

# Examining the Cultural Adjustment Experiences of African International College Students: A Qualitative Analysis

Madonna G. Constantine and Gregory M. Anderson  
Teachers College, Columbia University

LaVerne A. Berkel  
University of Missouri—Kansas City

Leon D. Caldwell  
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

Shawn O. Utsey  
Virginia Commonwealth University

The authors examined the cultural adjustment experiences of 12 Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students through semistructured interviews. Using consensual qualitative research methodology (C. E. Hill, B. J. Thompson, & E. N. Williams, 1997), 7 primary domains or themes related to these students' cultural adjustment experiences were identified, including (a) presojourn perceptions of the United States, (b) postsojourn perceptions of the United States, (c) cultural adjustment problems in the United States, (d) responses to prejudicial or discriminatory treatment, (e) family and friendship networks, (f) strategies for coping with cultural adjustment problems, and (g) openness to seeking counseling to address cultural adjustment problems. Implications of the findings are discussed.

In the 2000–2001 academic year, international students from the continent of Africa equaled nearly 30,300 individuals in U. S. colleges and universities (Institute for International Education, 2001). Relative to other international student populations in the United States (e.g., Asian and Latin American students), African students are one of the least represented groups on college and university campuses (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Essandoh, 1995). During the 2000–2001 academic year, international college students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana comprised the three highest totals of U.S. international students from African countries, and the numbers of students from these three countries rose between 6% and 16% from the previous year (Institute for International Education, 2001). As the numbers of international college students from some African countries continue to rise, it becomes especially important that counselors in college and university settings better understand the issues and experiences of these students, especially as they relate to their adjustment to the United States. As such, we investigated the cultural adjustment experiences of African international college students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana.

Counselors have offered conceptual writings discussing the potential difficulties and adjustment problems of international college students in general (Pedersen, 1991; Winkelmann, 1994). For example, many international students who sojourn to the United States have been noted to experience culture shock, confusion about role expectations, loss of social support, alienation, discrimination, and language barriers (Mori, 2000; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). Such phenomena, collectively known as *acculturative stress*, can result in the development of a variety of physical, social, and psychological problems (Constantine et al., 2004). Among international students, greater perceptions of social acceptance, greater English language proficiency, and longer residence in the United States have been associated with lower cultural adjustment concerns (e.g., Harris-Reid, 1999; Sodowsky & Lai, 1997; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). With regard to Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students, who represent an elite group of Africans by virtue of having been selected to attend U.S. schools by their parents or their government (Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996), there is a dearth of studies examining their cultural adjustment experiences, or even the experiences of other international students from the continent of Africa.

In a 1978 empirical study examining sub-Saharan African college students' adaptation to American society, Puritt found that the initial problems of these students included adjusting to a new climate, communication problems with Americans, racial discrimination, homesickness, depression, irritability, fatigue, and a lack of comfort with U.S. culture. Moreover, results of an interview study with Black East African, Black West African, and Arabic North American students at a U.S. university indicated that Black African students reported more difficulty adapting to their new surroundings than non-Black African students (Adelegan & Parks, 1985). Furthermore, the results of Nebedum-Ezeh's (1997) investigation of African international students suggested that some

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Madonna G. Constantine, Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Teachers College, Columbia University; Gregory M. Anderson, Department of Organization and Leadership, Teachers College, Columbia University; LaVerne A. Berkel, Division of Counseling and Educational Psychology, University of Missouri—Kansas City; Leon D. Caldwell, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Nebraska—Lincoln; Shawn O. Utsey, Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Madonna G. Constantine, Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, Box 92, New York, NY 10027. E-mail: mc816@columbia.edu

students experience adjustment difficulties because of inadequate preparation for their sojourn to the United States, inadequate support and assistance after arriving in the United States, and social isolation and discrimination on U.S. college campuses. In addition, Manyika's (2001) study reported that the historical legacy of racism is dominant in many U.S. African international college students' experiences.

Race may play an especially important role in relation to the cultural adjustment processes of African international college students in the United States. In particular, Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students generally have grown up in cultures in which being Black is the norm (Bagley & Young, 1988). Because most Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students have been reared in racially homogenous contexts, they are less likely to have had negative experiences related to discrimination or racism prior to coming to the United States (Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996). However, upon coming to the United States, race may become a highly salient issue for many of these students as a result of living in a predominantly White society (Adeleke, 1998), and racial discrimination may lead to or exacerbate their cultural adjustment difficulties (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Mori, 2000; Winkelman, 1994).

