. Asante (2016) also suggested that Black African international students' understanding of their Blackness within the American context largely shaped their experiences as temporary immigrants. When Black African international students move to the U.S, they become members of a racial minority group and must navigate

the sociopolitical implications of being a racial minority in America. For most of these students, the transition from being a member of a racial majority to living as a non-citizen racial minority group member can be quite challenging and taxing on their acculturative experiences (Asante, 2016).

Race is a well-researched construct within the social sciences, although it is complex and challenging to operationalize. Race has sometimes been defined from a biological perspective to mean an identity categorized by a person's physical features and genetic characteristics such as hair texture and skin color (Chavez & Guido-Dibrito, 1999). Race has also been discussed within the sciences as a social construct that refers to the sense of group identity based on a person's perception that they share a similar heritage with member of a racial group (Helms, 1993). This definition of race recognizes that although race is a social construct, it still has real life implications on how others move through their society. However, the conceptualization of race as a social construct has been criticized, as some researchers have argued that this definition still relies on skin color and other biological characteristics (Chavez & Guido-Dibrito, 1999).

Despite the challenges around conceptualizing race, various developmental models have been created to understand how specific groups develop their racial identity. One of the most well-known racial identity development models is Cross' (1971) nigrescence model of Black identity development. This model presents identity development in four linear stages: (a) pre-encounter stage, (b) encounter stage, (c) immersion-emersion stage, and (d) internalization. Another well-known model of racial identity development is the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI), developed by Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous (1998). The MMRI is an amalgamation of already-existing group identity theories, with a special focus on the historical and cultural experiences that make racial identity a unique form of group identity.

MMRI was developed on four major assumptions: (a) identities are contextual constructs that are also stable properties of an African American person; (b) different identities of a single person are hierarchically ordered; (c) an African American person's perception of their racial identity is the most valid indicator of their identity; and (d) the status of an African American individual's racial identity is more important than its development (Sellers et al., 1998). Out of these four major assumptions, Sellers and colleagues (1998) also identified four dimensions of racial identity development: (a) racial salience, (b) centrality of the identity, (c) the regard in which the person holds the group associated with the identity, and (d) the ideology associated with the identity.

These well-known models were developed to explain the racial identity development of African American people, and they may not be applicable to Black African international students. Because international students are foreign-born by definition, they do not experience the same type of racial socialization that American-born Black individuals encounter. Thus, their racial identity development may not follow the same stages outlined in Cross' (1971) or Sellers and colleagues' (1998) identity development models. Therefore, it is important to develop research focused on the unique experiences of Black African international students, and how these students navigate their racial identity in the U.S. context.

The primary purpose of the proposed study was to qualitatively explore how Black African international students' racial identity development impacts their overall acculturative experiences. Given the limited research in this area, a Grounded Theory methodology was used to develop a conceptualization of how Black international students navigate their racial identity within the U.S. context. Moreover, a Grounded Theory approach would also capture the ways that racial identity impacts Black African international students' acculturative experiences. Using



a qualitative approach would also ensure that the experiences are captured in participants' own language and conceptualization. The data for this study emerged from individual interviews with Black African international students.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a dearth in research about the experiences of Black immigrant populations, specifically Black international student groups (Asante, 2016; Benson, 2006). Although some research exists on how different international student groups acculturate to the U.S (e.g., Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Yeh & Inose, 2003), there is scant research on how Black African international students come to understand their racial identity within the U.S. context. Due to the lack of research on the resocialization process, psychologists have meager information on how Black African international students come to understand what it means to be Black in the U.S. The proposed study will contribute to the existing research on how Black African international students learn about their Black racial identity within the U.S. context. This study focuses specifically on critical incidents that facilitate the racial resocialization of Black African international students. I will explore how critical incidents and acculturative experiences help international students to understand what being Black means in America. This literature review will include a focus on racial identity development models, research on the racial identity development of Black African international students, and the existing literature on their acculturative experiences.

#### **Racial Identity Development**

The concept of race within the U.S is complex and difficult to operationalize for study (Chavez & Guido-Dibrito, 1999), resulting in confusion about even what really constitutes race and racial identity. Therefore, researchers are sometimes unclear and inconsistent in how they explain or study race, leading to further confusion in the social sciences about how to properly operationalize and study race-related issues (Sue, 1993). A full review of the literature related to

race and racial identity is beyond the scope of the dissertation. However, some key concepts and models are presented as background.

Some researchers define race from a biological perspective. As a biological category, race is determined by a person's physical features and genetic characteristics such as hair texture, skin color and eye color (Chavez & Guido-Dibrito, 1999). This definition ascribes certain characteristics to different groups of people and assumes that character flaws are a result of a person's racial identity. For example, from a biological definition of race, past researchers have placed the White race as superior and more intelligent than races and ethnicities. The biological definition of race ignores within-group differences in the same racial categories, as well the similarities that exist among individuals of different racial categories (Chavez & Guido-Dibrito, 1999).

More recently, race has been discussed as a social construct that has real life implications on people's lives. From this perspective, race is a sense of group identity based on an individual's perception that they share a similar heritage with members of a racial group (Helms, 1993). This understanding of race and racial identity moves away from the biological determinants of race and focuses on the perception of shared heritage and group membership. Conceptualizing race as a social construct also brings to light the socially constructed connotations of the term, as well as the social distance between different racial groups (Quintana, 2007). However, a limitation of understanding race as a social construct is that the social sciences continue to categorize people often based on skin color and other biological characteristics associated with race. Therefore, racial identity is simply a surface manifestation based on phenotypical expression yet has deep implications for how we are treated and our access to various resources (Chavez & Guido-Dibrito, 1999). Racial identity development is also

a small aspect of Black African international students' migratory experience within the U.S. Therefore, this dissertation will include a brief review on existing models and literature about racial identity development.

**Racial identity development models.** Numerous researchers have explored how people's sense of racial identity develops over the lifespan. The study of race and racial identity has been a challenging endeavor, due to competing conceptualizations and measures that are influenced by ideology, political climate, and the adherence to scientific advancements (Cokley, 2007). For the purpose of the proposed study, racial identity is defined as a collective identity of a group of people who have been socialized to consider themselves as a racial group (Cokley, 2007; Helms & Cook, 1999). Racial identity is considered a more appropriate construct to study when researchers are interested in how individuals construct their identities in response to a highly racialized and oppressive society. Studies of racial identity development have tended to focus on African American and European American samples, which might suggest that researchers tend to associate the study of racial identity with specific ethnic groups (Cokley, 2007).

Several researchers have developed racial identity development models to explain how members of different races develop their racial identity. William Cross (1971) developed a seminal racial identity development model that categorized Black racial identity development according to five stages. These stages focus on *nigrescence* or Black self-actualization, where Black people move from a stage of denial of their Blackness to a stage of self-acceptance (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1984). Parham (1989) then developed an extension to Cross' (1971) original stages of Black racial identity development. This extension focused primarily on the qualitative difference between Black individuals who develop their racial identities in their late

adolescence/early adulthood and those that develop their racial identities in their middle and late adulthoods. Parham (1989) recognized that an early childhood understanding of a person's racial identity is influenced by the home environment, and by the externalized parental attitudes and societal stereotypes that the child had incorporated into their own worldview. Parham (1989) also suggested that a Black person's racial identity developed out of their personal thoughts, behaviors and feelings that were rooted in Black or African culture. Therefore, their racial identity development resulted from the interaction between both individual and environmental factors (Parham, 1989). It is important to highlight that although the model is presented in a series of stages, real life rarely follows a neatly demarcated path, and the racial identity development tends to be a process, with some individuals repeating multiple stages.

The first phase of the nigrescence model is the pre-encounter stage which depicts the identity that is to be changed (Cross 1971; 1991). At this juncture, the Black individual may have internalized societal discrimination as self-hatred and separates themselves from their Black identity and other Black people. An individual at this stage may have a low level of identification with other Black people and may not make their racial identity the focal point of their self-conceptualization. According to Parham's (1989) extension, a late adolescence/early adulthood Black individual at the pre-encounter stage of development is more likely to be part of social circles with very few non-White people and is also more likely to adopt and assimilate to dominant White cultural values and belief systems. A middle-aged adult at this stage may prefer to adopt the Eurocentric standards of individualism and materialism and may also deny the extent to which their race has been an inhibiting factor within various aspects of their lives. They may also choose to isolate from other Black people and create social circles that consist primarily of White individuals (Parham, 1989).

The second phase of the nigrescence model is the encounter stage, which is triggered when the Black individual encounters a personal or social experience that dislodges their acceptance of assimilation into a racist society (Cross 1971). At this stage, the person might have a racist encounter with a White person, or an encounter with a Black person that causes them to question and challenge their initial acceptance of a society characterized by discrimination and racism. At this stage, the Black individual may also begin to shake loose of the internalized self-hatred and negative messages about one's racial group. According to Parham's (1989) extension, a late adolescent/early adult Black individual at the encounter stage may experience confusion about their values due to experiences of personal or social events which cause them to question their initial acceptance of and assimilation to White values and norms. The event that acts as a catalyst may be a negative racist experience with a White individual or a positive experience with a Black person (Parham, 1989). A negative experience with a White individual may also elicit feelings of anger and frustration in the individual toward the discriminative and racist society in which they once tried to assimilate. A middle-aged Black individual at the encounter stage also experiences racist encounters (e.g., racially degrading experience or not receiving economic rewards that were promised at work) or confrontations with Black people who question the individual's ethnic loyalties and lifestyle. Their experiences of racist encounters may elicit the same feelings of anger and frustrations that a young adult at this stage may experience.

The third phase, immersion-emersion, is characterized by an attempt to separate from the old identity while developing and moving toward a new Black identity. In immersion, a person commits fully to a Black identity to the exclusion of other identities. An individual at this stage may develop "Blacker-than-thou" (p. 159) attitudes and a preoccupation with proving that they

are “Black enough” (Cross, 1971). They may also develop social groups comprised of only Black people, and intentionally desist from associating deeply with White people or people of other racial groups. From Parham’s (1989) extension, for a late adolescent/early adult Black individual at the immersion-emersion stage, the feelings of anger and frustration toward White people as well as the newly found positive feelings toward Black people might lead them to develop a Black frame of reference (Parham, 1989). They may begin to absorb large amounts of information about Black culture, become preoccupied with being “Blacker than thou”, and form predominantly Black peer groups. The middle-aged Black individual at this stage of development might channel the anger and frustration that they experienced in the encounter stage in institutionalized ways. For example, if the person works, they might engage in efforts to develop and maintain a strong Black presence at their workplace. If they are affiliated with an educational institution, the individual may stress the essence of teaching Black-oriented courses (Parham, 1989).

The fourth phase is internalization, in which the individual may feel more secure in their racial identity and even begin to comfortably interact with members of other racial groups without rejecting their own racial identity (Cross, 1971; 1991). At this stage, the individual is able to be pro-Black while still recognizing the marginalization and oppression that other groups of people experience (Cross, 1991). They might extend their friend group to include people of other races and still maintain strong ties to Black communities and culture. In this stage, the adolescent/young adult’s preoccupation with a specific type of Blackness may become replaced with a more realistic perception of their racial identity (Parham, 1989). Their feelings of animosity toward members of other groups may be replaced with a sense of inner security about their own racial identity that allows them to engage comfortably with other racial groups.

Internalization attitudes at this stage allows the adolescent/young adult Black person to maintain a pro-Black perspective while still recognizing the ways that members of other social groups are oppressed and marginalized (e.g., recognizing the homophobia that non-heterosexual people experience, or the xenophobia experienced by immigrant groups). Adolescents and young adults who have reached the internalization stage may also become better at *code switching* (the process of switching between two different languages or language dialects when speaking to specific people) and live as bicultural individuals (Parham, 1989). A middle-aged Black individual in this phase may become more comfortable in their Black identity and begin to develop relationships with other racial groups as well. They may also begin to insist on being acknowledged as Black while still recognizing the experiences of other minority groups. They may open up their social circles to include non-Black individuals and interact in ways that suggest confidence in their own Black racial identity (Parham, 1989).

The original model by Cross (1971) included a fifth stage of commitment. At this stage, the Black individual was thought to convert their newly developed Black identity into action by working to dismantle systems of oppression in the society. This individual may actively seek out engagement in civil groups that draw attention to or work against various forms of injustices. Worrell, Cross and Vandiver (2001) modified the original model and collapsed the last two stages (internalization and internalization-commitment) into one stage of internalization, where the Black individual developed a positive racial identity and attempted to work against oppressive systems that they had initially accepted and internalized. These two different stages were collapsed into one due to lack of research evidence to support attitudinal differences between Black people in each of these stages (Worrell, et al., 2001).



Another model of racial identity development is the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI). Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous (1998) developed the MMRI as an amalgamation of already existing group identity theories with special attention to the historical and cultural experiences that render racial identity as a unique form of group identity for African American peoples. The developers of the MMRI made four major assumptions in developing the model: (a) identities are contextual constructs that are also stable properties of an African American person; (b) the different identities of a single individual are hierarchically ordered; (c) an African American individual's perception of their racial identity is the most valid indicator of their identity; and (d) the status of an African American individual's racial identity is more important than its development (Sellers et al., 1998).

Of these four major assumptions, the developers of MMRI also identified four dimensions of racial identity development: (a) racial salience, (b) the centrality of the identity, (c) the regard in which the individual holds the group associated with the identity, and (d) the ideology associated with the identity. Racial salience according to MMRI is the extent to which one's race is a key aspect of one's self-conceptualization at any given moment. Racial centrality refers to the extent to which an individual normatively defines themselves with regard to their racial identity. Regard is the positive or negative feeling attached to a person's racial identity. Racial ideology refers to an individual's beliefs, values and opinions with respects to how they believe that other members of their race ought to act (Sellers et al., 1998). A major benefit of the MMRI is that it provides an integrative model with which to investigate the structure and functioning of an African American Black identity within the historical and cultural contexts (Endale, 2018). A difference between Cross' (1991; 2001) model of nigrescence and the MMRI (Seller, et al., 1998) is that the former model conceptualizes Black racial identity development as

a linear progress of stages, while the MMRI conceptualizes a person's African American identity in terms of their status in a given moment (Endale, 2018).

### **Researching racial identity development model with Black African population.**

Hocoy (1999) explored how Cross' (1971) "Nigrescence Model of Black Identity Development" fit with a Black South African sample. The researcher first begun with observations and interactions with potential participants to confirm that the construct of Black identity exists in South Africa. Given the history of apartheid, the Black South African identity and perspective was unique and could not be only captured by traditional survey methods. Therefore, the researcher decided to combine ethnographic methods (naturalistic observations, study of census information and demographics, and examination of folklore and traditional practices) with phenomenological research methods (formal and informal interviews) to ensure that collected data was reflective of the local conceptualization of a South African Black identity (Hocoy, 1999). The researcher and his team immersed themselves in the data by living in the communities where he conducted informal and formal interviews, which is a typical practice in ethnographic research. A diverse group of participants from institutions of higher education dedicated solely to technology (Technikons) were sampled for the formal interviews. The researchers used a phenomenological process to analyze the data, starting from natural meaning units which were clustered into themes, and ending at an experiential framework for understanding the process of racial identity development in Black South Africans (Hocoy, 1999).

Results of the interview analyses indicated that most participants identified processes that were consistent with Cross' (1971). A majority of the participants described what is consistent with the pre-encounter stage of identity development, in which they subscribed to a worldview that supported the superiority of White people and the inferiority of Black people (Hoey, 1999).

Individuals at this stage had very little understanding and regard for their Black African identity and believed that they had to assimilate to White culture to be successful in work and school. Many of the participants also endorsed Cross' (1971) encounter stage, where they experienced one or more racist incidents that shattered their assimilative pre-encounter worldview. Participants also endorsed the immersion-emersion stage of Cross' (1971) model. The first part of this stage involved participants immersing themselves into Black culture and absorbing large amounts of information about Black South African identity and cultural practices. The second part of the stage involved participants emerging out of this intensely emotional and ideological framework of Black identity to a calmer and more comprehensive Black identity (Hocoy, 1999).

A few of the participants demonstrated characteristics of Cross'(1971) internalization stage, such as pride in their African heritage and an understanding of 'good' and 'bad' characteristics in all individuals regardless of race. These participants also reported that they believed in the equality of all races and the need for equitable distribution of resources among all people within their society (Hocoy, 1999). Although there were a few participants who did not endorse any of the stages of the Nigrescence Model, the overall results suggested that Cross' (1971) model was beneficial in understanding the racial identity development of Black South Africans.

### **Summary and Critique: Racial Identity**

Racial identity development is a well-researched topic within the field of psychology. Several models exist to explain racial identity development for various racial groups (e.g., Cross, 1971; Helms, 1990). The existing theories on racial identity suggest that for many people, racial identity is a key aspect of their overall identity development (Cokley,2007). The existing theories of racial identity development present development in linear stages, with an implicit assumption

that individuals complete one stage of development before moving on to the next stage. For example, Cross' (1971) Nigrescence Model presented four distinct linear stages of development that included explanations about changes likely to occur as the person progresses through the stages. A majority of the existing racial identity development models also focus on identity development of racial minority group members, with only few models developed to focus on how White racial group members develop their identity (Helms, 1990).

Several of the existing research on racial identity development have used quantitative methods to explain how individuals develop their racial identity. Various quantitative measures have also been developed in efforts to assess for levels of racial identity for individuals in members of various racial groups (e.g., Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Helms & Carter, 1990). A limitation of using quantitative measures is that participants are categorized according to their developmental stage, with little information on how the individuals experience and understand the developmental process. There are few existing qualitative studies on racial identity development (e.g., Collins, 2000; Kim, Suyemoto & Turner, 2010). Thus, more studies ought to qualitatively explore how individuals experience their racial developmental process. Furthermore, most studies have focused on the racial identity development of people socialized in the U.S., which affects the external validity and ability to generalize to racial minority individuals socialized outside this country. Therefore, more studies are needed to explore whether existing models of racial identity development fit non-American samples.

### **Black African Identity and Acculturative Experiences**

Black African immigrant communities within the U.S continue to grow, due to reasons such as educational opportunities, political instability on the African continent, and historical-structural paradigms of forced dependency relationships between African and Western countries

(Takyi, 2002; U.S Census Bureau, 2014). Existing research suggests that although on average Black African immigrants possess higher levels of education and human capital, their gross earnings fall below what their educational credentials would warrant, when they migrate to the United States (Arthur, 2000). Researchers also indicate that even for African immigrants who gain citizenship in Canada or the U.S., many continue to experience downward economic and social mobility due to workforce discrimination, racist policies and xenophobic attitudes (Creese, 2011). Therefore, it is important for Psychology and other disciplines to direct more attention to the experiences of African immigrants in the U.S.

One important variable to understand for Black African immigrants is racial identity. Despite ample evidence to suggest that Black African immigrant populations have doubled each decade since 1970 (Gambino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014; United States Census Bureau, 2014), there is only a small amount of literature that has been focused on how different Black African immigrant groups navigate their racial identity in the United States (Showers, 2015). Some authors have suggested that to achieve upward social and economic mobility, Black African immigrants assimilated into the White American socio-economic mainstream culture (Showers, 2015). Authors, through research findings, have also suggested that Black African immigrants also chose to stress their ethnic and national identities over their racial identity, in an effort to distance from the negative socio-economic implications of a Black identity in America (Habecker, 2012; Showers, 2015). Different Black African immigrant populations (e.g., international students, worker, and permanent residents) have unique acculturative experiences relevant to their immigration status, which are shaped by their racial identity development (Asante, 2016; Boafo-Arthur, 2014).

## **Black African Immigrants' Racial Identity Development**

Conceptual models have been developed to explain how skin color and native origin may shape the racial identities of Black immigrants in America (Benson, 2006). One of such models is the assimilative model (Gordon, 1964), in which the author posited that immigrant groups follow a linear trajectory of becoming more Americanized over time. In an assimilative model, immigrant groups find the native group that is closest in cultural identification, and then try to assimilate to that group. This model would suggest that Black immigrants would assimilate to African American culture, as that is the closest native cultural group. Although Black African immigrants may experience discrimination and racism when they assimilate into African American culture, the limited racial context of the U.S offers few identity options in terms of assimilation. The racial system in the U.S. does not offer adequate distinctions in ethnic variations and diversity, thus, assimilation for Black immigrants entails become a part of the already-existing Black racial minority group (Benson, 2006)

Another model is the segmented assimilation model (Benson, 2006), in which the author posited a more fluid and reflexive relationship between migrants and the host society. This model aligns with the social constructivist approach to race (Atwater, 1996) in which racial identities are conceptualized as social constructions produced through the interactions of racial classification and human agency. According to the segmented assimilation model, incorporation can occur along multiple paths with different segments of the migrant population, at varying rates. Incorporation depends both on the characteristics of the migrant group and how the migrant group is received in the U.S. society. The segmented assimilation model therefore would predict that Black migrants would not be uniformly incorporated into the U.S. society, as not all of them will accept the ascribed Black African identity (Benson, 2006)

**Research on Black immigrant assimilation and racial identity.** Some researchers have suggested that Black African immigrants follow a non-linear trajectory of racial identity, as this identity may be impacted by other identities such as nationality and ethnicity (Benson, 2006). Benson (2006) used a segmented assimilation model to investigate whether native origin overpowers skin color in shaping the racial identity formation of Black migrants. Data for this analysis came from a large household survey conducted 1992 and 1994 in Boston, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Detroit. Survey data from six different Black migrant groups (African, Puerto Rican, Central American, Dominican, West Indian, and Haitian) were compared across two racial identity dimensions: racial group identification and racial group consciousness. Racial group identification was explained as the degree to which people share a sense of common fate with other Black people and believe that whatever happens to Black Americans also affects them. Racial group consciousness was conceptualized as the ideological meaning that Black people in a given society attach to their racial identity (Benson, 2006). Duration of time in the United States, English language ability, and skin tone were used as control variables in the data analysis.

Results of Benson's (2006) survey study indicated that while most Black immigrants developed a shared racial group identity with native-born Black Americans over time, how they interpreted their racial identity varies by native origin. Puerto-Rican migrants, unlike other Black migrant groups, distanced themselves from native-born Black Americans due to differences in skin tone. Puerto Rican migrants who have lighter skin tones have more identity options within the U.S. categorization system than migrants with darker skin tones. This is because they are able to distant themselves from being labeled as either White or Black and have the option of

identifying as biracial. Therefore, this may suggest that skin tone, along with native origin, acted as a superior status that dictated racial group identification within the U.S.

The *color complex*, a term used to describe the social, political and economic implications that variations in skin tone has among members of the same racial group (Russel, Wilson & Hall, 1993) has been explored within the social sciences. After the liberation of Black people as slave laborers in the U.S, some Black social groups became stratified along color lines, with mixed-race Black people edging closer to Whiteness and much darker Black people at the bottom. Some mixed-race and lighter-skinned Black people experienced easier access to White spaces, and some segregated themselves from and actively discriminated against darker Black people (Russel, Wilson & Hall, 1993). Colorism (prejudice and discrimination based on the tone of a person's skin color) has been recorded in Black churches, preparatory schools and colleges. Black people who wanted to join color-conscious churches and academic institutions were often required to pass the *paper bag*, the *door* or the *comb* test. These were tests designed to determine whether a person's skin tone was light enough or their hair texture loose enough to afford them certain resources and privileges. Although these tests no longer exist, skin tone continues to sometimes impact the social, political and economic resources that are available to people, especially Black people (Russel, Wilson & Hall, 1993).

Black migrants who lived in the U.S for longer periods of time were also more likely to align their racial identification with Black Americans. This could be explained by longer exposure to racial discrimination that is similar to what native-born Black Americans experience (Benson, 2006). Black migrants who had higher levels of education and were gainfully employed were also more likely to share a common fate with other Black people. Benson (2006) identified two possible explanations for this finding: (a) highly educated migrants were less likely to buy



into the idea of meritocracy (people get what they have earned or are qualified for) than migrants with little to no education; and (b) Black immigrants with more years of education are more likely to experience higher levels discrimination in the labor market than those with less education.

Habecker (2012) specifically examined how Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants in the U.S developed a unique *Habasha* ethno-racial identity to challenge the ascribed Black racial identity, and how nationality further nuanced America's existing racial hierarchy. The Habasha identity is both a racial and ethnic identity and emphasizes Semitic origins in an effort to separate these immigrants from all other Black groups. The term Habasha has been used to mean different things at different times. For example, it was once used to described Abyssinian lands in East and West Africa, and then later used to describe Ethiopian slaves and sunburnt Egyptians who has a similar skin tone to the Ethiopian slaves (Habecker, 2012). The term was later reclaimed by ethnic Amharans (Ethiopia) and Tigrinyans (Eritrea) Orthodox Christians who monopolized state power in parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea, to distinguish themselves from "pagan" and Muslim Ethiopians.

The data for Habecker's (2012) study was taken from a larger one-year ethnographic field study conducted with six different groups of first-generation African immigrants in the Washington, D.C. area. The researcher focused mainly on the data for Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants. Analyses of the data indicated that Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants kept transnational ties by maintaining close ties to their home group, by staying abreast of and engaging in political activities and in community building projects in their home countries. These activities served as possible defense mechanisms against the racial barriers that hindered Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants' integration into mainstream U.S. society (Habecker, 2012).

Another way that Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants maintained their identity was by creating Habasha spaces in the Washington, D.C. area. These spaces typically included grocery stores, restaurants, bars, churches and sporting arenas and allowed immigrants to maintain their language, food, religion and other cultural practices while living in another country. Although several of the participants included in the study had interactions with individuals of other racial groups, they expressed a sense of pride and relief in knowing that they could retreat to these Habasha spaces and immediately feel like they were back home (Habecker, 2012). Yet another strategy that Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants used to separate from other Black groups within the U.S. was by denying their experiences of individual racism and the ways that institutionalized racism impact their community. Although Ethiopians and Eritreans are considered Black within the U.S, many of the participants included in the ethnographic study did not personally identify as Black. They also reported taking encounters at face value, deciding not to let the possibility of racism and discrimination affect them (Habecker, 2012).

These studies are examples of how both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to critically examine how different Black immigrants develop their racial identity in America. Such research highlights the similar strategies that various Black immigrant groups utilize, as well as strategies that are uniquely specific to certain Black African immigrant groups. For example, both Benson (2006) and Habecker (2012) highlight that some Black immigrant groups separate from native-born Black American groups by relying on their national and ethnic identity. Black immigrant groups may separate from native-born Black Americans in order to distance from the negative connotations associated with being Black in America. While Benson (2006) had relied on existing quantitative data, Habecker (2012) had qualitatively focused on Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants within the U.S. Although these groups are from different

countries with tense political relations, they joined together to form a Habasha identity in the U.S. as a way of separating from both native and foreign-born Black groups. Although both qualitative and quantitative methodologies can be used to document the experiences of Black African immigrant groups, qualitative research methods are better suited for capturing experiences that are unique to specific groups, especially ones that are underrepresented in the research literature (Polkinghorne, 2005).

**The Influence of Black Identity on the Acculturative Experiences of Black African Immigrants.** Berry (2005) provided a commonly cited conceptualization of acculturation theory that was influenced by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) *transactional theory of coping*.

Acculturation was conceptualized as the process of change in cultural patterns that occurred when people of different cultural backgrounds engage in prolonged first-hand contact with each other. Although acculturation is a neutral term and suggests that both cultures experience some significant change, in reality, acculturation induces change in only one of the groups (Berry 1997; 2005). Acculturation has been studied in the context of immigrant groups, with much of the focus placed on the changes that immigrants experience when they move into a new culture or country.

Berry (2005) posited that acculturative stress occurs when an immigrant experiences a poor person-environment fit or a negative interaction within the host culture. When a stressful incident occurs, an individual cognitively appraises it as either harmless or harmful. If the incident is appraised as harmful, the individual then assesses their coping resources to determine whether the incident will be taxing to their resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In his conceptualization of acculturative stress, Berry (2005) suggested that immigrants experienced varying levels of stress resulting from their efforts to adjust to the host culture. Researchers have

suggested that racial identity impacted the acculturative experiences of Black African immigrants in the United States (Boafo-Arthur; Waters, 2001), from their experiences in education (Asante, 2016) to their experiences in the workplace (e.g., Arthur, 2009; Creese, 2011). Boafo-Arthur (2014) discussed in a conceptual paper how Black African international students often struggled with adjusting to a new academic system, living away from their support systems, and balancing financial and academic demands of being international students. In addition to these experiences, they also encountered racism and discrimination, which impacted their sense of belongingness on their campuses, as well as their overall acculturation to the United States.

Showers (2015) qualitatively explored how racial and ethnic identity impacted the work experiences of Black African immigrant women. The researcher interviewed forty-two women who were registered nurses from various countries in West Africa. The interviews were coded and analyzed using a grounded theory method. Themes emerging from the interviews highlighted participants' experiences of racism and discrimination in the various health-care settings in which they worked. Most of the participants recounted incidents of individual racism and discrimination at work, such as patients calling them racial slurs, patients questioning their authority, patients' families acting in racist ways towards them, and clients mistaking them for nurses' aides. These experiences suggested that as Black women, there was an assumption on the part of patients and their families that they occupied the lowest rungs of the health professional hierarchy (Showers, 2015).

Participants also discussed more institutional and structural forms of racism, such as the high concentration of African immigrant women and other immigrant women of color in the least regarded specializations and units within hospitals and other health care settings. They

believed that there were structural obstacles to upward mobility for African women in the healthcare profession, as well as racial hierarchies within healthcare workspaces in the United States. Within this hierarchy, White nurses and professionals seemed to occupy the top spaces, then Asian or Asian American professionals, then Black professionals. The participants discussed how nationality further complicated this hierarchy. For example, although Black professionals are at the bottom of the hierarchy, African health care professionals tend to report more experiences of racism and discrimination than African American health care professionals (Showers, 2015).

Themes from Showers' (2015) interviews also highlighted various coping mechanisms that participants used to combat their experiences of racism and discrimination in the workplace. The least common strategy was to lodge formal complaints or report individual acts of racism to supervisors. Rather, participants reported that they tended to highlight their intelligence and professionalism, in the hope that displaying these characteristics would change some of the stereotypical preconceptions about Black Africans. For some of the participants, they highlighted their competence by obtaining advanced degrees and specialized credentials in their field. Yet another strategy was distancing from co-ethnics at work or choosing to work in predominantly White spaces (Showers, 2015). Because Whiteness is associated with success in America, the participants who intentionally distanced from other Africans in their workplaces hoped that their association with White spaces and individuals would grant them advancement and upward mobility in their professions. These findings also suggest that the acculturative experiences of Black African immigrants are complex and is compounded by their racial identity and resulting experiences of individual and institutionalized racism (Showers, 2015).

## **Black African International Students' Racial Identity Development**

Although the number of international students in the U.S from continental Africa continues to increase (IIE, 2019), there is scarce existing research focused on the racial identity experiences of these students. Black African students may work to negotiate their racial identity within the U.S. in order to understand their shifting position as a Black person from their country of origin to a Black immigrant in the United States (Asante, 2016). Although they have access to U.S institutions of higher education, Black African students must also navigate institutional racism and cultural bias to make sense of their experiences as immigrants in the U.S. African international students hold unique immigration status that impacts their experiences. Because they live in the country as non-immigrant residents and are granted temporary residency for the duration of their studies, international students are expected to return to their home countries upon completion of their studies. Although some international students remain to gain work permits after completing their degrees, it is assumed that their stay in the country will be temporary. Asante (2016) examined how African international students experienced racial re-socialization and negotiated their Black identities while living in the U.S. For the purpose of the study, Blackness was conceptualized as “an identity with various intersections that are contested, remade and negotiated within the context of shared histories and struggles” (p. 368).

### ***Research on Black international student experiences***

Asante (2016) used a qualitative phenomenological method to examine themes that emerged from focus group interviews with Black African college-aged students. Twenty-three participants were recruited from two different African student organizations focused on building communities of support for African students. All participants arrived in the United States from sub-Saharan African countries, and more than half of them had lived in the U.S. for more than

three years. Two major themes, *negotiating Blackness as Africans* and *negotiating Blackness with African Americans*, emerged from the interview data and illustrated how participants navigated their subjective positions surrounding the notion of Blackness, going between their identification as Africans and their racial positioning as Blacks in relation to African Americans within the U.S. (Asante, 2016). The theme of negotiating Blackness as Africans highlighted participants' experience of tension between *avowed* and *ascribed* identity, which resulted in them emphasizing their ethnic African identity. By emphasizing their African identity, participants tried to decide for themselves which of their identities would be salient. The theme of negotiating Blackness with African Americans also highlighted some participants' desire to distance from Blackness within the U.S context, due to the negative stereotypes and socio-political implications of being Black in the U.S. For these participants, distancing from the U.S. context of Blackness was a way to self-protect against racism and discrimination (Asante, 2016).