Similar to other college students who sojourn to the United States from various countries, Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students also may experience profound cultural value conflicts that affect their academic and personal adjustment in American college settings. Cultural value conflicts are negative affect (e.g., guilt, anxiety, or shame) and cognitive contradictions that result from wrestling with the values and behavioral expectations from an individual's culture of origin and the values and behavioral expectations present in the host culture (Inman, Ladany, Constantine, & Morano, 2001). In particular, a salient type of cultural value conflict for some Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students relates to differences in worldviews and values as compared with White U.S. college students. For example, many Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students adopt an African-centered perspective to life, which includes guiding principles and values pertaining to group survival, communalism, harmony, collective responsibility, commonality, cooperation, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective (Myrick, 2002; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997; Nobles, 1991; Okeke, Draguns, Sheku, & Allen, 1999). Because many African students who come from more communal cultural backgrounds may value close interpersonal relationships (e.g., Allen, 2001), they may experience difficulties when interacting with many White American students, who may tend to emphasize aspects of individualism such as independence and self-reliance in relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students with high communal or interdependent self-conceptions also may struggle to define themselves when they are away from their families (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, & Moreau, 2001), and their sense of isolation, loneliness, and homesickness may be especially notable in American individualistic environments that tend to disparage dependence on others.

As a result of racism, discrimination, and cultural value conflicts, some Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students find it challenging to make friends and establish a social support network on their local campuses because of differences in

ways of being and interpersonal communication patterns (Constantine et al., 2004; Essandoh, 1995; Mori, 2000; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997; Taylor & Nwosu, 2001). For example, in college dormitory settings, African international students may appear to violate American students' norms concerning personal space because there is a greater individualistic sense of territory and ownership of space in U.S. culture than in collectivistic cultures in which space is shared (Pedersen, 1991). Furthermore, because of cross-cultural differences in values, many African international students experience a profound sense of loss in being away from their families and friends abroad, who would presumably be better able to relate to them interpersonally because of similar cultural values and expectations (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

Nebedum-Ezeh (1997) noted that some coping strategies used by African international college students to deal with cultural adjustment concerns included studying and working harder to overcome academic problems; using "trial and error;" and seeking help from fellow African students, campus staff and officials, faculty members, and even strangers. Although social support networks can serve vital buffering roles with regard to many Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students' cultural adjustment difficulties (Mori, 2000; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997), it is plausible to consider that these students may not have adequate access to such networks on college campuses. When marked distress associated with their cultural adjustment processes ensue, there may be limited other culturally appropriate resources perceived by these students. In particular, many African international students may not choose to access formal mental health services (e.g., individual counseling) to deal with their concerns or problems because of (a) culturally based beliefs about causes of mental illness that are incongruent with Western notions about the etiology and treatment of mental health problems, (b) strong levels of commitment to their culture or family, and (c) a lack of familiarity with traditional counseling services (e.g., Essandoh, 1995; Madu, Baguma, & Pritz, 1999). Many Africentric mental health scholars have noted that maladjustment can occur in African-descent individuals when they live in opposition to their nature or natural essence (Myers, 1988; Parham, 2002). As applied to African international college students, it is possible that living in institutional (e.g., college) and societal (e.g., the United States) contexts that might pathologize their essence, worldviews, values, personalities, and ways of being could contribute to severe cultural adjustment difficulties and, subsequently, to undue levels of psychological distress. Such distress may affect their academic and interpersonal functioning, and formal mental health intervention may be warranted at that point.

In light of culture-specific issues regarding formal mental health service utilization and conceptualizations of mental health among African individuals, it seems vital to explore the psychological help-seeking attitudes of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students in relation to these students' cultural adjustment experiences. Furthermore, because of the increasing numbers of international students from Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana who are sojourning to the United States, it is crucial that we expand our understanding of these individuals' experiences on college campuses. Moreover, there is a dearth of empirical literature that examines the experiences of African international college students in the United States as related to these students' ability to negotiate foreign academic and social environments. Such infor-

mation may have important implications for the retention of many African international students in college and university settings across the United States and for the delivery of culturally relevant and appropriate mental health services to these populations. Hence, we explored the cultural adjustment experiences of 12 African international college students from the countries of Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana using Hill, Thompson, and Williams's (1997) consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology. In spite of the enormous intercultural heterogeneity among African international students, individuals from countries located in the sub-Saharan region of Africa display some fundamental similarities with regard to their cultural adjustment experiences in the United States that justify examination in our study (Essandoh, 1995).

Guided primarily by the empirical and conceptual literature in the area of international college students' cultural adjustment issues, with particular attention to African international students' cultural adjustment experiences (e.g., Essandoh, 1995; Manyika, 2001; Mori, 2000; Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996; Taylor & Nwosu, 2001), we endeavored to identify Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian college students' pre- and postsojourn perceptions of the United States, challenges associated with being an international student, quality of interpersonal relationships in the United States, and strategies for coping with their cultural adjustment concerns.