The themes that emerged from Asante's (2016) interviews also reflected the ways that participants had to learn new cultural performances and behaviors associated with Blackness when they migrated to the United States. For many Black African students, the cultural and social norms around their Black identity in their countries of origin are quite different from how Blackness is perceived in the U.S. These differences may be a result of the historical and collective experiences that separate Black Africans from African Americans (Asante, 2016). For example, African Americans have a shared history of their ancestors being transported as slave labor from the African continent and being disconnected from their African heritage, whereas majority of Black African international students have direct ties to their African heritage. The identity negotiations used by Black African international students are nuanced, complex, contingent on their context, and can sometimes seem contradictory as they search for embodied

agency within spaces where Blackness is steeped in a collective experience they might not identify with (Asante, 2016).

Although other studies have been developed to explore how Black African international students develop their racial identity in the U.S context, most of these studies are completed theses and dissertations and may not appear in the published literature. Manguvo (2013) used a mixed method study to explore the interrelationship among African international students' ethnic identity, perceived acceptance, and social adjustment for African international students. The researcher used a sequential method in which the qualitative phase was conducted first, followed by the quantitative phase. For the qualitative portion of the study, Manguvo (2013) used a multi-method approach to data collection encompassing interviews, freewriting, document analysis, and direct participant observation. Twenty African international students were sampled from three different universities. Manguvo (2013) also observed African students during various events at a university. For some of these events, the researcher was an observer and participant, while for others he was only an observer. Participants' sense of acceptance by host country members were collected via questionnaires asking them to write words or phrases they thought were impressions that Americans held of African immigrants. All the qualitative data was transcribed and analyzed using Grounded Theory methodology. Data from free writing was analyzed through quantitative content analysis.

Results from Manguvo (2013) Black African international students negotiated two main identities: (a) a monolithic African identity, and (b) a Black racial identity within the U.S. context. In order to navigate an ethnic African identity, students consolidated their ethnic and national differences to adopt an African identity. The single African identity provided a medium through which to explain African affairs to others, and also served as a way to distance from the



inherent negative stereotypes associated with a Black identity in the U.S. For these students, identifying with other Africans, regardless of country of origin, was a way to separate from native-born Americans and also from the negative implications of being Black. Their navigation of a Black racial identity was also complicated by their lack of solidarity with native-born Black people. For many of the participants, their racial identity did not become salient until they moved to the U.S. Because they did not perceive themselves to share a similar identity with native-born Black people, they displayed little empathy towards pertinent issues for native-born Blacks. Their use of an African ethnic identity as a way to separate from other Black groups also further complicated their racial identity development (Manguvo, 2013).

Mandishona (2018), following the recommendations by Manguvo (2013), developed a study to explore institutional and regional influences on the racial identity development of Black African international students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the American South. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with nine participants from different HBCUs and followed up with the participants with journal questions. Mandishona (2018) used a phenomenological approach to analyze data, due to the lack of existing research on the racial identity development of Black African international students. A qualitative phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to capture the complex phenomenon of acculturation with the added intricacies of being a Black non-American student in the United States (Mandishona, 2018).

Seven major themes emerged from Mandishona's (2018) initial interviews and follow-up journal questions with participants. The themes generally described participants' knowledge and perceptions of southern history, and suggested that for many participants, their knowledge of the south and HBCUs were largely based on American television shows and news that they had been

exposed to in their home countries. Themes also indicated that when participants moved to the U.S., the significance they attached to their racial identity changed (Mandishona, 2018). Prior to moving to the United States, the participants did not consider their race as a salient identity marker, as all participants originated from countries with majority Black populations. However, after living and studying in the U.S., participants became more conscious of their race and the implications of a Black racial identity in the U.S context. This change in salience of racial identity seemed to be facilitated by experiences of negative incidents such as police brutality, feelings of “otherness” and experiences of racism outside of their HBCU campuses (Mandishona, 2018). Themes also highlighted other identities that were salient for participants, such as ethnic/national and religious identities. These identities sometimes helped participants cope with feelings of isolation, and also distinguish themselves from Black American and Black Caribbean students in their universities. Themes also captured the relationships between participants and other international students, as well as relationships with Black American peers that fostered participants’ understanding of their racial identity. Relationships with other Black international students as well as American-born Black students provided participants with spaces where they could safely explore experiences of racism and discrimination and develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be Black in the U.S. (Mandishona, 2018).

### ***Research on Black international student acculturative experiences***

Black African international students may have unique acculturative experiences due to their racial identity. Due to their temporary residency status, these students are expected to return to their home countries upon completing their studies. However, while living in the U.S., they may experience discrimination and racism that could impact their acculturative experiences. Researchers have suggested international students experience social isolation while living in the

U.S. Yeh and Inose (2003), in a study that explored predictors of acculturative stress among 359 international students, reported that students who reported feeling isolated from their American peers and university campus also reported higher levels of acculturative stress.

Results also indicated that international students experienced language barriers (even for those who spoke English) and difficulty adjusting to a new academic environment. In addition to these, Black international students' racial identity also impacts their acculturative experience (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Black African international students are exposed to *nativism* (the policy of protecting the interests of native-born people against immigrants) and racism due to their status as racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). A few researchers have examined how racial identity impacts the acculturative experiences of Black international students (e.g., Haskins et al., 2013; Mwangi, Changamire & Mosselson, 2018).

Haskins and colleagues (2013) used a phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of Black international students in a graduate Counseling program. In their study, the researchers explained the phenomenological approach as a "form of research exploration that seeks to understand, examine, and describe the experiences of the participants under investigation" (p. 164). The participants in this study were recruited from a predominantly White institution (PWI) and interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researchers. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. Themes that emerged from interviews highlighted participants' frustrations with the lack of inclusion of Black counselor perspectives in their course work, feelings of tokenization as Black international students, and the isolation that they experienced as international students within their department. Themes also highlighted differences in interactions with department faculty; some participants reported being treated poorly by faculty members due to their race, nationality, or both (Haskins et al., 2013).

Building on the existing literature, Mwangi, Changamire, and Mosselson (2018) used a counter-narrative approach based on critical race theory to explore racism, nativism and other forms of oppression that impacted Black African students' experiences. Critical race theory first emerged in the early 1970's, was developed by a group of lawyers and activists to highlight the relationship between power and the construction of social roles (Delgado, & Stefancic, 2017). Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with two different samples. The first sample included Black African undergraduate and graduate students, and the second sample was comprised of ten faculty and campus administrators who either worked directly with international students or were involved in graduate student programming (Mwangi et. Al., 2018).

Themes that emerged from the interviews were indicative of participants' experiences of marginalization in their universities due to their racial identity, international student status and age. Participants described feeling isolated from others, and being unable to access financial resources due to their international student status. Participants also described the cognitive dissonance they experienced about their racial identity. For several participants, dissonance occurred because they had been a part of the racial majority as Black people in their home countries, but upon moving to the U.S., they had suddenly become members of a racial minority group that is socially and structurally discriminated against (Mwangi et al., 2018). This dissonance made experiences of language barriers, lack of access to financial resources, lack of access to economic opportunities and learning a new campus climate even more difficult for Black African international students.

### **Summary and Critique: Black African Identity and Acculturative Experiences**

Black African immigrant communities within the U.S continue to grow, due to reasons such as educational opportunities, political instability on the African continent, and historical-

structural paradigms of forced dependency relationships between African and Western countries (Takyi, 2002; U.S Census Bureau, 2014). Despite this apparent growth, the racial identity development of Black African immigrant groups is an area that has received little research attention. For many of these immigrants, they leave countries where they are members of the Black racial majority. However, upon arriving in the U.S., they become categorized as members of a racial minority and experience social injustices that accompany a racial minority status in America (Asante, 2016). The existing research suggests that when Black African immigrants arrive, they utilize different strategies to develop a racial identity that is consistent with the U.S context. Some Black African immigrants closely associated with native-born Black groups due to a shared sense of racial identity and consciousness (Benson, 2006). However, other Black African immigrants created a new ethno-racial identity in an effort to distance from other Black racial groups in the country (Habecker, 2012). The desire to distance from other Black racial groups usually stemmed from the negative implications of being Black in American society (e.g., Showers, 2015).

Black African international students, as a subgroup of the larger Black African immigrant population, have received even less attention in the psychological literature. The few existing studies suggested that sometimes Black African international students navigated their racial identity by emphasizing their African ethnic identity, as an effort to determine for themselves which of their identities would be salient (Asante, 2016). Another way that these students navigated their racial identity was by distancing from Blackness within the U.S context, due to the negative stereotypes and socio-political implications of being Black in the U.S. For these students, distancing from the U.S. context of Blackness was perceived as a way to self-protect against racism and discrimination (Asante, 2016). Black international students' racial identity

also impacted their overall acculturative experiences. Researchers suggested that in addition to difficulty navigating a new academic environment and losing their social support systems, Black international students also experienced marginalization in their universities due to their racial identity, international student status and age (Haskins et al., 2013; Mwangi, et al., 2018).

Most of the studies developed to explore the identity development and acculturative experiences of Black immigrant groups have been conceptual or exploratory in nature. For example, Asante (2016) used a thematic approach to explore how Black African international students' Blackness impacts their experiences in the U.S., without developing a theoretical explanation for how racial identity impacts acculturative experiences. Bofo-Arthur (2014) also provided a conceptual understanding of the various challenges that Black African international students, and the ways that their racial identity impacts acculturative stress. There is no published theory to explain how Black African international students develop their racial identity within the U.S context. It would be important to develop theory in this area in order to properly conceptualize the experiences of Black African international students. Theories would also aid researchers in understanding exactly how Black international students navigate their racial identity, and the factors that aid or restrict their racial identity development. Developing a theoretical base for this area of research would provide direction for future researchers in exploring racial identity in Black African international students. Thus, more studies using grounded theory methodology are needed to qualitatively explore how individuals experience their racial identity developmental process, and to develop a theory that can be used to conceptualize this process.

### **The Proposed Study**

From this review, it appears that Black African international students must navigate a

new racial identity upon moving to the United States (Asante, 2016; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Mwangi, Changamire, and Mosselson, 2018). However, there is no existing theory that explains how this racial resocialization process occurs. I conceptualize African international students' navigation of their racial identity as a *resocialization process*. Prior to moving the U.S., Black African international students may have lived in countries where Black people were the racial majority, and social identity was focused on ethnic or tribal identification instead of race. They may have no understanding of what Blackness means in the United States, due to being socialized in countries where Blackness is the norm. When they move to the U.S., they may be faced with encounters that challenge them to critically examine their racial identity and what it means to be Black in the U.S.

For these students, being Black in America may mean learning the complexities of being a racial minority, specifically a Black person, and the negative socioeconomic implications that accompany racial minority status in America. Therefore, African students may be faced with the challenge of navigating a new identity that may not match how they would identify themselves in their home countries. Existing Black racial identity theories (e.g., Cross, 1971) explain how native-born African Americans develop a Black racial identity, and present identity development in a linear model. These models may not be applicable to Black African international students, who are born and socialized in countries where majority of the citizens are racially Black. Applying the existing models of Black racial identity development to foreign-born Black international students may also not account for the different cultural meanings and experiences associated with a Black racial identity (Asante, 2016).

Black African international students, as a subsection of the larger Black African immigrant population, hold a temporary immigration status and could return to their home

countries upon completion of their degrees (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Moreover, there is less stigma attached to students' immigration category, and they are sometimes viewed as a privileged class due to their level of education (Arthur, 2000). However, while living in the United States, these students must navigate their Black racial identity, which in the U.S context, makes them members of a racial minority group with a complex history and current experiences of discrimination and oppression. Presently, there is no existing theory to guide the conceptualization of Black African international students' racial identity development. Therefore, research is needed to develop theories that fully explain how Black African international students navigate their racial identity while living in the United States.

The complete study was a qualitative exploration of how Black African international students navigate their racial identity within the U.S. context. However, in this study, I utilized Grounded Theory Method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to analyze interview data with the goal of generating a model or theory to conceptualize how Black African international students navigate their racial identity in the U.S. context. Six participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview protocol with broad topics and accompanying probes. In a previous study with Black international students (Coleman, 2019), I conducted interviews with participants in a focus group format. Although the focus groups were beneficial in getting group perspectives of acculturative experiences, a major drawback was the inability to engage all participants equally in the discussions. Individual interviews with each participant were highly beneficial in getting richer information about how each individual has navigated their racial identity, and how these experiences are similar to and distinct from each other. Given the exploratory nature of qualitative research, no a prior hypothesis was articulated. However, general research goals and questions were outlined in advance:



1. What are the various ways that Black African international students navigate their new Black racial identity?
  - a. Are there strategies that are unique to African students from specific countries?
2. In what ways do stereotypes about Blackness in the U.S impact their understanding of their racial identity?
3. In what ways do racial identity impact Black African international students' acculturative experiences?
4. How do Black African international students interact with native-born and other Black groups?
5. How are their interactions with native-born Black groups impacted by their understanding of their racial identity?

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

The completed study was a qualitative exploration of how Black African international students navigate their racial identity while living in the U.S. Qualitative research is a form of research in which the researcher collects and interprets data using language that captures the lived experiences of their participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The researcher is often actively involved in the data collection and does not seek to separate themselves from the data interpretation. A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify lived experiences in relevant contexts within which they occur (Polkinghorne, 2005). Qualitative research can also be used to explore how meanings are formed and transformed, topics and groups that have not yet been thoroughly researched, and to discover relevant variables that can later be tested and validated through quantitative forms of research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Qualitative research allows for the use of open and flexible designs, which stands at odds with the notion of rigor in quantitative research. Because qualitative research involves a fluid, evolving and dynamic nature of data collection and analysis, it is more appropriate for researchers who do not wish to follow the more rigid design of quantitative methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Polkinghorne, 2005).

The main purpose of data collection in qualitative research is to provide evidence for the experience that is being investigated, which is often in the form of self-reported accounts that participants provide of their experiences. The data serve as the ground on which research findings are based, and excerpts are drawn from the data to provide support for findings and conclusions (Polkinghorne, 2005). A limitation of using self-reports from participants is that they often only have partial access to their own thoughts and memories. Participants often report only

what they remember, and their memories may not be an accurate representation of actual events (Polkinghorne, 2005). The translation of a reflective awareness of an experience into a language expression may also alter the recollection of the memory itself, which can be problematic in qualitative research. Thus, participants' expression of experiences in language may change the way that they are remembering their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005).

### **Participants**

Six Black African international students were recruited to participate in the completed study. Inclusion criteria were participants who self-reported: (a) identity as Black or of African descent; (b) country of origin on the African continent; (c) age 18 or older; (d) fluency in English; and (e) international student status. International students are defined as students who do not hold citizenship or permanent residency status in the United States or Puerto Rico. All international students in the U.S are admitted on F-1 or J-1 visas, granting them temporary non-immigrant status. Participants for the study were recruited through an email solicitation that was sent to the Center for International Education to be distributed to the international student email listserv.

### **Materials**

#### **Demographic Questionnaire**

Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A), disclosing their age, sex, sexual orientation, racial identification, academic standing, highest level of education achieved, country of origin, and the number of years spent in the United States. Demographics data was analyzed using description statistics to identify means, and standard deviations. Data was also analyzed to identify the country that is most represented within the sample, which may affect subsequent purposeful sampling.

## **Interview Protocol**

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the individual interviews (see Appendix B). The author developed interview questions based on previous research and the gaps noted in the literature. The interview protocol contained broad questions about participants' experiences of acculturation, race-related experiences both in the U.S and their respective home countries, interactions with other Black immigrant populations, identification with other African international students, and understanding of their Black identities within the U.S. The questions on the interview protocol were intended to loosely guide the interview and provide direction for conversation (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Jacob & Ferguson, 2012). The researcher probed responses further as needed, to explore answers that participants provide. Sample follow-up probes were also presented in the interview protocol. The interview protocol was first piloted on two Black African international students to generate estimates regarding the length of interviews and also make adjustments to questions where needed based on pilot participants' feedback.

## **Procedure**

Participants for this study were recruited through the Center for International Education (CIE) at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. The email listserv for international students enrolled at the university is protected information, therefore an email was sent to the staff at CIE to be disseminated to all students. The email solicitation included the researcher's name and program of study, the name and contact information of the project advisor, a brief description of the purpose of the study, any potential risks from participating in the study, and the contact information for the Human Subjects Committee, should participants have concerns or complaints concerning the study. The researcher's email address was enclosed in the email solicitation, so

that interested students could contact the researcher directly. Participants in this study were offered the opportunity to be entered into a drawing to win one of three \$10 Amazon e-gift cards.

All participants were scheduled for sixty-minute individual interviews, and I conducted all of the interviews. Interviews were conducted on Zoom, as I was unable to meet participants in person due to COVID-19 restrictions. Digital copies of the informed consent and the Demographics forms were emailed to participants prior to their interviews. When participants arrived online for their interviews, they were asked to confirm the completion of the consent form, and also asked to provide verbal consent to be audio-taped. I also checked to verify that I had received a signed copy of the informed consent prior to beginning the interviews. The informed consent form explained the nature of the study and participants' rights, and information regarding the Human Subjects Committee's approval of the study. All interviews were audio-recorded to be transcribed later, and participants were asked to keep their videos turned off for privacy concerns. Each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves, as a way to ensure that their identity was protected. After each interview, I and two undergraduate research assistants transcribed all interviews in Microsoft Word. Participants were given the option to provide their email contact to be entered in a drawing to win one of three \$10 Amazon e-gift cards, and the three participants who were randomly selected were sent the links to the gift cards. Participants were verbally debriefed after the interview and provided an opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns related to the study or their participation in the study.

### **Data Analytic Strategy**

Interview data were analyzed using the Grounded Theory Method, following the procedures and techniques outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008; 2015) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). Grounded Theory is a type of qualitative research method originally developed by

Glaser and Strauss (1967) for the purpose of constructing theory grounded in experiential data. Grounded Theory allows for identification of general concepts, development of theoretical explanations that stretches beyond what is known and provides new insights into a variety of experiences. Grounded Theory is different from other qualitative methods in several ways. First, the concepts out of which theory is developed are derived from data collected during the research process, and not chosen prior to beginning data collection. This is what gives the methodology its name and also grounds the theory. Second, research analysis and data collection are interrelated in grounded theory. After the initial data are collected, the primary investigator analyzes the data, and concepts derived from the data analysis form the basis for the subsequent data collection. Therefore, data collection and analysis continue in an ongoing cycle throughout the qualitative research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

In Grounded Theory research, data can be collected in various ways. Typically, researchers who use this method tend to collect data through interviews and observations. Data can also be collected through videos, journals, diaries, drawings, memos, historical records, and internet postings (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Regardless of the data collection method, data in grounded theory are analyzed by means of constant comparisons, working with data that has been broken down into manageable pieces that convey a single idea, known as thought units. Each unit is compared to other units for similarities and differences. Data that are conceptually similar are grouped together under a conceptual heading, and through further analyses, concepts are grouped together to create categories. Each category is then developed in terms of its unique properties and dimensions, and then eventually different categories are integrated around a core category. The core category can be conceptualized as the theory, as it describes in very few words what the researcher identifies as the major theme of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

For the completed study, data analysis proceeded through three stages: (a) open coding; (b) axial coding; and (c) selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). To prepare for the coding stages, all audio recordings and notes taken by the primary interviewer were transcribed verbatim. After each interview had been transcribed, I read through each transcript thoroughly to familiarize myself with participants' experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). After thoroughly combing through each transcript, I reflected upon my initial reactions through the use of personal notes. I then read through each transcript again to identify thought units, which are discrete units of meaning. Thought units can vary in length, from a word or phrase to a full paragraph that conveys a thought (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

**Open coding.** Open coding consists of the conceptualization and categorization of the data from the interviews. The thought units are discrete chunks, which can consist of ideas, incidents, acts, and events (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The chunks of data were conceptualized and named to aid in identifying the concepts they represent. The concepts were then sorted to form categories based on similar properties among the concepts. Because the categories were saturated by the end of the open coding stage, no more interviews were conducted to collect more data. Saturation occurs when no new categories are emerging and the existing categories are well-defined regarding properties and dimensions, and relationships between different concepts are determined (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Categories were formed via the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which new data units are first compared to previous categories, and similar data will be coded the same way. Each new data unit can change the nature of a given category or lead to the development of subcategories. Units that don't fit with any existing categories became the basis of new categories that continued to be developed to the point of saturation. As categories began to emerge, an auditor who was unaffiliated with

the study provided feedback regarding the categories and concepts represented in the open-coding categories.

**Axial coding.** The next stage of grounded theory analysis was axial coding, where concepts were related to one another and expanded upon based on causal conditions, phenomena, contexts and intervening conditions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Causal conditions are the incidents that precede phenomena. Phenomena are the events, incidents, and/or ideas that relate to actions. Context are the surrounding events within which phenomena occur. Intervening conditions are the structural factors that either constrain or facilitate actions and interactions. Actions and interactions, under the intervening conditions, are what are done to carry out phenomena, and consequences are the results of the actions/interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The connections between categories were formed at the conceptual level, unlike in the open coding stage where connections were developed at the level of the raw data. I also used strategies such as asking questions and making comparisons in order to elaborate on certain concepts. At this stage of coding, themes also began to emerge from the creation and elaboration of categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

**Selective coding.** The last stage of this grounded theory process was selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The selective coding stage involved linking various axial categories to generate central themes around which the other categories can be organized and conceptualized. A core category, also referred to as the “story line”, was identified through the systematic connection of other categories and were validated through the data. Any categories needing further development will be refined. The story line, which was the central phenomenon around which other categories were integrated, became the core of the grounded theory (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Memos and journals that were kept throughout the analysis were



used to construct summary reflections that helped identify how various categories were interconnected (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the selective coding phase, various techniques might be used to understand and portray the relationships among the categories, such as diagramming (e.g., Miles and Huberman, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

The proposed research involved several strategies to ensure the quality of the results, to verify that the researcher did not have an excessive amount of influence on the results, and to ensure that results were grounded in the data. I actively maintained a journal throughout the research process and during the analysis, wrote memos on emerging themes and connections, bracketed assumptions, and used one external auditor. These strategies ensured that the data and results were trustworthy. *Trustworthiness* is defined as the researcher's ability to persuade their readers that the research results and conclusions are valid and reliable. In qualitative research, trustworthiness is composed of four key components: (a) credibility; (b) transferability; (c) dependability; and (d) confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*Credibility* is the qualitative equivalent of internal validity in quantitative research. It involves triangulation and member checks and refining working hypotheses with the intention of improving the likelihood that research findings and interpretations will be strongly connected to constructs of interests within the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation involves asking different participants the same research questions and collecting data from different sources using different collection methods, all to answer the same questions. Member or participant checks occur when participants are asked to review the data collected and interpreted by the researcher. For the completed study, triangulation was used to ensure credibility of data results and interpretation. The auditor involved in the open-coding stage of data analysis provided

researcher triangulation, increasing the dependability of the study. The auditors will provide different perspectives for the same data and also call attention to researcher biases in data interpretation.

*Transferability* may be considered the equivalent of external validity in quantitative research, which is the ability of research results to generalize to other settings and members of the population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although researchers cannot prove that the outcomes based on their interpretations of the data are applicable to other people in other settings, they can establish that this it is likely to be transferable. To ensure transferability, I used purposive sampling, a form of nonprobability sampling, to ensure that students from various African countries are represented. The majority of the studies conducted with African international students (e.g., Asante, 2016) have tended to include participants from West Africa, which does not make data interpretation to be likely transferable to other Black African international students from other parts of the continent.

*Dependability* in qualitative research is equivalent to reliability in quantitative research, and will be demonstrated through triangulation and the use of auditors to replicate the research process. I will also provide a statement of subjectivity outlining my sociocultural identities and how they influence biases I may have about participants' experiences. The auditor also provided a statement of subjectivity (Appendix C) to ensure that their audit of the data was dependable.

*Confirmability* is the process of devising rules that describe category properties that can be used to explain the inclusion of each data unit that is assigned to a category, as well as to provide a basis for other researchers to be able to replicate the study in the future. In most qualitative studies, confirmability is established by implementing audit trials. In this study, the auditor was provided with the raw data, data analysis and synthesis, and all process notes. The external

auditor used this information to verify that the findings were indeed grounded in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore how Black African international students navigate and recreate their racial identities within the U.S. context. The results of a qualitative analysis of six individual interviews highlight the non-linear and complex nature of racial identity development and how other identities shape and foster racial identity development. First, profiles are presented for all participants, including the researcher, as context for the qualitative results. The results are organized around the grounded theory model (see Figure 1) that emerged at the selective coding level of this analysis. Axial level categories and associated open level categories and sub-categories are presented in Table 2.

#### **Participant Profiles**

I will begin by presenting profiles of all participants in the study, to provide context on the background of the participants, my relationship with each participant, and how I showed up in each interview. I am thinking of myself as a participant in this study, for several reasons. To start, I am an African international student who shares similar identities and experiences with my participants. Also, due to the qualitative nature of the study, I was an active participant and used myself as a subjective tool in the Grounded Theory process. By virtue of being present in the interview, I also hold stimulus value, which could have impacted how participants interacted with me and responded to prompts.

#### **Maame Esi**

I was born and raised in Ghana, a developing country in West Africa. Ghana is a former British colony and a current member of the Commonwealth, along with Great Britain and other former/current British colonies. Although the era of colonization is technically over, there are

traces of our colonial history still present in the country. Ghana continues to use English as the official language of instruction and government. Our educational and government/judicial system resembles that of Great Britain. In Ghana, more than 95% of the country's population identifies racially as Black. Although the majority of people are racially Black, race is not a significant marker of identity like it is in the United States. In Ghana, we do not need to indicate our race on employment forms, census records, or any other documentation. Ethnic group affiliation, economic status and gender are considered more significant than race, and greatly impact the socioeconomic and political opportunities that one has, much like race impacts these opportunities in the United States. People from the ethnic groups in the southern parts of the Ghana (e.g., the Fanti ethnic group, with whom I identify) are more privileged and have easier access to the nation's capital city and resources than the ethnic groups in the northern part of the country.

Prior to moving to the U.S. in 2011 to finish high school in California, I had rarely ever given thought to my racial identity. I had rarely even consciously identified myself as a Black person; neither had I ever had to. In the U.S., I had to slowly learn what it means to be Black, how this identity impacts how others perceive me, and the experiences I have. Initially, I had an overwhelming desire to separate from other Black people, due to the negative connotations associated with blackness. I worried that if I created community with non-African Black people, I would start to experience the racism and discrimination that they did. Instead, I clung to my African identity and bonded mainly with other Africans. I thought that by doing this, I would be protected from racism, prejudice and discrimination since I wasn't really "Black". I had learned about how African Americans were, and still continue to be treated in the U.S, and I thought if I did not identify as Black, I could escape those experiences. Unfortunately, this is a strategy that

was not unique to me; several other Africans whom I have met and spoken with hold the perspective that distancing from Blackness and African American people will protect them from anti-Black racism.

As I continue to exist in this country as a Black woman, I have come to learn, rather painfully sometimes, that my ethnic identity does not make others blind to the color of my skin. Through my experiences of racism and discrimination, I have found that there is no distinction between different types of Black people; in the U.S., you are treated as Black if you look Black. My friendships and conversations with American-born Black peoples have provided me opportunities to better understand my racialized identities, and have been influential in my racial identity development in the U.S. I am now at a stage where I can fully embrace my racial identity without feeling the need to use my African ethnic identity as a shield. I continue to build community with both African and American Black peoples, to help cope with the difficult realities of being Black in America.

As the primary researcher for this study, I relied heavily on my clinical expertise in the interviews. I have been providing psychotherapy for the past 5 years, as part of my graduate training to become a counseling psychologist. With each interview, I engaged in self-reflection, and explored how my own experiences shaped the types of questions that I asked. I also periodically reflected on how I formed my Black identity, and how this identity either becomes salient or peripheral depending on which Black circles I am. Through these conversations with the participants, I also learned a great deal about how interactions with fellow Africans, as well as African Americans, shaped their concepts of Blackness, their willingness to identify with that racial label, and their comfort in examining their lived experiences through a racial. There were several moments in the interview process where I felt connected with the participants'

experiences, especially when they shared personal experiences of racism, difficulty of living away from family, and relearning about racial identity. Personally, it felt validating to know that other African students had struggled to come to terms with being Black in the U.S., and it was impactful for me to hear their stories.

**Choc:**

Choc is a 25-year-old cisgender, heterosexual female student from Nigeria. She is a graduate student and was on an internship at the time of our interview. Choc was born and raised in Nigeria and moved to the U.S. for her undergraduate studies. Choc and I have been acquaintances for about two years, having been members of two different social groups. At the time of our interview, Choc had lived in the U.S. for about four to six years, and had done all of her post-secondary education in the U.S. In our interview, Choc spoke extensively about growing up in Nigeria; growing up as a female child, middle-class, plus sized and dark-skinned. She offered specific examples of how Nigerian society is structured, how her gender and social class shaped her experiences, her struggles with colorism, and the lingering Eurocentric beauty standards. Choc was also vocally critical of Nigerian society, as she indicated that she had not critically examined her experiences until moving into another country. Choc was also one of the few participants who provided commentary on how her home country is socially stratified on non-racial lines; mainly on ethnicity, gender, and economic status.

Choc was the first person that I interviewed for my research project. I greatly appreciated how open and patient Choc was in working with me around scheduling and some small technical issues. Interviewing Choc was an honor and learning moment; she provided great wisdom and insight into her experiences as an international student, as well as her development of her Black identity in the U.S. There were several times where I connected with Choc's experiences as a

Black woman in the U.S., and I greatly appreciated her candor. I also appreciated Choc's willingness to elaborate and provide information on questions I did not even think to ask. Unlike other participants in this study, Choc seemed to have spent a considerable amount of time examining the difference between her gendered experiences in her home country, her racialized experiences in the U.S, and the intersection of the two identities. Her story has certainly enriched the data I collected, and also broadened my understanding of how different international students explore and develop their racial identities.

### **Malaika**

Malaika is a 30-year-old heterosexual cisgender female international student enrolled in a doctoral program at a midwestern university. Malaika self-identified as a Black/African descended person, and identified her home country as Zambia. She grew up in different parts of Zambia with her family, and moved to the U.S. after high school for her post-secondary education. Malaika already has a master's degree, and has lived in the U.S for more than six years at the time of our interview. Malaika was the only participant from the southern African region. Prior to our interview, Malaika and I had had several informal interactions with each other, and also have some mutual friends. We were both members of the same registered student organization, and have interacted at several gatherings and events. I had also attended an art show that Malaika and a friend had put together about a year ago.

In her interview, Malaika spoke with fondness about growing up and living in Zambia, and her relationship with her family. She also spoke on how she learned about the U.S through movies and books brought back by family living abroad, and the conception she had formed about life and living in the U.S. Malaika also spoke on her acculturation process in the U.S, differences she noticed between life in Zambia and life in the U.S, and some difficulties she



experienced living in the U.S. Malaika shared her frustration about others' expectations to write and sound a certain way, and the negative perceptions they form about her based on her non-American accent. Malaika also spoke about the difference between how race is understood in Zambia and the U.S, and her own journey to understanding her Blackness in the U.S. She disclosed her own experiences of racism and microaggression, as well as frustrations with the amount of judgement within her African community in Carbondale. For example, she described a conversation with a friend where Malaika indicated that she would not feel comfortable disclosing an unplanned pregnancy to members of her African community, as they would accuse her of promiscuity and refuse to support her.

Malaika was the second participant that I interviewed for my research project. Our interview was recorded via Zoom audio, for the client's privacy and in observance of COVID-19 social distancing protocol. Malaika sounded enthusiastic on her call and tended to laugh regularly when sharing her experiences of moving to the U.S. I remember feeling nervous about my interview with her because of her reputation as an excellent qualitative researcher. Malaika was insightful about her own experiences, and seemed to have thought about how others' perceptions of her, as well as interactions with other Black people, had influenced her racial identity development. I greatly appreciated her willingness to answer my questions and provide responses that informed how I proceeded with my subsequent interviews.

### **Dasi**

Dasi is a 25-year-old cisgender heterosexual international male student from Angola. He is currently enrolled as an undergraduate student in a mid-sized university. He was born and raised primarily in Angola, and moved to the U.S. when he was around 18 years, to begin his undergraduate studies. He initially attended an institution in Colorado, before transferring to SIU

Carbondale in 2015. Dasi and I have known each other for about a year, as we are both active members of a small Afro-Caribbean Christian campus organization. At the time of this interview, Dasi had lived in the U.S for about 4-6 years. In his interview, Dasi spoke about life in Angola, his family's indirect conversations around race and racism, and navigating his racial identity in the U.S. Dasi identified his own experiences of racism both in Angola and the U.S., and how he navigated these experiences. Although he did not pinpoint specific incidents that impacted his identity as a Black person, he spoke about interactions with other Africans, and friendships with African Americans that expanded his understanding of his own racial identity and contributed to his identity formation.