## Method

### *Participants*

Twelve African international college students pursuing an undergraduate degree at a large, predominantly White university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States participated in the study. All of the participants self-identified racially as Black, and, by ethnic heritage, 4 of the participants self-identified as Kenyan, 4 as Nigerian, and 4 as Ghanaian. Eight men and 4 women participated in the study, and the participants ranged in age from 20 to 31 years ( $M = 22.67$ ,  $SD = 3.31$ ). The participants reported having sojourned to the United States between 4 and 51 months ago. By educational level, 2 of the participants identified as first-year undergraduate students, 3 were sophomores, 4 were juniors, and 3 were seniors. By academic major, 5 of the participants reported majoring in engineering, 3 in math, 2 in business, 1 in education, and 1 did not indicate a major. All of these individuals had lived in their countries of origin until they came to the United States specifically to attend college. Of the 12 participants in our study, 10 reported that their education was funded primarily by their parents and other family members, and 2 indicated that they had received educational funding primarily from governmental entities or agencies in their home countries, with minimal financial support from their families.

### *Researchers' Backgrounds, Experiences, and Biases*

The researchers for this study were two African American female counseling psychologists, two African American male counseling psychologists, and one South African male professor in higher education administration. The CQR (Hill et al., 1997) was selected as the methodology of choice to gather and explore the data because it is highly rigorous as a means of scientific inquiry, highlights the use and importance of having multiple researchers involved in understanding data obtained, provides a forum for reaching consensus among researchers, and is a systematic way of exploring the representativeness of results across cases (Hill et al., 1997). One of the investigators had expertise in the CQR method, and one had limited experience with this type of methodology. The remaining researchers did not have any CQR experience prior to this study and were trained by the investigator having this expertise. Moreover, three of the five

researchers had extensive experience counseling African college students who had sojourned to the United States, and all of the researchers were very familiar with the literature in the area of cultural adjustment and adaptation of African international students in the United States.

Two African American doctoral students served as interviewers for the study, and the five researchers served as judges for the coding tasks. Prior to data collection, the researchers noted their biases and expectations regarding the potential findings of the study. According to the CQR (Hill et al., 1997) method, documenting and discussing these biases is essential in order to minimize their impact on the data coding process (Hill et al., 1997). With regard to our biases, we collectively believed that the participants would enjoy living in the United States and matriculating at their university. We also speculated that they would experience some racial discrimination that would affect their cultural adjustment experiences. In addition, we expected that our participants would report having strong peer networks in their university setting in order to help them adjust to the campus climate and to living in the United States.

### *Measure*

After conducting a thorough review of the cultural adjustment literature related to international college students, particularly African international students (e.g., Essandoh, 1995; Manyika, 2001; Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996; Taylor & Nwosu, 2001), a semistructured interview protocol was developed. The interviewers used probes to elicit additional information as needed. Prior to the actual interviews, pilot interviews were conducted with 2 Ghanaian undergraduate students. The researchers used the feedback gleaned from these pilot interviews to amend the interview protocol. Examples of feedback obtained from the pilot interviews included making some interview questions clearer, changing the order of some interview questions, and adding follow-up questions to some primary areas of inquiry or interest related to the cultural adjustment experiences of international students. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in the Appendix.

### *Procedures*

For our study, we were primarily interested in Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students because these populations, relative to other African international students on the participating university campus, were enrolled in greater numbers but were severely underrepresented in terms of seeking campus mental health services. The counseling center staff at the participating university was interested in identifying these students' unique adjustment concerns and in attempting to offer services that could aid them in addressing their concerns. Posters recruiting potential participants for the study were placed in the International Students' office on the campus. The posters indicated that Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students were needed to discuss their experiences related to attending college in the United States. Although 16 students from these countries volunteered to participate, the final group of 12 participants was chosen to ensure ethnic balance among the participants. The participants were each compensated \$25 for their participation in the interview. All of the interviews took place in English. In case any of the participants experienced distress during the interviews, a licensed psychologist was available to provide crisis counseling or referrals to the campus mental health center.

The participants were randomly assigned to interviewers. Prior to these face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to sign a consent form. All of the interviews were audiotaped, and the interviews lasted an average of 60 min (range = 50–90 min). None of the participants reported having any adverse reactions to their interview. After the interviews, the participants' names were deleted from the data, each participant was assigned a code number, and the tapes were transcribed. The transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy by the interviewers, and minimal expressions such as "ahh" and "um" were deleted (Hill et al., 1997). Qualitative analyses were then



conducted by the researchers using the CQR method outlined in Hill et al. (1997).

*Development of and coding into domains.* To begin the coding process, each judge developed a “start list” of domains (i.e., topic areas) on the basis of the interview content. Next, each interviewer independently reviewed his or her respective interview in order to categorize the material. Later, the judges argued to consensus regarding the final list of domains. Modifications of the domains on the basis of themes found in participants’ responses occurred during the coding process. The final seven domains were (a) pre-sojourn perceptions of the United States, (b) post-sojourn perceptions of the United States, (c) cultural adjustment problems in the United States, (d) responses to prejudicial or discriminatory treatment, (e) family and friendship networks, (f) strategies for coping with cultural adjustment problems, and (g) openness to seeking counseling to address cultural adjustment problems.