Dasi was the third person that I interviewed, and we completed our interview on Zoom, recording only the audio portion of the interview. He was energetic and enthusiastic in his speech sometimes breaking into laughter or using intentional pauses to drive home his points. He provided thorough and thoughtful responses, and also asked for clarification on the questions that I asked. I remember feeling appreciative of his warmth and humor, as well as willingness to provide examples of his own personal experiences. I felt a personal connection to many of the stories that Dasi shared - particularly to his experiences as an international student at SIU. I also felt included in this interview, like I was more than just a bystander, because Dasi asked me questions at the end about how the entire project was going and whether participants would be made aware of the final material once it was completed. My existing acquaintanceship with Dasi certainly made me feel more comfortable asking personal questions about his racial identity formation process. I was also conscious of how our existing friendship impacted his willingness to openly share his experiences with me, and how it may impact my interpretation of his data.

## **Mito**

Mito is a 24-year-old cisgender heterosexual international male student from Nigeria. Mito was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, and considers that to be home. At the time of the interview, Mito was enrolled as a graduate student at a mid-sized university. Mito was quarantining with family members outside Illinois when I conducted his interview. He moved to the U.S when he was around 17 years, for higher education. His older brothers were already living in the U.S, and had both graduated from SIU. Prior to our interview, Mito and I had never met nor interacted with each other, and did not have any other interactions outside of the interview. At the time of the interview, he had been living in the U.S for about four to six years.

In his interview, Mito spoke about his childhood living in Nigeria, the striking differences between communities in the U.S. and communities in his home country, and the culture shock he experienced after moving to the U.S. He shared how his brothers had been a source of support for him; helping him set up a bank account, register for his social security card, introducing him to other African students in the Carbondale area, and sending him home-made Nigerian meals. For Mito, adjusting to the academic system was also a culture shock, as he was especially unused to referring to professors by their first names. Because English is used as the official language in Nigeria, Mito did not struggle with having to learn a new language. Mito's description of his racial identity formation process stood out to me, as he was one of the few participants who reported that President Obama's Road to the presidency was a significant event that contributed to his awareness of race relations in the U.S. For example, Mito indicated that

...I like, for instance, Obama got errm [sic], I remember the night Obama got eh actually got elected? I did not even know Obama was running. I was in high school then, all of a sudden there was a huge uproar, everyone was screaming and

celebrating, and I was just there looking confused. I was like okay, somebody won the U.S. election, like, what has that have to do with me in a sense right?

Mito was the fourth person that I interviewed, and by that time I had gotten quite comfortable with the interview process. We completed our interview on Zoom, using only audio. Due to my increased comfort level with interviewing, I used less fillers or encouragers in my speech, and was better able to identify moments where I could ask follow-up questions. He had a calm and gentle manner of speaking, in a way that suggested possible comfort with the interview process. He provided thorough and thoughtful responses, and also asked for clarification on the questions that I asked. I remember feeling appreciative of his warmth and humor, as well as willingness to provide examples of his own personal experiences. I felt a personal connection to some of Mito's experiences, particularly his experience of being able to rely on his older siblings in the U.S for emotional and practical support. I appreciated his openness and vulnerability, as well as curiosity about the research topic and interest in knowing the final theory that emerges out of the data.

### **Wale**

Wale is a 25-year-old heterosexual cisgender man from Lagos, Nigeria, At the time of the interview, Wale was enrolled as a graduate student at SIUC. Wale had been living in the U.S. for more than six years, and had completed his undergraduate education here. Wale self-identified racially as Black/African-descended. Wale shared that he had family members already living in the U.S prior to his immigration, and identified family as a major source of support during his transition. Wale identified various aspects of mainstream American culture and lifestyle that was a culture shock for him, such as the types of food, informal student-teacher interactions, lack of closeness with neighbors and the hyper-focus on racial identity. Wale also shared his personal

experiences of racism and how he conceptualized and coped with his experiences. Wale shared his experiences as a student at SIUC. He openly discussed his views about race in the U.S., his understanding of his own racial identity, interactions with other Africans, and friendships with African Americans.

Wale was the fifth participant that I interviewed. He expressed feeling a bit nervous about the interview, as he had not done something like that before. Wale was easy to talk with, forthcoming with information, and was engaged in the interview process. I greatly appreciated Wale's willingness to share his personal experiences of racism, as I got the sense that these were difficult experiences for him. I found myself relating to some of the culture shock Wale experienced, particularly the informal student-teacher interactions and the availability of fast foods. I noticed myself feeling saddened by the racism he had experienced from peers, as it reminded me of my own classroom-related experiences of racism. For example, Wale disclosed being questioned by a White colleague who did not think he could be smart enough to complete a homework assignment:

Um, to, let's say junior year, we had a class with, um, one random person was in the class... and so, this dude really thought that I was at the bottom of the class, because he didn't really think I was, I was, you know, I could hold my own in the class.

Wale's interview also highlighted the ways that birth and adopted families in the U.S. serve as a buffer against the acculturative stress they experience, something I had explored in my master's thesis.

### **Ashley**

Ashley is a 23-year-old heterosexual, cisgender woman who is an international student from the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter referred to as Congo). At the time of our

interview, Ashley was in the final semester of her undergraduate studies. Ashley moved to the U.S for her post-secondary education, first completing an Associate's degree in Arizona before transferring to Carbondale. Ashley shared that she had initially moved to Arizona, because her older sister had been enrolled in a graduate program there, and she had wanted to remain closer to family. Ashley and I already had an established relationship with each other, and she was referred to my study by one of the participants. Ashley and I have mutual friends, attend the same Afro-Caribbean social group for international students, and are both active members of the African Students Union on campus.

During her interview, she discussed her experiences growing up and attending school in Congo, and the stark differences she noticed between schooling in her home country and the United States. She highlighted her difficulty in making friends in her classes, navigating a language and accent barrier, learning English as a third language, and adjusting to living away from her family. Ashley also highlighted the differences between how race is perceived and experienced in Congo, and how it is experienced in the U.S. She discussed her own experiences of learning what it means to be Black, encounters with people who had negative perceptions about Black people, and her racial development journey. Ashley also spoke about her empathy towards the experiences of African American people, as well as her reluctance to align with African Americans in the U.S. She spoke to the importance of her African identity, and the differences she perceived between Africans and African Americans. Ashley was candid about her conceptions about African American people, and her understanding of what she perceived to be their "plight" in the U.S. According to her:

I feel like the people, the African American community are being misunderstood. Um, they, they also know it, I feel like they know that they're misunderstood and the way

when they trying to make themselves understood being understood make them looked at as angry and, in that way, when the they see that every other people feel like doing danger because of their way, this the way they speak. So at the end of the day, I feel like maybe if they had more people who are actually listening to the cause, or what they're trying to tell us we will not understand what they, they, they mean by the way they speak and maybe that way we will try to limit all the--all the injustice that is going in the African American community.

Ashley was the sixth participant that I interviewed. We completed our interview on Zoom, using only audio recording. She appeared nervous at the start of the interview, possibly due to her concerns about being misunderstood. She provided thorough and thoughtful responses, often pausing to reflect on the questions I was asking her. I greatly appreciated Ashley's warmth and willingness to expand on the answers she provided. I felt a connection to some of the experiences that Ashley shared, particularly her struggle with living away from family and forming friendships in college. My existing friendship with Ashley helped make her feel more comfortable with the interview process, and I appreciated her engagement with the subject topic under discussion.

### **Qualitative Interview Findings**

Grounded theory methodology consists of three stages of data analysis processes: (a) open coding; (b) axial coding; and (c) selective coding. The selective coding process revealed a grounded theory model involving a major story line around which the various categories that emerged at the axial level were interrelated. These results will be presented according to the grounded theory model that emerged in this study. The various categories that emerged at the

open-coding and axial-coding levels are shown in Table 2, and they will be presented/illustrated along the way as they relate to the grounded theory model.

### **Racial Identity Development as a Flowing River**

The Grounded Theory model, as illustrated by Figure 1, provides a visual representation of the variables influencing racial identity development and the experiential identity development process for Black African international students in the United States. It is important to keep in mind that this model is connected to the timeframe of this data collection. All of the participants for this study were interviewed during the spring and summer of 2020, a time when racial tension and xenophobia were mounting in the United States, given the COVID-19 pandemic and George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police. Participants had also spent varying amounts of time in the U.S., from as little as a few years to as much as more than six years. Individuals were at different points when it came to their experiences of race within the U.S. context, as well as how they made sense of their racialized experiences here. Racialized experiences, as well as the conceptualization of said experiences, influenced all components of the analysis process, from the thought units to the conclusions that can be drawn from this study.

The central theme/category that emerged from this analysis is that racial identity development in a different societal context is a journey, influenced by various racialized experiences and heavily impacted by other identities that a person may hold. The descriptions of this journey had the feel of floating down a river, with various ebbs and flows, hazards and rapids. Axial level categories reflecting multiple levels of experience/impact (i.e, individual level, community level, larger social systems) make up the river and form the basis from which the central theme emerged. The data and open-coding level categories that comprised the axial level categories of *race in home country* and *race in America* includes descriptions of the ways



that context changes the nature and experience of race. Furthermore, that context is suddenly dramatically different upon arrival in the U.S.—like falling or being tossed into the river.

### **African Identity as a Safe Vessel on the River of Racial Identity Development**

Racial identity development was characterized by a combination of these participants' individual experiences, organizational systems of racism and discrimination that participants encountered, and their already-established ethnic and gender identities that they leaned on. The categories that emerged at the axial level of coding reciprocally affected one another, and the core story line (central theme) emerged from this interaction. Participants' African ethnic identity served as a safe vessel from which to navigate the river of race relations and explore their racial identity within the U.S. context. Conceptually, it seemed like their African identity was the vessel in which they sought safety when the ebbs, flows and hazards of the river became overwhelming and taxing (e.g., "because I really love where I'm from, I'm African, I, I represent who I am um no one's gonna change that", and...like the African community here, it was like a link back home for me."). African identity also served as a secure social location because this was an identity that participants were already comfortable and secure in, and an identity that was not changed in context, unlike their racial identity. These participants' connection to and interaction with other Africans also helped them remain connected to their home culture and cope with the turbulence of the river of racial identity development. For example, Malika shared that "where there's like a fellowship of uh, and this is especially by like older people in the community. Like, older, our elders. I would say, uhm, in the community that would have fellowships..."

At the time of the interviews, participants were at varying positions in their racial identity development process. For some participants, they were at a place where they were comfortable

identifying as Black in the U.S and felt a sense of kinship with other Black people. For example, Malika spoke about her friendship with Black American women, saying “I have very, some very good friends uhm who are... Black [laughs] African, I mean American!” She also indicated how conversations with these friends have been helpful to her in navigating her own racial identity:

So those are kind of things I would learn from my American, Black American friends, like just how to be, uh, how to navigate your blackness on a daily basis, you know? For others, there was still discomfort with being labeled as Black and a desire to dissociate from other Black people, particularly African American people.

There were still other participants who were in the middle of exploration; they had personally decided to identify as Black in the U.S but were conflicted about whether this decision was impacted by situations where they were forced to pick a race. At the center of this general storyline was the general theme of understanding race in both their home country context and within the context of the U.S.

Like a vessel on troubled waters, the participants’ established African identity also helped protect against the harmful psychological impacts of racism and discrimination. Unfortunately, racialized experiences and feelings of being *othered* were parts of the ways that these participants came to understand the context for what it means to be Black in the U.S. Having an identity that had been established prior to their migration to the U.S, particularly an identity that could withstand the rocks and turbulences in the river of racial identity development was essential. Ashley illustrated the permanency of her African identity when she said:

...I identify as an African. I can’t imagine myself being anything else but African it's, it's my roots. I feel like that's what defines who I am as a person so I cannot see myself--I

mean it can happen that I change. I might change my nationality to maybe an American [inaudible] and something else but I would never not see myself as an African...

Choc also spoke on the permanency of her African identity by describing it as something that has been stamped on her, stating “yes, I definitely identify as African that is an identity that is really stamped on me, but I’m definitely African...” When their racial identity became tiring or difficult to navigate, participants were also able to retreat to their African identity as a vessel. For some, this included cooking their traditional foods or wearing traditional African clothing. This was a coping strategy that Malika used, as she stated:

...piece that screams out that I’m an African. It can be a bracelet, it can be a toe ring or, you know, just something minute, or sometimes I can have very flamboyant clothes that are very traditional in my home country, and I’m like, I’m so proud, I’m so excited right now and all of those things. So, like, my clothes are some of those things that would highlight the identity of, of being an African...Or even just like the food...

### **Strange waters: Living in Home Countries vs Living in the U.S**

For many of participants, a major aspect of their transition to the U.S. was noticing the similarities and differences between their home countries and their new country. All the participants were born and raised outside of the U.S., and so they had an understanding of various life situations and styles that do not fit into the context of the U.S. Participants commented on their life in their home countries, often providing examples of how they had lived prior to moving over here. For example, Mito, a male participant from Nigerian noted that:

I kinda got used to having a large extended family, being close with cousins, even second cousins, and we’re all kind of living in the same place at a point in time” in describing the household structure that he was accustomed to prior to his move.

Dasi observed, “I was born and raised in Angola...life was great there, I mean, it was a normal life you know” when reflecting on his life prior to moving to the U.S. In most cases, such comparisons to people’s home countries left their U.S. experiences as less desirable.

In addition to simply providing information on their lifestyles in their home countries, participants also readily highlighted the differences they noticed between how they had lived and how life is structured here in the U.S. Many of these differences were captured in the open-level categories of *living in different parts of the U.S* and *differences between U.S and home countries*. For some, these were statements of fact, but for others, it was shedding light on the adjustment challenges that they faced when they moved to the U.S. One of the challenges that some participants identified was the change in the types of food available and the styles of cooking. Dasi captured this theme, noting that “... and I mean, African culture we have very specific ways to cook, like, food...yeah even when we try to cook African food in the U.S it tasted differently, you know?”

Some participants also highlighted adjustments to the differences in weather. All of the African countries represented in this study are considered tropical in climate, so winter and extreme cold weather situations tend to be non-existent. Dasi highlighted the extremity of the weather where he now lives by stating:

When it’s hot, it’s very hot and when it’s cold, it’s very cold. We don’t have snow in my country so there’s that living in that environment most of the year. I mean, you get used to it after living here, but yeah, in the beginning it’s shocking.

Another difference that was highlighted between life in various African countries and life in the U.S was accessibility to goods and services. In their home countries, participants had limited access to certain goods and services that were either outside of their geographical

location, or considered “special delicacies” or were unavailable to the general population. For example, Choc expressed her shock at her easy access to shoes and clothing sizes that were not readily available to her in Nigeria.

So, uh, that’s like, that was a shock, being able to like find shoes in my size, like, the shoes in my size in Nigeria are expensive, they sell fast when they arrive cos you know, you don’t, you don’t normally see them so being able to do something like doing an eBay search for shoes in my size and see only shoes in my size, or clothes in my size...

### **Smooth and Familiar Currents: Understanding Race in Home Country**

The racial identity development journey of the participants in this study generally began with their understanding of how race is conceptualized and experienced in their home countries. This conceptualization was captured in open-level categories like *race definition in home country*, which informed this axial level code. For many of the participants, their understanding of race within the context of their home countries was vastly different from how they experienced race in the U.S. All participants in this study are originally from African countries, where the majority of the population would be classified racially as Black. In their home countries, race was not the salient identity and there was little emphasis on a person’s racial identity. For Ashley, who lived in Congo, race was not a factor in how people were perceived or judged:

...not really like as I mentioned like we have a lot of Chinese people who moved there for work and we have some other African people who move there for jobs and stuff like that, but we don't really look at someone because of like- look at them different because of the color of the skin.

The experience of race as simply another aspect of a person's identity was familiar to other clients, as Wale reiterated the lack of emphasis placed on racial identity back home in Nigeria, and how little he thought about his own race growing up in a country with the highest number of Black people. Mito, also Nigerian, shared how other social identities were more emphasized than race was:

Growing up, occasionally, when we considered races one, it was never really a common question if you were even filling a form--In Nigeria, to ever ask what race you are. So it was, that was very, I don't think I'd ever filled a form asking, if anything, our identifiers were, after sex and age, would be tribe in terms of before that, I had never really identified as Black before I came to the US-

These examples highlight how participants had very little reason to conceptualize their race as anything beyond skin color, shade and tone, prior to moving to the U.S. The knowledge of race in their home country contexts is smooth and familiar, without much turbulence, rocks or painful bumps. This surface-level understanding of race is in sharp contrast to how race is experienced in the U.S cultural context.

### **Hazards and Turbulence: Understanding Race in America**

As part of their journey in this racial identity development process, these international students had to also familiarize themselves with what it means to be Black in America. I conceptualized their understanding of race in America as the hazards and turbulence on their flowing river journey. This process of learning was sometimes uncomfortable at best, and painful at worst. For several of the participants, their understanding of race in their respective home countries was in sharp contrast to what race means here in the U.S. In their home countries, race was conceptualized as simply another part of a person's identity, often fading to the background.

Race was not considered to be the salient identity for any of them (e.g., “like when you're from Congo say technically see Black, what we weren't really thinking about black is you know that's how I identify myself as a Congolese person.”), and there was very little thought given to what it means to be Black.

Upon relocating to the U.S., participants were often subjected to a painful reality shock of what it truly means to be Black in a Eurocentric cultural context. For example, Wale commented on never having to think about being Black (e.g., “I never actually had to think that deep into it. For me it was mostly the color of my skin.”). Malika echoed this statement, expressing shock at how much her race has come to mean beyond simply skin color complexion (e.g., “I mean before I was like ‘Oh my God why?; I’m an African but like now it’s like ‘oh okay. It’s happened...there’s nothing I can do about it.’ Yeah, like you know, like, sometimes you just can’t fight anymore...”). These international students slowly came to understand how in the U.S., race was seen as one of the most salient identity markers, as Asley observed, “I feel like that's when I really came to understand that, when they ask you how do you identify yourself you really supposed to start with your race first and then move on to other attributes that you think define who you are.”

In addition to the understanding that here in the U.S. Blackness is more than simply skin color, tone and complexion, participants also had to learn about the constructivist nature of race. Where race had meant only skin color in their respective home countries, in the U.S. a person's race is used to form socially constructed opinions and make judgements on their character. For Ashley, a participant from Congo, the learning of the constructivist nature of race came after she noticed the frequency with which she heard about police brutality against Black people in the US:

Uhm, I came to this realization after seeing all the, uhm, all the things, all the trouble that Black people are going through in the US especially uh, from like the pol- police force. like, I think every time I see a video of someone being either spoken wrongly or bad someone who's angry at first even when they're only speaking calmly or peacefully, the first thing that comes in their mind, maybe it's like “oh this person is threatening me” or “this person is doing something that they shouldn't be doing” I think uh I think it started in I think it was 2016 there was an incident in Iowa where my friends live. She was telling me this story of this guy who his car broke down and wanted to go look for help so he went to this house and knocked, and it was like a white family and the white family felt like they were in danger because a black person was asking for help, so they shoot the person.

Awareness of such events often developed after these international students compared their experiences here in the U.S. to how they lived back in their respective countries, and noticed the racial overtones of their lives here in the U.S. For several of the participants, they were able to notice how their lives in the U.S. had become race-centered, which was not the case in their home countries (e.g., “and I did not know that I was Black...became glaringly obvious to me when I arrived as a student here” and “...Almost every time you’re filling out some sort of form, you fill out um, you fill out like your race”).

Another way that participants came to learn about what race means in the U.S. was through interactions with other Black people in the U.S., particularly African American people. Some of the participants talked about their interactions and friendships with African Americans and how these interactions helped them develop a deeper understanding for what it really means



to be considered Black in this cultural context. For example, Dasi reflected on how his interactions with African Americans, whom he still considered as just American, helped him understand how their history and experiences separates them from other American peoples:

So, it's like, okay they are Americans too because they are from around here but because of their experiences and the history they live differently than the other Americans. It was good. It was, it was very good actually because, I mean, we kind of understood each other for a little bit because of the black aspect.

Solidarity and oneness with African Americans was another important theme in their process of understanding race in America, as illustrated by Mito:

...but I led to the realization that in terms of like the treatment in America and overall it was one and the same [pause in speech] things erm Black people were experiencing all over the US wasn't singled only to only one part. There was [inaudible] a pass, and this was only for African Americans and vice versa-these [unintelligible] experiences that Black people are facing in America and in some cases all over the world. So, I think that kind of pushed my belief strongly in terms of like still one people overall and when something that affects one of us affects all of us in a sense. So, shared commonalities in [speech unclear] I do believe there are a lot of commonalities...

Sometimes, however, these international students were not too keen on interacting with African American people. Unlike Dasi who viewed these interactions as helpful in building connection with other Black people and expanding his understanding of race in America, there were other participants who did not see much similarity between themselves and African Americans beyond skin color and tone. Ashley particularly highlighted the ways she believes

herself as being different from African Americans, even though both groups are considered to be racially Black in the U.S.

...this is going to sound really bad, but I try my hardest to stay away from African American, because we have different perspective about things... I think I have like a way of thinking that is very different from African American, um, I feel like they went through a lot of trauma and so they, um, they usually see stuff differently...

Even when participants expressed a lack of belonging with African American people, they still expressed a preference for spending time with other Black people, as this was comforting and felt more familiar (e.g., “it’s like, there’s some certain things that we all love”).

### ***Racism and Othering***

Experiences of racism, discrimination and othering were central to the ways that African Black international students learned the meaning of race in the U.S. context. This centrality was captured by various open-level categories of *racism in America*, *feeling “othered” in America due to race*, *personal experiences of racism* in various settings, and *coping with racism*. For several participants, growing up and living in predominantly Black countries in Africa had shielded them from experience of racism, and created the perception that these incidents only happened to other people. Upon moving to the U.S., where the majority of the population is White, and White supremacy runs rife, they began to encounter instances where they were judged, discriminated against and othered because of the color of their skin. Several participants provided specific instances where they were discriminated against, perceived to be unintelligent, and judged due to their race:

So, I went in for an interview one time, of course I’m the only Black person in the office. I answered the questions as best as I can, it goes very well! Now, on my way out

of the office, the next person that is to be interviewed comes in and she is blue haired, uh, blue eyed blonde haired, you know, skinny preppy White girl, and the first thought that comes to my mind is “You got the job, don’t you?” eh-and then uh, since having to, ‘I don’t wanna say that that’s why, but I felt like it would be easier for me to get a call back if-if I wasn’t Black cos some, some jobs I would go for the interview and like I’m the only Black person there. (Choc)

In their interviews, participants spoke about not having to give much thought to their racial identity, as members of the racial majority of their African countries. This was captured in the axial level category *race in home country*, where various open-level categories and accompanying thought units capture the singular way that race is thought of as nothing more than skin tone or skin complexion. Ashley further illustrated the experience of feeling othered in the U.S. due to her race

...but when I moved to the United States it became more of like evidence of who I am because of all the different races that is going on here in the United States. So uh, we were doing this exercise in class--or was it I think it was in one of my student organization that I was part of--and they asked this question, “how do you identify yourself?”. Um, when they asked that question I was like “um, Congolese then the lady that was asking the question was like “I think you did not understand the question,” and she was white, and she was white...

These instances of racism, discrimination, and othering left participants feeling dissatisfied with their experiences in the U.S. Like rocks in a river, experiences of racism were hazardous elements that participants had to look out for in their racial identity development journey. Choc put it aptly when she said, “and now as a Black woman, I cannot afford to make a

false statement, I'm very aware of the fact that I cannot make, I cannot make the mistake of making a false statement. But then, interacting with two people at the, at the pinnacle of American privilege who can make false statements and get away with things like that...you know?"

### ***Coping with Racism, Discrimination, and Othering***

When confronted with incidents of racism and othering, participants had to make decisions on how they would cope with these experiences. The coping strategy utilized was typically reflective of where participants were in their racial identity journey. Participants who still viewed themselves as separate from other Black people in the U.S tended to dismiss these experiences, thinking of them as one-off incidents or the other person's personal problem. An example of coping by thinking of a racist incident as the other person's problem was how Wale described coping with an incident of being ignored by a cashier at Walmart when checking out his groceries with his White friend:

I was irritated at first, but then I was like "you know what, I am the center of attention now. So [laughs] let them keep looking at me, let them waste their time and energy just looking at me while I'm doing my own thing, cos in the end, it's not bothering me, it's bothering them..." On the other hand, those participants who viewed themselves as sharing a common fate with other Black people in the U.S. tended to conceptualize their personal experiences as part of a larger systemic problem in the country. These individuals tended to be the participants who had lived in the U.S. longer, had frequent interactions with other Black people, and fully viewed themselves as part of the U.S. Black collective. Malika highlighted how it was helpful to talk about her experiences with other Black people whom she knew could understand:

...and we talk about, as Black individuals how that can be weaved into this fiber of America, uhm, but yeah, yeah so like “how does that influence my experience you say?” Was it yesterday or today when one of my housemates said, “Black people don’t have often but they have to be [seen] getting out of a store?” So those are kind of things I would learn from my American, Black American friends, like just how to be, uh, how to navigate your blackness on a daily basis, you know?...

In addition to relying on community for support, these international students also sometimes chose to rely on internal strengths and recognize that people would continue to hold racist views regardless of participants’ actions (e.g., “...being very consistent and being very persistent you can have some leverage at the end you know, uhm...just like an understanding of like, at the end of the day, like, people would just be different”).

### **Moving Downstream: Understanding Racial Identity**

Just like a flowing river would move downstream, the international students interviewed for this study eventually arrived at a space where they understood the racialized nature of life in the U.S., and were able to reconcile their expectations with the realities of being Black here. Much like a river, this downstream flow was not easy, and certainly did not occur overnight. It is important also to recognize the impact of their African ethnic identities as safe vessels in this trip down the river of racial identity development. The safe vessel of African identity was a space where they were able to be held, rest, and take shelter. That is exactly the role that participants’ African identities served for them (e.g., “I would never not see myself as an African”). It also seemed helpful for some participants to remind themselves of their African identity, possibly as a source of comfort in the tumultuous journey of racial identity development here in the U.S (e.g.,

because I really love where I'm from, I'm African, I, I represent who I am um no one's gonna change that...".)

The downstream flow of the river was also personalized for each participants; some found themselves in the calm part of the river where they were fully comfortable being identified as Black in the U.S., while others were struggling to stay afloat in the rapids, facing various realities of this identity in a majority White context. This was highlighted by the varying open-level categories that made up the axial category of *personalized racial identities*. Choc was one such participant who indicated comfort in identifying as a Black person in the U.S. After living here for more than four years, she has finally come to embrace her identity as a Black person, and celebrates it herself:

...like you cannot mistake me for anything other than Black, I love it! I love it, I--  
I love the fact that I'm Black...I cannot be anything other than Black, and I can't spend my time, um, wishing I was something else, I have done that...

Malika was also similar to Choc in her acceptance of her racial identity in the U.S. Like several other participants, the journey for her was slow and may have begun with having a new identity (Black) thrust upon her in interactions with registration forms, formal paperwork and people outside of her African community. This left her with little choice but to accept and embrace her new identity as a Black person in the U.S.

...I mean, now I've accepted that I'm Black in America. I really don't know how I could say it. I think it's just like a long process, uhm, you're kind of like nudged into it slowly...

An upstream point in the river, before the calm waters, was illustrated by Ashley, who had previously expressed discomfort as being categorized with other Black people, was still able

to emphasize that she was no other race but Black and this was something she was okay with (e.g., "...so people also someone who's maybe looking at my application that I'm not white, I'm not Asian I'm African I'm Black...").

Unlike Choc, Malika and Ashley who seemed to have arrived at the calm part of the river where they were comfortable being identified as Black people in the U.S., other participants seemed to still be grappling with what this identity means for them and how others interact with them due to their Black racial identity. Wale was one such participant, who continued to experience discomfort at how people, particularly White people, interacted with him:

...yeah, cos people look at me differently over here, erm, it's like, it's not the right thing you know if another, a White person looks at me, sometimes I'll be like "alright I just gotta like, not pay attention to them..."

Navigating the rapids of racial identity in the U.S. often involved recognizing that the contextual meanings of race differed here in the U.S. from what they were used to in their home countries. For these participants who continue to struggle, it seemed to be helpful for them to cement themselves in their African identity by highlighting the differences between themselves and African Americans. This created some distance between them and other members of their racial group, and served as a sort of protective factor:

"it's just, it's so funny because I really just when I speak with like African American, or when I speak with African, I usually tend to be more drawn to speak with like African more than speaking with African American"

### ***Incidents Shaping Understanding of Racial Identity***

Similar to how U.S. minority group members respond to race-related incidents and experiences, these international students highlighted several ways that certain incidents had

shaped the personalized ways that they think of their racial identities. These incidents either happened to other Black people, or happened personally to the participant and /or someone close to them (e.g., "... I came to this realization after seeing all the, uhm, all the things, all the trouble that black people are going through in the US..." and "...I've experienced racism in the middle of the street when I was in the US..."). Sometimes these incidents were difficult for participants to comprehend due to expectations that things would have gotten better in modern times, as illustrated by Dasi:

It was like I think it was 2018 and I was like 'wait we're in 2018, we're still doing that?

We're still doing that to other people? I was like, and then in the university SIU we had a scandal when some guys put some racist messages on, they made a YouTube video and it was very racist you know? They used some cartoon and it was all over the place and I was like 'Dang man. We-This is college. This is 2018. We're supposed to be smarter than this...

Personal incidents also seemed to have impacted these participants' racial identity development journey. These incidents were not identified as racist incidents per se, however, they seemed to have impacted how they were viewing themselves as Black people. Malika reflected on this, as she shared how a classroom incident left her wondering how other Black people viewed her:

Uhm, I remember one of my professors referred to me as an "African American" in class and I was just like, "uhh, no I'm not. But uhm, no?" and they were like "okay so what's the difference?" and I'm like "I am just an African who happens to look like what I look like and." So, it's, it's like always that reminder of you're Black in America...



These incidents shaped participants' racial identity development, because they are in sharp contrast to how they thought about race in their home countries, and probably how they were treated back home (e.g., if I'm in any other African country, or maybe in a different country that's not in Africa, probably the definition of black is just "Oh. It's just a person. It's normal.")

### ***Intersectionality of Gender and Race in Shaping Racial Identity Development***

Participants' racial identity development process did not seem to have occurred in a vacuum. All of them had established social identities prior to their move, and these identities impacted how they were conceptualizing themselves as Black people. Much like how their African ethnic identity served as a safe vessel from which to explore their race, and a space for reprieve and support when the racial identity development got difficult, gender also influenced the racial identity development process. Although only one participant (Choc) spoke specifically on this, it seemed to be worthy of note. Choc provided insight into how her experiences in Nigeria were mostly gendered, as a plus-size woman living in a patriarchal society:

...for starters, I'm a big girl, so finding clothes that cater to that in Nigeria is not easy. A lot of stores don't stock things beyond like a size 10 or a size 12. In Nigeria, yes...I mean by the time a girl reaches like 10, 11, 12, she becomes very aware of how different things are between her and the males.

For Choc, her gender and race became so intertwined that she was unable to separate them when examining her experiences. She was keenly aware of how being a woman, and being Black, influenced others' perceptions of her, as well as the opportunities that were closed to her (e.g., ...and I know that the world isn't too friendly to Black women...). It also seemed crucial for her to honor her gender identity by recognizing the ways that beauty standards negatively impacted her both as a Black person and a woman:

...so [exhales] the beauty standards...having to reject all those other-worldly beauty standards to tell myself, “okay, yeah, I’m dark-skinned but I love the fact.”. You know, my hair is curly and kinky and is natural, I’m not gonna retouch it, I love that um, I look the way I look and I don’t wanna look anywhere else, this is the body that I have, this is the body I’m gonna love ...I love being a Black woman, that is the truth...

The racial identity development process of African Black international students is non-linear, and does not follow a single course. Like a river, it flows and meanders according to individual pace, and is impacted by rocks form of racism, discrimination, othering, and other major incidents. Ripples, in the form of interactions with other Black people and navigating the constructivist nature of race in the U.S., also periodically show up in the river. Thankfully, these students are able to feel safe in their African identity, which serves as a safe vessel for navigating the river. Although the participants made their way downstream, eventually arrive downstream, the process of flowing through the river is just as important and ought to be recognized. In participant interviews, it did not seem that any of them had reached the end of their journeys, implying that their racial identity development processes are still on-going.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of the present study was to explore how Black African international students understand their racial identity development within the U.S. context and to identify the factors and experiences that help facilitate this development process. Grounded Theory method was used to develop a contextualized understanding of racial identity development in a different cultural environment that is not the subjects' primary culture. The selective coding analysis process revealed a grounded theory model, *Racial Identity as a Flowing River*, that is represented by Figure 1, which captured the various identity related processes that emerged at the axial level to explain the storyline that emerged.