Each judge then independently read through the transcripts and assigned blocks of sentences to a domain. At times, double coding the data was necessary if the data fit under more than one domain, but this procedure was used infrequently throughout the process. After this process was completed, all five judges convened as a group to discuss the coding for each specific transcript. Differences in coding were discussed until consensus was reached regarding the most suitable domain for each block of data.

*Abstracting core ideas within domains.* Two of the five judges read the raw data within each domain and formulated core ideas (i.e., summary statements). The general purpose of this procedure is to capture the essence of what each participant said in a clear and concise fashion (Hill et al., 1997). After the two judges abstracted the core ideas independently, the team discussed these ideas as a group until consensus was reached on the wording of each core idea.

*Audit.* The auditor was an African American female doctoral student with expertise in counseling African immigrants and international college students. The audit process entailed checking to ensure that raw data were appropriately sorted into domains and abstracted into accurate and complete core summaries. The auditor made several written suggestions for changes, and the judges who originally constructed the domains and core ideas evaluated the auditor’s comments and made changes by consensus judgment.

*Cross-analyses.* The purpose of cross-analysis is to identify similarities across cases. To achieve this goal, the team created categories within each domain that reflected the essence of the core ideas. Teams of two judges then examined the core ideas under each domain and placed respective core ideas under each category. Next, the team met as a group and came to a consensus on the placement of the abstracted core ideas to ensure that the information had been properly coded.

*Auditing of the cross-analyses.* The same individual who audited the domains and core ideas audited the cross-analyses. Changes suggested by the auditor were discussed by the primary teams and incorporated when warranted. The entire research team reviewed the final cross-analyses and changes were made until all judges were satisfied with the product. All 12 cases were included in the final reported analyses.

## Results

Table 1 illustrates the categories and subcategories within each domain. As per the CQR method (Hill et al., 1997), a category that included all cases was called *general* ( $n = 12$ ), a category that applied to 6–11 cases was called *typical*, and a category that applied to 3–5 of the cases was called *variant* (occasionally). Categories that included fewer than 3 were not included in the final results. The next sections offer descriptions and examples of the domains, categories, and subcategories.

### *Pre-sojourn Perceptions of the United States*

Participants generally indicated that, prior to their sojourn, they believed the United States offered many academic and personal opportunities for African international students. Two typical subcategories stemmed from this category. First, interviewees typically noted that they believed the U.S. higher educational system was better than that in their own country of origin. For example, 1 male participant stated, “In Kenya, we have good programs in business, but America leads the world [in terms of academic preparation and course offerings] in my area. That’s why I wanted to come here.” Second, participants typically noted that they believed there was a lot of personal freedom or choice in the United States prior to their arrival. In the words of a Ghanaian female interviewee, “I saw America as a place where people did what they wanted when they wanted. The personal freedoms and choices [afforded to Americans] are endless, and anybody coming here can take advantage of these things.”

### *Post-sojourn Perceptions of the United States*

All of the interviewees reported that, after coming to the United States, they recognized that White Americans occupied a lot of power in this country. Two typical subcategories emerged from this category. One of the typical subcategories pertained to the notion that the educational system in the United States was too Eurocentric or oriented toward White cultural values. For example, a Ghanaian male participant reported, “A lot of what you learn in classes has to do with what White people think and value. Some professors expect us to buy [fully] into their thinking, but I don’t.” Participants also typically indicated that they believed White Americans possessed most of the economic resources in the United States. In the words of a Nigerian female interviewee, “I knew that White people here had a lot of power, but it’s [remarkable] how much [capital] they have compared to [other racial and ethnic groups].”

Two variant categories also emerged from the data under this domain. First, participants reported that they found the U.S. educational system to be challenging but excellent in its focus and content. For example, a Nigerian male interviewee reported, “I enjoy [studying] here, even though it’s very challenging to stay on top of things in my major. I think this [educational] system is among the best in the world.” Participants also occasionally indicated that many people in the United States had little awareness of global issues outside of U.S. domestic concerns. A Kenyan male interviewee described this issue in the following way: “Most Americans aren’t concerned with the fact that many other countries are suffering all kinds of social, civil, and economic crises. When I bring up these points, they don’t even seem aware of these [global] problems.”

### *Cultural Adjustment Problems in the United States*

*Prejudicial or discriminatory treatment.* Participants generally indicated prejudicial or discriminatory treatment by others. Four subcategories emerged from this general category, two of which were typical and two were variant. For example, interviewees typically noted that they were called names and racial slurs by White Americans. With regard to this issue, a Nigerian female interviewee reported,

Table 1  
*Summary of Domains, Categories, and Subcategories From the Cross-Analysis of the 12 Interviews With African International College Students*

Domain, category, and subcategory	Frequency
Presojourn perceptions of the United States	
The United States holds many academic and personal opportunities for African international students	General
The United States has a better higher educational system than country of origin	Typical
There is a lot of personal freedom and choice in the United States	Typical
Postsojourn perceptions of the United States	
White Americans occupy a lot of power in the United States	General
The educational system in the United States is Eurocentric/oriented toward White cultural values	Typical
White Americans possess most of the capital in the United States	Typical
The educational system is challenging but excellent in its content and focus	Variant
Many people in the United States have little awareness of global issues outside of U.S. domestic concerns	Variant
Cultural adjustment problems in the United States	
Prejudicial or discriminatory treatment	General
Being called names/racial slurs by White Americans	Typical
Americans generally view Africans as less intelligent than themselves	Typical
Some Black Americans will not date African students	Variant
Other international students (e.g., from Asia) are prejudiced against African international students	Variant
Loneliness/feeling isolated from others	Typical
Financial concerns	Typical
Concerns about having enough money to pay for basic living expenses	Typical
Concerns about having enough money to pay school tuition	Variant
Responses to prejudicial or discriminatory treatment	
Become angry or frustrated	Typical
Try to educate others	Variant
Ignore racist remarks and behaviors	Variant
Family and friendship networks	
Good family network	General
Supportive family members who live abroad	Typical
Supportive family members who live in the United States	Variant
Good friendship network in the United States	Typical
Supportive network of African students on campus	Typical
Supportive network of African students across the United States	Typical
Strategies for coping with cultural adjustment problems	
Seek social support from family members	Typical
Seek social support from friends	Typical
Try to handle problems directly	Typical
Keep problems to self so as not to trouble/worry others (i.e., forbearance)	Variant
Engage in physical activities (e.g., exercise)	Variant
Sleep to avoid problem	Variant
Openness to seeking counseling to address cultural adjustment problems	
Not open	Typical
Somewhat open	Variant

*Note.* We identified a category and subcategory as general if it applied to all 12 cases, typical if it applied to 6–11 cases, and variant if it applied to 3–5 cases. Categories for which there were fewer than 3 cases are not shown in this table.

In a tutoring session for one of my classes, the [White teaching assistant] called me a 'stupid nigger.' I was so shocked he said this in front of [other students], that I couldn't say anything and just left the session. I ended up dropping the class because I couldn't go back to face the professor and the other students.

Participants also typically perceived Americans to view Africans as less intelligent than themselves. A Ghanaian male interviewee reported,

Americans see themselves as intellectually superior to people from other countries, especially Africans. A lot of them think Africans are stupid and that Africans need to be civilized. I don't think they realize

all the contributions that Africans made to the world and that civilization [originated in] Africa.

Participants occasionally reported that they experienced prejudicial or discriminatory treatment from Black Americans because of these individuals' refusal to date African students. With regard to this issue, a Kenyan male participant noted,

I think some [Black Americans] see themselves as better than Africans. You find a lot of [light-skinned] Black people [in the United States], and I think they don't want to date us because they think we're too [dark-skinned]. One Black [woman] I asked for a date told me I was 'too Black' for her and [that] she had to think about how our kids

would turn out if we ever got married. I only asked her for one date [and] not marriage.

Interviewees also occasionally indicated that other international students were prejudiced against African international students. For example, a Nigerian female participant reported,

When I first moved into my dorm, I had roommates from Taiwan and Japan who both asked to be moved to another room because they didn't want to room with an African. I also heard some Asian and [European international] students talk about being afraid of Africans, like we're going to hurt them. They have some strong stereotypes about us.

*Loneliness/feeling isolated from others.* Interviewees also typically noted that they felt lonely and isolated from others. In the words of a Ghanaian female participant,

Even though there's a lot to do [in the United States], I still feel pretty much alone. I don't have really good friends here. It's hard to be away from [loved ones] for a long period of time. My friends here are nice, but it's not the same [as relationships in Ghana].

*Financial concerns.* Interviewees typically reported that they had financial concerns, and two subcategories (one typical and one variant) stemmed from this category. First, participants typically stated that they were concerned about having enough money to pay for basic living expenses such as rent, food, and clothing. With regard to this issue, a Nigerian female indicated, "It's hard to make it here. You've gotta struggle. Sometimes, I barely make it from one school year to the next with the [limited funds I have] for paying rent and [buying food]. There's no money left sometimes for even [having fun]." Participants also occasionally reported being concerned about having enough money to pay for their school tuition.

### *Responses to Prejudicial or Discriminatory Treatment*

Participants typically indicated that they became angry or frustrated in response to prejudicial or discriminatory treatment in the United States. For example, 1 Kenyan male individual reported,

It's frustrating to know that people think less of you because of the color of your skin. I belong on this campus just as much as anybody else, and I get mad when people treat me like I don't belong here.