Researchers have provided theories and models to explain how Black people develop their racial identity theory (e.g., Cross, 1971; Parham, 1989; Cokley, 2007). Cross' (1971) nigrescence model is arguably the most popular, outlining the various stages of Black racial identity development. This study's results are, to a degree, consistent with the Cross' (1971) nigrescence model of Black racial identity development. According to this model, Black people move through four main stages in their identity development; pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization (Cross, 1971; 1991). Although the development process is presented in a stage model, the actual reality is far from simply linear. Black people often cycle through these stages, and may sometimes repeat a stage based on new information, experiences or contexts. This non-linear process was accurately captured in how participants of this study described their own identity development process, which mimicked the gradual flow of a river littered with ripples and rocks. Unlike the nigrescence model however, results of this study indicate that non-American Black people may not always start their identity development

process at the pre-encounter stage. They already identified as Black, and recognized that other people would also identify them as Black. No participant in this study echoed internalized anti-Blackness or self-hatred, which is what the pre-encounter stage of the nigrescence model proposed. Rather, participants highlighted pride in their Black identities, which was reflective of the internalization stage of the nigrescence model.

The multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) is another model that has received some attention in the literature. Sellers and colleagues (1998) developed this model out of the amalgamation of already-existing identity models, with a specific focus on the historical and cultural experiences that make racial identity a unique form of group identity. This study revealed that international students' identities and understanding of race prior to moving to the U.S. were a critical aspects of their identity development process, which would reflect a highly salient racial identity according to MMRI.

These international students already possessed an understanding of race that was consistent with the context of their home countries. Upon moving to the U.S, participants have to hold up their pre-existing conceptualizations of race to the U.S. context, and alter their understanding of race to make space for race-related incidents they experience here in the U.S. Thus, participants don't really learn about race when they move to the U.S., they simply relearn what race means in a Eurocentric cultural space. The aforementioned racial development models provide a framework for psychologists to understand what racial identity development looks like for Black people born and socialized in the United States. However, there is still paucity of research in how various non-American minority groups, particularly African Black international students, develop their racial identity in the context of the United States.

The existing racial identity models may not appropriately capture how Black African

international students make sense of the constructivist nature of race in the U.S, and conceptualize incidents of racism, discrimination, and othering. Due to the inherent assumption in racial identity development models that members of the minority group were socialized in the U.S (Hocoy, 1999), they may do a poor job capturing how African Black international students transfer and integrate knowledge of race in their home countries into the U.S cultural context (Asante et al., 2016). The existing racial identity development theories also operate on the assumption that members of minority races begin their development process with little to no understanding of their race, which may not be applicable to Black African international students.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

A crucial outcome of the present study was a broader, more contextualized understanding of how African Black international students understand their racial identity within the U.S cultural context. The conclusions of this study revealed that the process of understanding racial identity is non-linear and unique for each participant. However, a central theme running through the interviews, which indicated that these international students had a basic understanding of racial identity, steeped within the context of their respective African countries. However, upon moving to the U.S, students were exposed to other Black people in the U.S, learned about the racial hierarchy that exists in the country, and had race-related experiences that challenged them to re-access their own racial identities. This identity development process is like traveling down a river littered with ripples and rocks, with students' African ethnic identity serving as a safe vessel from which to navigate the downward flow of the river.

The present study contributes to psychology's understanding of how non-American Black people come to understand their racial identity within a new, Eurocentric cultural context. The model that was developed from the data and analysis lays the groundwork for how we can begin

to think of the contextual nature of race, and how this impacts the ways non-American Black people understand their racial identity within the U.S. cultural context. Open-level and axial level categories formed the basis on which the central theme of this model was developed. At the center of this theoretical structure is the impact of various incidents such as racism, discrimination, othering, interactions with African Americans, and the treatment of Black people in various parts of the country.

When these international students moved to the U.S., they were confronted with the differences between life in their home countries and life in the U.S. One of the main differences that was keenly noticeable was the central role that their race took in this country. These participants moved from countries where race was a non-essential social identifier, to a country where they were forced to constantly think about and notice their race. For some of them, this switch to a more contextual understanding of racial identity was easy, while for others it was a rather challenging process. In a sense, it may have contributed to the already laborious task of having to learn the culture and ways of a different society. Those participants who had lived in the U.S for longer periods of time (i.e., more than four years) were better able to recognize instances of racism and discrimination. The process of recognizing how their experiences could be conceptualize through a racial lens is consistent with existing research on minority immigrant groups, which indicates that after about the fourth year of living in the U.S, members of immigrant minority groups begin to report similar rates of incidents of discrimination and racism to their U.S born minority counterparts (Tuch & Shaw-Taylor, 2007).

While navigating their racial identity within the U.S context, these international students' African ethnic identities served as a safe vessel on the sometimes-turbulent river, on which they can retreat and receive support. This was an identity that had been developed prior to

participants' relocation to the U.S, and it was an identity that seemed to have gotten even stronger while living here. The African identity provided participants with stability, a sense of community, and a sense of permanence (Pierre, 2004). Unlike their racial identity which shifted drastically after they moved to the U.S., their African ethnic identity remained relatively stable. The members of their African communities were also helpful in validating these participants' acculturative struggles, providing emotional and practical support, and serving as a sounding board in processing race-related experiences. Through their African communities here in the U.S, Black African international students were also able to maintain connections to their home countries and cultures, which appeared to be a helpful coping strategy (Asante, 2012).

An interesting finding in the present study was the awareness and impact of intersectionality on racial identity development. Although this phenomenon was only explicitly discussed by one of these participants, it was an important illustration of the complexities of identity. Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1993) to describe the ways that people's social identities overlap to impact their lived experiences. Although this experience was only shared by one participant, I believe that it is crucial to note, as it highlights another aspect of how Black African international students understand their racial identity within the U.S cultural context.

Several researchers have explored intersectionality and its impacts on social experiences. Crenshaw (1989) indicated that Black women in the U.S. are often discriminated in ways that don't fit the strict definitions of racism or sexism. Black women's experiences are usually a combination of both racism and sexism, which is rarely captured in the legal and historical definitions of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989). Although the term "intersectionality" was initially coined to capture the gendered racism that Black women in the U.S face, the term has

been expanded to capture how other minoritized identities such as sexuality (Asante, 2020) intersect with race to influence lived experiences. Recently, researchers like Alexander-Floyd (2012) have lamented on the gradual erasure of Black women as knowledge producers and subjects of investigation. As intersectionality becomes more integrated into mainstream social science research, Black women's experiences are being left behind and shifted to the sidelines. Furthermore, research on intersectionality of race and gender rarely focus on the intersectional experience of Black women who are not socialized within the U.S. context.

Choc, a Black woman from Nigeria, spoke extensively on her gendered experiences, and the ways that she notices the intersectionality between her gender and race. Choc provided examples of the gendered nature of her life and the general culture in Nigeria, and highlighted how her experiences became both gendered and racialized in the U.S. For example, she spoke on being keenly aware of her status as a Black woman in her workspaces, and how this impacted how she understands her experiences as a Black person in the U.S. For her, it was challenging to speak with her American friends about misogyny and her struggles as a woman, due to the false separation that tends to exist in the U.S. between gender and race when exploring Black women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1993; Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

Another aspect of intersectionality that was captured in this study was the way that ethnicity impacted these students' racial identity development. Current models of Black racial identity development (e.g., Cross, 1971, Sellers et al., 1998) have not captured how ethnicity impacts the ways by which Black people conceptualize their racial identity. The international students in this study spoke extensively on how their African ethnic identity served as a safe vessel from which to navigate racial identity. When they faced experiences of racism and discrimination, participants were able to rely on other Africans for support. Participants were



also able to recognize the similarities and differences that they share with other Black people, due to their already established African ethnic identity. For example, they readily connected with African American people's experiences of racism and discrimination, but were also able to draw distinctions between their cultural backgrounds and practices, and that of other Black people.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A major strength of this study was the use of qualitative methods to develop further insight into how Black African international students understand their racial identity within the U.S. context. There is very little information about this subject and population (e.g., Asante, 2012), and this study contributes to the literature by providing rich descriptions of the racial identity development process as well as the factors that influence this process within the U.S. cultural context. The present study also illuminated the interactions between these factors to develop a storyline that was common for all participants, while also stressing the importance of individual culture, context, and experiences. The qualitative process also allowed for the development of a working model to describe the racial identity development process of Black African international students.

Another strength of the study was the diverse representation of various African regions in terms of participants' countries of origin. When conducting psychological research, it is essential to have a diverse representation in participants, to ensure that results are representative of the population of interest (Morse et al., 2002). This study had participants from four of the five major regions within Africa; east, west, south and central. The diversity of the participants allowed for differences in experiences living in the U.S., as well as exploration of the similarities in how people in different African countries experience race in the African context. This is

important in ensuring that the data collected in this study, as well as the resulting racial identity development model, can be applied to other Black African international students who were not a part of this study.

The relationship that I had with some of the research participants was also beneficial to the interview process and results of the study. Due to the small percentage of international students, and subsequently African international students, present at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, students tend to have relationships with one another in various capacities. For most of the participants, I had had encounters with them at African Student Union gatherings. I was also acquainted with a few of the participants, due to our involvement in an Afro-Caribbean Life Group, which is a religion-based support group for international students of African and Caribbean descent. My existing relationships and previous encounters with almost all of the participants allowed us to create a comfortable interview environment. I believe that participants were also able to be more candid and transparent in their responses to questions and prompts because they had encountered me in other settings prior to their interview.

In addition to these strengths, the current study also had some weaknesses that should be taken into consideration when implementing the results. Although my existing relationships with some of the participants is a strength, it could also be considered a weakness. Since some of the participants already knew me in some capacity, their responses could have been influenced by their desire to please me or positively contribute to my study. For example, participants could have felt a pressure to respond a certain way in order to not make future encounters with me awkward or unpleasant. I did not purposefully sample participants whom I already knew; however due to the small African international student community here at SIUC, it was impossible to ensure that I had no previous contact or interactions with any of my participants

prior to their participation.

Another limitation of this study was that I was unable to recruit freshly arrived Black African international students in the current study. Given the timing of this data collection (i.e., spring semester), and the fact that most students move to the U.S. and start school in the Fall, any potential participants would have been in the U.S. at least six months. Because experiences tend to be different for newly arrived versus more senior international students, it would have been helpful to have freshly-arrived participants who could offer a unique perspective on what the racial identity development process looks like for these students who have only recently moved to the U.S. I imagine that such participants would have a different understanding of their racialized identities and would still be operating from their understanding of race within the home country cultural context. New arrivals might also be experiencing various aspects of culture shock (e.g., Ecochard, & Fotheringham, 2017). Although all the participants in this study had been in the U.S. for more than two years, they did not seem to have any difficulty recalling their thoughts, feelings, and experiences when they first arrived in the U.S.

A final limitation of that this study is grounded in the timing of the data collection. Given the context within which racial identity development occurs, it would have been helpful to be able to get information about how the racialized events of the following summer (2020 i.e., the police killings of Black people such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor) influenced their racial identity development process. Unfortunately, the participants whom I reached out to for follow-up interviews were unable to speak with me due to time and personal constraints. These data represent a more ordinary, pre-George Floyd/Black Lives Matter, stage of these participants racial identity development in the U.S. context.

## **Implications and Future Directions**

The results of this study have many implications for mental health professionals, researchers and university departments dedicated to international students' wellbeing and academic success. Conclusions derived from this study's data can benefit mental health professionals who aim to provide culturally sensitive clinical services to Black African international student. It can also help international student offices in their decision-making around community resources that could be beneficial for Black African students. The results of the study can also be used to guide future researchers interested in exploring the racial identity development process of non-U.S.-born Black people.

### **Implications for Mental Health Professionals**

Results of this study should be considered by mental health professionals, particularly those practicing in college counseling centers and who are more likely to provide services for Black African international students. In considering how to effectively work with these students, mental health providers should first consider the cultural and contextual variables that each client operates in, as this will impact individual student needs. First, it would be essential for the mental health professional to recognize that, depending on where the Black African international student is in their racial identity development process, they may be unable to recognize how racialized experiences impact their mental health. For example, A Black African international student who has not properly integrated their pre-existing understanding of race into the U.S context may not realize how experiences like racism and discrimination could lead to mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, and adjustment concerns (Pieterse et al., 2012). In such an instance, it may be unhelpful to client to immediately conceptualize their presenting concerns as a race-based stress response. It may be more beneficial to provide psychoeducation

about the impacts of racism on mental wellbeing, and allow the client to slowly develop insight as the clinician supports them through that process.

Conversely, a Black African international student who is fully aware of what it means to be Black in the U.S. cultural context may be better able to conceptualize how negative race-based incidents and experiences could impact their mental wellbeing (Asante, 2012). Such a student may benefit from therapeutic interventions that allow space to process these difficult experiences, connect them to communities and resources, and affirm their racial identity. For example, for such a client, it may be helpful to name such experiences as racist, identify the specific ways such incidents are contributing to psychological distress, and highlighting ways that community healing could be beneficial for them (Jones & Neblett, 2019).

Results of this study could also be helpful for structuring therapy and support groups for Black African international students. Group therapy has been identified in psychotherapy treatment literature as an effective modality for the treatment of various psychological and emotional concerns for people of color (Fenster, 1996; Stark-Rose et al., 2012). Many universities and colleges in America already offer group therapy options for students from minoritized groups, as a supplement to individual psychotherapy and psychoeducation workshops. Group therapy options could be provided for such students who desire to build community with other Black people and receive support for their racialized and wider adjustment concerns. For example, counseling centers could develop group therapy for Black international students who are experiencing difficulty adjusting to life in the U.S as a space to receive support from their peers and also learn some coping and self-care strategies.

### **Implications for University Services**

Results of this study also have implications for college and university international

student offices who provide services for international students from admission up until graduation. To start, university staff employed in such positions ought to be mindful of how race impacts the acculturative experiences of Black African international students (Poyrazli, et al., 2010). In addition to acculturative stressors like language barriers, financial challenges, and living away from main sources of support (Smith, & Khawaja, 2011), these international students must also cope with suddenly becoming members of a racial minority group in the U.S (Asante, 2012). It is crucial then, that international student office personnel recognize how this added layer of racial identity could impact how Black international students struggle to adjust to their new environments.

In meeting the needs of these students, personnel in these offices should be mindful not to create a blanket set of expectations for all Black African international students (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Failing to recognize individual needs and situations of these students could lead to personnel applying stereotypes when working with said students, which could lead to harm and psychological distress. It is essential to recognize that each Black international student one works with will have a unique background and story, no matter how similar it is to other students from their home country (Boafo-Arthur, 2014). For example, the experiences of an international student from Nigeria with family living in the U.S. would be different from another student from the same country who has no family living here. To ensure that the services being provided are beneficial to all students, personnel at international student centers ought to be flexible in their service provision, respecting the needs and experiences of each individual.

### **Implications for Researchers**

Given the results of the current study, there are a few suggestions for future research. The results of this study provide a stepping stone in developing and testing models that

accurately capture the racial identity development process of non-American Black people in the U.S. This study was focused solely on the experiences of Black African international students; however, the results could be used to inform future studies that explore the unique racial identity journeys of different Black immigrant populations. Some research already exists on how the current racial identity models could be applicable to non-American Black people in the African diaspora (Hocoy, 1999), so the results of this study could be integrated with existing data to develop studies that capture the racial identity development of non-American Black people. The existing data could also fill in the gap in literature on the acculturative experiences of Black African international studies. Currently, there are very few published studies (e.g., Asante, 2012; Poyrazli et al., 2010) of how racial identity affects the acculturative experiences of Black international students. To take it further, researchers could also explore whether the racialized experiences are similar and different for other international students who are members of racial and/or ethnic minorities when they move to the U.S. Thus, this study's results could be used to inform future studies that explore how Black international students experience their racial identity development within the U.S. context.

Another topic for future research would be examining the role of intersectionality on racial identity development of non-U. S born Black immigrant groups. Researchers could explore how already-established identities such as gender and ethnicity could impact how non-U. S born Black people come to understand what it means to be Black within the U.S. cultural context. This study's results suggested that participants' African ethnic identity served as a vessel from which to safely explore their new identity as Black people in America. When the exploration process became difficult, participants were able to retreat into their African communities to reconnect to their home countries through things such as conversations, food, and religious

practices. In the same vein, gender identity also seemed to impact how participants, particularly those who were female-identifying, made sense of their racialized experiences (Bailey, 2012). Research studies could be developed to further explore exactly how intersectionality influences racial identity development. A research question could be how different non-U.S. born Black people's ethnic identifications influence their racial identity development process. Another specific research question is how non-U. S born Black women and Black men experience Blackness in the U.S. This line of questioning would be consistent with the recognition of the interconnectedness of various group identities, the role of culture and context in group identity development (Sellers et al., 1998) and efforts to recenter Black people's experiences in intersectionality research (Alexander-Floyd, 2012).