Occasionally, in response to prejudice or discrimination, interviewees noted that they tried to educate others. Regarding this issue, a Ghanaian male participant stated,

Just the other day, one of my [White] friends was discussing the intellectual and genetic superiority of Whites because of how they score on [largely White-normed] intelligence tests. I had just learned earlier last week in my psychology class about the racial biases [of] intelligence tests, so I told him about it. He didn't really want to hear what I was saying and kept saying stuff like, 'White people are good with their brains, and Black people are good in athletics, so it shows that each race has its own talents.' He wasn't open to what I was saying, but at least I tried to [get through] to him.

Occasionally, participants in our study reported that they ignored racist remarks and behaviors made by others. In the words of a Kenyan female participant, "I try not to pay too much attention

when people try to treat me bad just because I'm Kenyan. I don't have time to spend trying to make them act right. They should know right from wrong."

### *Family and Friendship Networks*

Participants generally reported that they had a good family network. Two subcategories stemmed from this category, one of which was typical and the other was variant. The typical subcategory related to participants' perceptions that they had supportive family members who lived abroad. In the words of a Ghanaian male interviewee, "I let my family know if I need something, and they make sure I get what I need. It's good to know I have that kind of support." The variant subcategory of good family network pertained to some participants' assertion that they had supportive family members who lived in the United States.

Participants also indicated that they had a good friendship network in the United States. Two typical subcategories composed this category. One of these subcategories related to participants' perception that they had a supportive network of African students on their campus, and the other pertained to their recognition of a supportive network of African students across the United States. Regarding the former subcategory, a Nigerian male interviewee stated, "The Nigerian students on our campus are very close [to each other] because there's so few of us."

### *Strategies for Coping With Cultural Adjustment Problems*

Participants typically reported that they sought social support from both family members and friends to cope with problems related to adjusting to U.S. culture. For example, a Kenyan female interviewee stated, "I speak to mom or my sister when I miss home or when school [gets too difficult]." Participants also typically reported trying to handle cultural adjustment problems directly. In the words of a Nigerian male participant,

I don't let [problems] get too big because I try to deal with them before they get out of hand. Like if I didn't feel good about [a racist incident], I would probably confront the person and get it over with. I can't be mad about it for long.

With regard to their cultural adjustment problems, participants also occasionally indicated that they (a) kept problems to themselves so as not to trouble or burden others (i.e., forbearance), (b) engaged in physical activities such as exercise, and (c) slept to avoid problems. With regard to the latter variant category, a Ghanaian female participant indicated, "I sometimes take a nap to keep from thinking about my troubles or from being sad or lonely. I always wake up feeling better and things don't look as bad."

### *Openness to Seeking Counseling to Address Cultural Adjustment Problems*

Participants typically reported that they were not open to the idea of seeking counseling to address their cultural adjustment difficulties. For example, a Kenyan female indicated,

Problems ought to be [kept] private or talked about only to your friends or family. A stranger can't help me with my [personal] problems because they wouldn't know me [well enough to be able] to

give good advice. I don't think it's good to focus on your problems by talking about them too much with just anybody.

Occasionally, participants noted that they were somewhat open to seeking counseling to address cultural adjustment concerns. In the words of a Nigerian female, "Perhaps counseling [could] be helpful, but I'm not really sure [what it involves]. I would check it out if I needed to, but I'm probably skeptical about it."

### Discussion and Implications

Although the nature and degree of cultural adjustment difficulties experienced by international college students in general have been shown to vary as a function of many different factors (e.g., degree of English language proficiency, degree of perceived social acceptance, and amount of time spent in the United States), few prior studies have focused specifically on the experiences of African international students who sojourn to the United States (Harris-Reid, 1999; Sadowsky & Lai, 1997; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). The intent of our study was to explore the particular cultural adjustment experiences of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students. Prior investigations (e.g., Adedelegan & Parks, 1985; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997; Puritt, 1978) have documented that African international college students face unique stressors and concerns related to their adjustment to U.S. culture. We found that several issues affected these students' cultural adjustment experiences, including their pre- and postsojourn perceptions of the United States, responses to prejudicial or discriminatory treatment, family and friendship networks, strategies for coping with cultural adjustment problems, and openness to seeking counseling to address cultural adjustment problems.

Before their sojourn to the United States, the Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students in our study believed that the United States offered many academic and personal opportunities in the form of better educational systems than in their countries of origin, and in terms of personal freedoms and choices. However, their postsojourn perceptions appeared to focus on a broader range of issues, especially issues pertaining to notions that White Americans held a great deal of educational and economic power. For example, some participants seemed disappointed about the extent to which some issues addressed in their educational setting were oriented toward White cultural values. It seems important to note that many international students have certain expectations or assumptions about what their lives will be like when they move to the United States, and they may experience disappointment, anger, resentment, depression, and culture shock when their expectations or assumptions are unsupported (Mori, 2000; Puritt, 1978).

Participants in our study reported a range of cultural adjustment problems upon coming to the United States. Of particular note was the fact that all of the interviewees reported prejudicial or discriminatory treatment. Some of these experiences included being called racial slurs by White Americans, being viewed as less intelligent than Americans, and perceiving Black Americans and international students from other continents as prejudging them. Because most Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students have grown up in contexts in which their racial or cultural group represents the numerical majority (Bagley & Young, 1988), experiencing racial discrimination may be a relatively new phenome-

non (Adeleke, 1998; Mori, 2000; Winkelman, 1994). Moreover, exposure to racial discrimination may increase these students' risk for developing or exacerbating mental health problems or concerns during the cultural adjustment process. In fact, there is a plethora of literature that documents the strong link between perceived racist events and negative health-related and psychological outcomes such as hypertension (e.g., Broman, 1996; Krieger & Sidney, 1996), cardiovascular reactivity (e.g., Fang & Myers, 2001), depression (e.g., Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994), general psychological distress (e.g., Jackson et al., 1996; Pak, Dion, & Dion, 1991), eating problems, (e.g., Thompson, 1992), and substance abuse (e.g., Neuspiel, 1996). As such, staff members in university counseling centers could institute multiple and concurrent strategies to address Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian students' racist and discriminatory experiences. For example, counselors could educate these students about various forms of discrimination and oppression they may experience as a member of their racial group, along with ways to address this type of racism when encountered. This kind of psychoeducational intervention could be instituted in the form of an outreach program or a series of workshops. Furthermore, through racism awareness and cultural sensitivity programs, staff counselors in academic environments could attempt to enlighten students, staff members, and faculty members about the undue effects of racism for international college students and even other marginalized students on campus. The social justice dimension inherent in this latter form of intervention could go a long way in altering potentially oppressive climates that could contribute to these students' cultural adjustment problems.

The Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students in our investigation typically reported having good family and peer networks. Our results are consistent with prior investigations and literature noting the salience of family and peer support in the lives of many international college students (e.g., Mori, 2000; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997). Our findings also relate to the importance of these students maintaining social connections with individuals who can validate their sense of self and ways of being. Although relationships may be important to many college students in general, connections to important others may represent essential aspects of self-identity and seem to reflect strong cultural values for international students from communal cultures such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana (Grills, 2002; Grills & Ajei, 2002). Moreover, for Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students who may be experiencing difficulties adjusting to a new college setting, close connections and social support networks may reflect critical ways of coping or dealing with acculturation stressors and mental health concerns (Essandoh, 1995; Rousseau et al., 2001). Hence, counselors should be aware of the nature of the social support networks of these students, and the extent to which they may be involved with such networks. These helping professionals also should be aware of the value placed on interdependent relationships and connections by many Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian students so that they do not erroneously pathologize these students' strong reliance on family members and friends for support.

Many of the Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students in our study indicated that they tried to deal with their cultural adjustment problems directly. Nebedum-Ezeh (1997) noted that the African international students in her study used direct coping strategies to address their problems. The existing



literature in the area of coping suggests that Blacks in general tend to use diverse and flexible responses to deal with stressful situations, including social support networks, spirituality, prayer, humor, and frequent appraisal of stressful events as discriminatory in nature (e.g., Broman, 1995; Copeland, 2000; Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Lewis, 2000; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997; Plummer & Slane, 1996; Utsey, Adams, & Bolden, 2000). It is possible that dealing with the multitude of stressors associated with being an African international student calls for the use of diverse coping practices that may not focus primarily on mastery of the environment, as found in many Eurocentric conceptualizations of coping (Azibo, 1996), but on basic daily survival in oftentimes difficult and hostile environments.

Occasionally, Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian students in our investigation reported keeping problems to themselves so as not to burden others. Forbearance of problems may be a salient characteristic of some communal or collectivistic cultures (e.g., Yue, 2001), and the students in our study seemed to use this coping strategy so as not to cause distress in important others. Although this could be viewed as an admirable trait in some students, it is plausible to consider that failing to share some troublesome personal information could impede the psychological health and academic performance of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students experiencing high levels of cultural adjustment difficulties (e.g., Constantine et al., 2004). Through informal outreach programs and workshops, counselors could play a vital role in helping to educate these students to recognize when their levels of distress become so high that they may need more deliberate and intensive mental health intervention.

To address their cultural adjustment problems, some of the Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian participants in our study engaged in physical activities, and some reported that they slept to avoid dealing with these problems. Exercising may be an effective means of dealing with cultural adjustment stressors for some of these individuals because it has been heralded as a productive form of coping with problems for many college students in general (e.g., Bolger, 1997; Donin, 1995). However, because it is unclear the degree to which some participants in our study may use sleep to avoid cultural adjustment problems (i.e., the amount of sleep used to cope with cultural adjustment problems was not reported by the participants), it seems vital to note that an excessive amount of sleep could be symptomatic of some type of depression. In fact, cultural adjustment, or acculturative stress difficulties, has been linked to psychological distress syndromes such as depression (e.g., Al-Issa & Tousignant, 1997; Constantine et al., 2004). In extreme cultural adjustment cases, it may be important that Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students seek some type of formal mental health intervention to address their distress.