### **Conclusions**

Racial identity development for Black international students is a non-linear and ever-evolving process, and is influenced by already-existing identities, racialized experiences, and previous understanding of race in a non-U.S. cultural context. In this study, other group identities, prior understanding of race and experiences of racism and discrimination reciprocally interacted with one another to form the basis of the contextualized understanding of racial identity within the U.S. cultural context. Since there is very little existing research on how Black African international students navigate their racial identity in the U.S., the results of this study and the resulting racial identity model could be used to inform future research on this subject matter. It is hoped that various stakeholders involved in the academic success and overall wellbeing of Black African international students (i.e., mental health professionals, researchers, and international student office personnel) consider the cultural and personal variables that facilitate the racial identity development process when working with these students. Although



the current study contributed to the existing literature in this area and deepened the understanding of the complex and non-linear nature of the racial identity development process, continued work is needed to further understand and support Black African international students in U.S. colleges and universities.

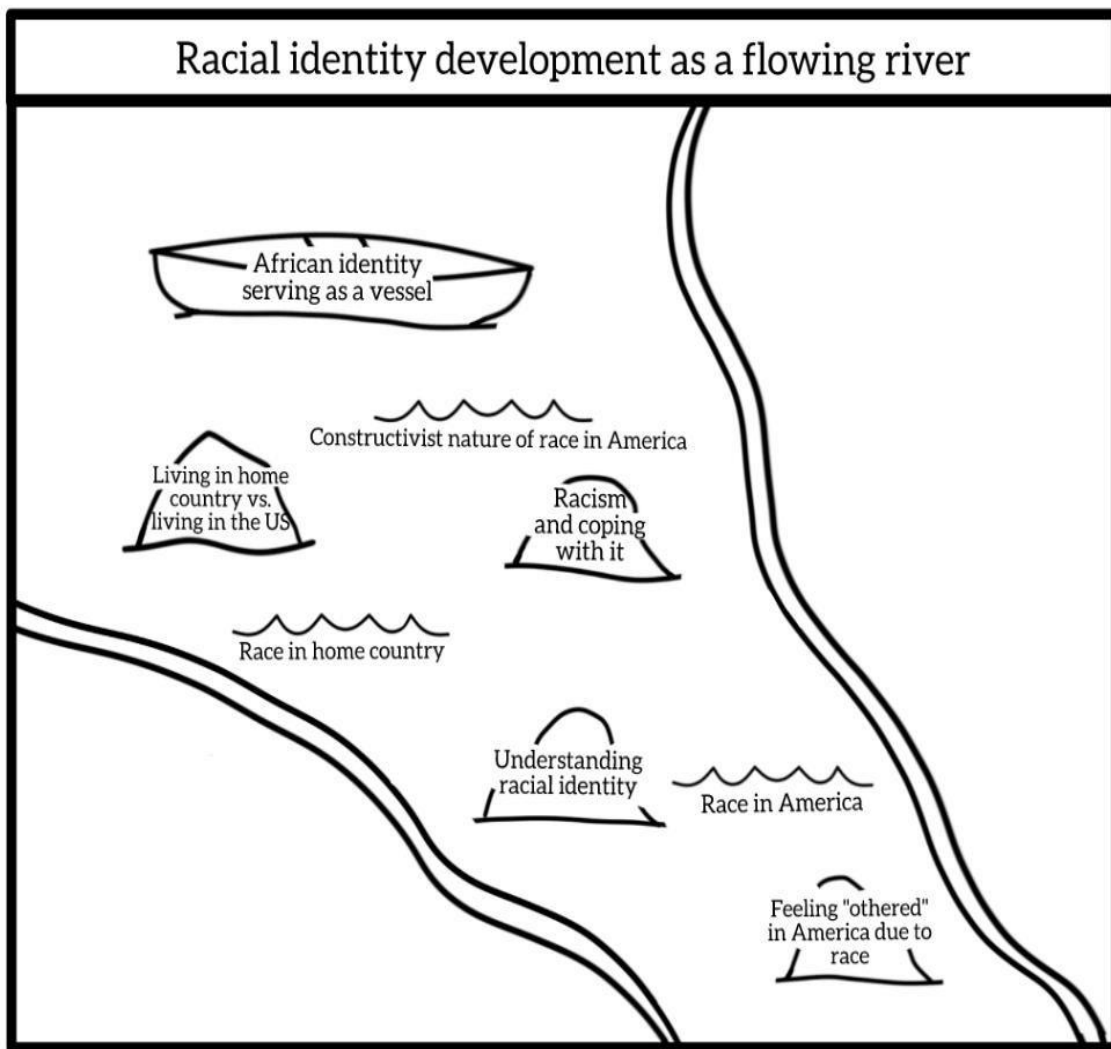


Figure 1: Racial Identity Development Model

**Table 1 – Axial-Level and Open-Level Categories**

| <b>Axial-Level Categories</b>                 | <b>Open-Level Categories</b>                    | <b>Descriptions</b>                           | <b>Examples</b>  |
|---|---|---|--|
| Living in home country vs. living in the U.S. | Perception of the U.S. Pre-Immigration.         | How perceptions of the U.S were developed     | <p>“I would say, I was exposed to American culture</p> <p>Movies, Literature and Socialization with people who traveled...”</p>  |
| Living in home country vs. living in the U.S. | Differences between US and home countries.      | What’s different here in the U.S.             | <p>“Yeah, and especially like things were different right</p> <p>like in Nigeria we don’t rely on a credit system or a credit, so it’s kind of the situations like that.”</p>  |
| Living in home country vs. living in the U.S. | Experiences as an international student at SIU. | What it’s like being an international student | <p>“There’s something fascinating Americans about internationals,</p> <p>I don’t know what it is, like even the accent, the way we behave, people I met when I first [line breaks] they were really friendly to me...”</p> |

| <b>Axial-Level<br/>Categories</b>                      | <b>Open-Level<br/>Categories</b>               | <b>Descriptions</b>   | <b>Examples</b>   |
|--|--|---|---|
|  |  |   |   |
| Living in<br>home country<br>vs. living in<br>the U.S. | Living<br>in different<br>parts of the<br>U.S. | Life in<br>different parts of<br>the U.S.                       | <p>“Uhh, I lived for one year in, uh, in Colorado, in Boulder, and then, then I moved to the, to Carbondale.”</p> <p>Uh, Boulder was like... It was a very nice place</p> <p>It was a very nice city. Quiet. Very well organized.</p> <p>Very nice people...”</p> |
| Understandin<br>g Race: Race<br>in Home<br>Country     | Race<br>Definition in<br>home country.         | How race is<br>defined in home<br>country                       | <p>“Growing up, occasionally, when we considered races</p> <p>one, it was never really a common question if you were even filling a form- in Nigeria, to ever ask what race you are...”</p>   |
| Understandin<br>g Race: Race<br>in Home<br>Country     | Underst<br>anding Race in<br>Home Country.     | How race is<br>understood and<br>experienced in<br>home country | <p>“Uh, not really like as I mentioned like we have a lot of Chinese people who moved there for work</p> <p>and we have some other African people who move there for jobs and stuff like that</p>   |

| <b>Axial-Level<br/>Categories</b>   | <b>Open-Level<br/>Categories</b>         | <b>Descriptions</b>                        | <b>Examples</b>   |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|
|                                     |  |  | but we don't really look at someone because of like- look at them different because of the color of the skin..."  |
| Understanding Race: Race in America | Incidents Shaping Understanding of Race. | Incidents that impact racial understanding | "Uhm, I came to this realization after seeing all the, uhm, all the things, all the trouble that black people are going through in the US especially uh, from like the police force."                                   |
| Understanding Race: Race in America | What does Black Mean?                    | Black meaning                              | <p>"...the term Black...[exhales] this is a tough question</p> <p>what does the term Black mean to me?</p> <p>I never actually had to think that deep into it.</p> <p>For me it was mostly the color of my skin..."</p> |
| Understanding Race: Race in America | Constructivist nature                    | The ways that definition race              | "...that's when I can say I strongly started identifying myself as Black, and with the various perspectives that come with being uuh, Black in America that's   |

| <b>Axial-Level Categories</b>                     | <b>Open-Level Categories</b>   | <b>Descriptions</b>   | <b>Examples</b>   |
|---|--|---|---|
|   | of Race in America.  | in America depends on context   | typically, I never had to consider or worry about when I was in Nigeria...”   |
| Understanding Race: Race in America               | Interactions and relations with African Americans in various contexts. | How interactions with African Americans impact understanding of race. | “...I-this is going to sound really bad, but I try my hardest to stay away from African American because we have different perspective about things...” |
| Understanding Race: Understanding racial identity | Personalized racial identities   | Personal ways of connecting with racial identity                      | “I wear my natural hair a lot. I wear my natural- and I have like 4c natural hair. Yes, my hair is very [we?] and very kinky and I wear it out...”      |
| Understanding Race: Understanding                 | Incidents Shaping Understanding of Race                                | Specific incidents that impacted how                                  | “...but then, gradually, and that just started the summer of my, like the summer, a few months after I had been in the U.S, when I got more             |

| <b>Axial-Level Categories</b>                           | <b>Open-Level Categories</b>                                       | <b>Descriptions</b>  | <b>Examples</b>   |
|---|--|--|---|
| g racial identity                                       |  | participants understand race   | involved in politics, learning a lot about here...”   |
| Understandin<br>g Race:<br>Racism and<br>Coping with it | Racism in<br>America   | Racism in<br>America   | “...giving the example of the American people. I feel like racism is like, more like, all the other races combined against Black people, Uhm, it’s- racism is really just an injustice...”  |
| Understandin<br>g Race:<br>Racism and<br>Coping with it | Coping with<br>Racism (“I<br>cannot make a<br>false<br>statement”) | Ways<br>different<br>participants coped<br>with experiences of<br>racism | “I was irritated at first, but then I was like you know what, I am the center of attention now. So [laughs] let them keep looking at me, let them waste their time and energy just looking at me while I’m doing my own thing...” |
| Understandin<br>g Race:<br>Racism and<br>Coping with it | Feeling<br>“othered” in<br>America Due<br>to Race                  | Ways<br>participants felt<br>excluded                                    | “Yeah it became more, I became more aware like “oh I’m, I’m black in a, you know, more of like a white dominant country” when I moved here...”  |

| <b>Axial-Level<br/>Categories</b>                     | <b>Open-Level<br/>Categories</b>                               | <b>Descriptions</b>                           | <b>Examples</b>  |
|---|--|---|--|
|   |  |   |  |
| Understanding Race:<br>Racism and<br>Coping with it   | Personal<br>Experiences of<br>Racism in<br>Various<br>Settings | Personal<br>experiences of<br>racism          | “Yes, I have. It was actually, erh, um, I won’t mention the, it’s a supermarket, I won’t mention the name.”  |
| Understanding Race:<br>Racism and<br>Coping with it   | How Has<br>Racism<br>Impacted You?                             | Ways<br>racism impacted<br>individuals        | “It makes me think a bit harder about the situation because it’s really, I feel like it’s really mentally draining with everything that’s going on these days...”                |
| Identity:<br>African<br>Identity as a<br>Link to Home | Personal<br>Identity as<br>African                             | Personal<br>connection to<br>African identity | “...Or sometimes I can have very flamboyant clothes that are very traditional in my home country and I’m like, I’m so proud I’m so excited right now and all of those things...” |



| <b>Axial-Level<br/>Categories</b>                     | <b>Open-Level<br/>Categories</b>                                     | <b>Descriptions</b>  | <b>Examples</b>   |
|---|--|--|---|
| Identity:<br>African<br>Identity as a<br>Link to Home | Connecting<br>with Other<br>Africans As<br>Link to Home<br>Countries | How<br>relations with other<br>Africans help<br>maintain<br>connections to<br>home countries | “...but when I moved in Carbondale then I was going to this church and we had this group called, uhm, ACLG, and our group, it was like a group of African and Caribbean coming together to hang out and just enjoy life together, and so I really felt strongly connected with them.” |
| Identity:<br>Ethnicity and<br>Gender<br>Identities    | Ethnicity<br>and Gender<br>as Salient<br>Identifiers                 | How<br>important gender<br>and ethnicity are   | “...so we identify ourselves, uh, through language and the tribes that we belong.”<br><br>“...like the society was very, very gendered,<br>and that’s one of the things I said, that you don’t really realize how messed up it is until you’re outside the culture looking in...”     |
| Identity:<br>Ethnicity and<br>Gender<br>Identities    | Gender<br>Experiences  | Experiences<br>related to gender<br>identity   | “...this is the body that I have, this is the body I’m gonna love, I love being a Black woman, that is the truth, and I know that the world isn’t too friendly to Black women...”   |

**Table 2 – Participant Identities**

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>County of Origin</b>      | <b>Sexual Orientation</b> | <b>Years in U.S</b> | <b>Academic Standing</b> |  |
|------------------|------------|---------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Missy            | 26         | Female        | Ghana                        | Heterosexual              | 6+                  | Graduate                 |  |
| Malika           | 28         | Female        | Zambia                       | Heterosexual              | 4-6                 | Graduate                 |  |
| Choc             | 26         | Female        | Nigeria                      | Undisclosed               | 4-6                 | Graduate                 |  |
| Ashley           | 24         | Female        | Democratic Republic of Congo | Heterosexual              | 4                   | Undergraduate            |  |
| Mito             | 25         | Male          | Nigeria                      | Heterosexual              | 4-6                 | Undergraduate            |  |
| Wale             | 28         | Male          | Nigeria                      | Undisclosed               | 4-6                 | Graduate                 |  |
| Dasi             | 26         | Male          | Angola                       | Heterosexual              | 4                   | Undergraduate            |  |

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## APPENDIX A

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

*Instruction:* Please complete the following information about yourself, to the best of your ability.

**Pseudonym (fake name):**

**Age:**

**Race(s):**

- a) White/Caucasian
- b) Black/African-descended
- c) Asian
- d) Non-White Latinx
- e) Multi-racial
- f) Self-identify

**Sexual Orientation:**

- a) Heterosexual
- b) Gay
- c) Lesbian
- d) Bi-sexual
- e) Self-identify

**Gender:**

- a) Man
- b) Woman
- c) Intersex
- d) Transgender
- e) Gender queer
- f) Non-binary
- g) Self-identify

**Academic Standing**

- a) Freshman
- b) Sophomore
- c) Junior
- d) Senior
- e) Graduate/Professional student

**What is your major/field of study?**

**Highest level of education**

- a) High school diploma
- b) Bachelor's degree
- c) Graduate/Professional degree (e.g., Master's, PhD, J.D., etc)

**Country of origin:**

**How many years have you been living in the United States?**

- a) Less than a year (please specify):
- b) 1-2 years
- c) 2-4 years
- d) 4-6 years
- e) 6+ years

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Question 1: How was life in your home country?**

- What was your family like? Structure? Interactions?
- What was your life like prior to moving to the United States?

#### **Question 2: What is the perception of race in your home country?**

- What is the social classification system in your home country?
- Is race a major social identity within your country?
- If not, what is the major social identifier within your country?

#### **Question 3: How has it been living in the U.S.?**

- What has it been like trying to adjustment to American society?
- Have you had any challenges trying to adjust to the American culture? Tell me more...
- What has been your experience on SIU's campus?
- What are some challenges you have experienced trying to adjust to being a student here at SIU?
- What have been some positive experiences you have had as an international student at SIUC?
- Have you had any experiences where you felt you were treated differently on SIU campus?

#### **Question 4: How would you describe your racial identity in America?**

- How closely do you identify with the racial group that you are categorized into, in the U.S.?
- How closely do you identify with other members of your racial group?
- In what ways do you perceive other members of your racial group? Generally good? Generally bad?

#### **Question 5: How much does your racial identity impact your adjustment to the U.S.?**

- How does your racial identity help you gain access to certain resources or spaces?
- How does your racial identity restrict your access to certain resources or spaces?

How does your racial identity impact the friendships that you seek out or the people you seek interactions with?

**Question 6: How do stereotypes and perceptions impact your interactions with other**

**Black people?**

- What are some stereotypes and perceptions that you have of Black international people?
- How do these stereotypes impact your interactions or relationships with Black international people?
- What are some stereotypes and perceptions that you have about native-born Black people?
- How do these stereotypes impact your interactions or relationships with native-born Black people?

**Question 7: Are there any other topics that I did not address that you would like to discuss in this interview?**

## VITA

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University

Maame Esi A. Coleman

maamecoleman1394@gmail.com

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh  
Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, August 2015

Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology, May 2019

Dissertation Paper Title:

A Grounded Theory Analysis of Black African International Students' Racial Identity Development

Major Professor: Dr. Kathleen Chwalisz Rigney

Publications:

Knutson, D., Chwalisz, K., Becerra, M., Christie, M., Coleman, M.E., Couch, C., & Perinchery, R. (2020). *Student development in the context of a beginning level social justice practicum*. Training and Education in Profession Psychology.

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