Most of the Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students in our investigation, however, indicated that they were generally not open to seeking professional counseling to address their cultural adjustment problems. The underutilization of formal mental health services by African international students in the United States has been documented previously (e.g., Essandoh, 1995; Pedersen, 1991), and our results reiterate the notion that many Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian students view seeking professional psychological services in a less than favorable light. One of the primary reasons for our findings may rest in the fact that, according to the Africentric worldview, mental illness results

from individuals not living in accord with their nature, the universe, and the natural flow of things (Parham, 2002). Moreover, many African cultures believe that all life forms are interrelated. That is, the mind, body, and spirit are not differentiated, and the integration of these three domains is present in all daily activities (Constantine, Myers, Kindaichi, & Moore, 2004). In addition, many African students believe that mental illness, social stress, or other types of imbalances may have a spiritual etiology (Mbiti, 1970). Hence, optimal mental health is viewed as the restoration of harmony, order, and balance to individuals' lives so that they may achieve a sense of peace, happiness, goodness, and cultural congruence (Parham, 2002). As such, university counseling center personnel who work with African international college students should identify culturally embedded and culturally sanctioned intervention strategies (i.e., based on and rooted in these students' worldviews) to assist them in mitigating both potential and actual cultural adjustment difficulties.

### *Limitations*

Our exploratory findings should be considered in light of several potential limitations. First, although our sample size is consistent with other qualitative investigations using CQR (Hill et al., 1997) methodology (e.g., Ladany et al., 1997; Rhodes, Hill, Thompson, & Elliott, 1994), generalizability of the findings to other Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students is cautioned. Second, this study is limited to the extent that it is based on one set of researchers' interpretations of one set of data pertaining to the cultural adjustment experiences of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students. Although we attempted to account for our biases and expectations in the context of analyzing our data, it is possible that our perceptions uniquely influenced aspects of the investigation (e.g., the formulation of our research questions), which in turn may have affected the data we acquired. To this end, it is important that other investigators replicate and extend our study. From this extension, additional categories and domains could emerge, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural adjustment experiences of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students. Our findings also may be limited because we analyzed the data by combining the Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian ethnic and gender subgroups into one larger group of African international college students. Although we may have lost some unique culture-specific issues associated with each subgroup, it is vital to note that international students from the continent of Africa do share some fundamental cultural similarities (Essandoh, 1995). Thus, our results are still deemed reliable and usable.

### *Future Research Directions*

Future research is needed that further examines the qualitative domains and categories identified in our study. In particular, additional information about Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students' pre- and postsojourn experiences, prejudicial or discriminatory experiences, and mental health issues would illuminate critical information about how counselors could better intervene to address cultural adjustment difficulties in these populations. It would also be important that future researchers explore the extent to which the training offered in traditional



mental health or counseling programs is consonant with the needs, goals, and experiences of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students who may seek mental health services. That is, to what degree do the approaches and interventions taught in applied training programs appropriately address the cultural needs of these students (Parham & Parham, 2002)? Furthermore, how can counselor training programs best teach their trainees to intervene in noncounseling helping roles (e.g., providing antiracism workshops) that address social justice issues (e.g., racial discrimination) affecting these students' lives?

Because many Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students appear to have negative ideas about Western mental health counseling interventions, it may be necessary for counselors to destigmatize both counselors' and mental health-seeking behaviors and to identify and provide counseling services that are culturally relevant to these students. In addition, examining the efficacy of culture-specific coping behaviors among Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international college students, especially as they relate to African-centered worldviews and principles, may inform counselors about the types of interventions that would be most effective for these populations of students.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. Describe your experiences and perceptions of living in the United States thus far. Please contrast these experiences and perceptions to those you might have had prior to moving to the United States.
2. What are your thoughts and feelings about being an African international student in the United States?
3. Are there specific challenges, problems, or stressors you experience being an African international student in the United States? On this campus?
3. To what extent do you identify with your country of origin? To what extent do you identify with American culture?
4. What do you do when you experience problems in the United States? On this campus?
5. Are there specific resources or strategies you use to deal with problems you might have related to adjusting to the United States? To what

extent would you be open to seeking counseling or some other type of mental health intervention to address these types of problems?

6. Describe your relationships with friends and peers in the United States. Describe your relationships with family members who live in the United States.

7. Describe your relationships with friends and peers who live abroad. Describe your relationships with family members who live abroad.

8. Is there anything else you'd like to add in response to any of the questions you've been asked in this interview?

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