

Making visible the cultures, values, and contributions of students from the African diaspora

Andrea Dennison, Stacy Herrard & Christine Kamba

Abstract

In this poster, we draw from graduate students' lived experiences to build upon the limited literature that examines cultural variables, values, and perspectives of students and families from the African diaspora, in order to illuminate the need for greater attention to their diverse experiences. First-, second-, and 1.5-generation students from African and Caribbean countries are not often highlighted in research that involves African Americans, or are presumed to be similar to Black students whose families have lived in the U.S. for generations. The limited literature about these students' experiences in U.S. schools leaves educators with critically limited knowledge from which to draw. The aim of our poster is to summarize what literature is available, and to expand on prior authors' findings and recommendations, extending our consideration to the experiences of African diasporic students enrolled in school psychology graduate programs.

Literature Review

Visibility and representation are steps in the direction of equity. The pursuit of cultural sensitivity and the development of cultural consciousness requires that we actively seek to lift up the voices of those who come from marginalized groups. Those whose voices, values and experiences have diverged from the "mainstream" of American society have too often been overlooked and undervalued in the scientific literature. This includes students whose families have immigrated to the U.S. from African diasporic nations. Too often subsumed by large datasets in the categories "Black" or "African American," but nevertheless distinct, those from African nations who are in the first, second, or 1.5 generation bring rich knowledge, wisdom, and experiences to American classrooms. The African diaspora refers to the many places where people of African descent primarily live. Outside of the U.S., this includes many of the Caribbean nations. Immigrant families comprise a unique place in America, long-considered a nation of immigrants; however, the status of immigrants varies widely, dependent upon the unique personal and social contexts of entry and exit, and access to social, financial and cultural capital. The strategies which immigrant families engage to acculturate to the new context of their life, and the degree to which they hold onto the identities held by their families form spectra of multicultural and intercultural dimensions. How each person navigates these is their story.

African nations, the diaspora, and representation

The enslavement of African people has left an indelible mark on the history of the world, especially in those countries where enslaved people lived for generations. African American and Caribbean families who were brutalized by the slave trade may have complex relationships with this history. Africans who are more recently arrived to the U.S. may be seen as having very different experiences, and may even be stereotyped, bullied, or marginalized by others, including other Black Americans, creating intercultural tension. A focus on Black/African unity may counter this.

Views of diasporic nations, including Haiti, in the 21st century

The media significantly affects how people think about other countries, and preconceptions about Haiti are no exception. Haiti is portrayed as a terminally dysfunctional failed state plagued by widespread corruption and violence. American media is notorious for claiming Haiti to be the poorest nation in the Caribbean. By presenting countries in the diaspora as poor and needy, a false cultural hierarchy is maintained: White, European colonialist attitudes are perpetuated, and the cultural wealth of the diaspora is ignored. Educators can help shift this narrative.

Attitudes about school and family roles

Haitian parents rely on the school system to educate their children. Most Haitian parents do not feel obligated to attend school events or meetings because they believe the schools have responsibility for their children's education. They are, however, more likely to participate in a meeting about their child's behavior since they believe it is their role to provide discipline and moral development. A home-school collaboration benefits from eliciting the family's expectations for the school, not just the inverse.

Methods

Participants

The two students involved in the first author's research lab, the Social-Emotional Well-being lab, share the experience of being members of immigrant families who are part of the African diaspora; recognizing this commonality prompted spontaneous discussion in which they recognized the value in sharing their diverse experiences with trainers and scholars, as graduate students in school psychology. The student authors, whose experiences are referred to in the table, as well as throughout the text, agreed that their narratives were important to illuminate, and co-authored this piece.

Procedures

A social justice orientation undergirds school psychological work. This necessitates attention to the experiences of those who have been historically overlooked, so that their perspectives may be seen, heard, and respected. Following a search of the literature, the lab members discussed what was missing in the discourse about African immigrant families: authentic accounts of their lived experiences. As scientists are increasingly encouraged to include their own voice in research, a shift in the culture of science has necessarily followed. "Me-search" holds its place at the core of multicultural research; here, the subjective, lived experiences of scholars of color are centered. A set of questions regarding family, educational, and sociocultural experiences were given to lab students as open-ended prompts. Several questions posed by the Director of Research to the lab students aimed to elicit their diverse experiences, their responses appear in the table. A follow-up discussion between each student and the Director allowed for a more in-depth discussion to unfold about what they had written. The discussion and writing process allowed meaningful discourse to occur between the professor and students.

Results

The process of a guided inquiry allowed reflection upon the process of psychological acculturation, and included necessary attention to multiple variables: generationality, contexts of entry and exit, languages spoken by parents/families and the degree to which the student understood or spoke those languages and in which contexts, unique family dynamics, and how those combined with other variables in idiosyncratic ways.

Discussion & Recommendations

In this poster, cultures, languages and experiences of two students from the African diaspora were highlighted. For educators wanting to center their students' cultures, a first step involves self-reflection: Recognize yourself as a cultural being, and how your beliefs influence your interactions and teaching. Also, recognize and use your students' values and experiences to inform your teaching. Creating a warm, welcoming environment for all students may encourage greater sharing. Ask questions about acculturation processes and assimilation pressures, and give students the option of whether to respond in oral or written ways. When possible, trainers in bilingual school psychology may want to teach about tests in African languages, including French.

Question	Student 1	Similarities/differences	Student 2	Cultural dimension
Where are you and your family from, specifically?	My mother is from Gonaves, Haiti, and my father is from Jeremie, Haiti.	Focus on parent origins	Both of my parents are from Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo	Family origins
What languages are spoken there? How often do you get to speak your parents' native language(s)?	Haitian Creole or Kreyol, and French Daily	French is a shared language Home language use differs	Lingala and French Rarely, if ever	Inter-generational, multicultural language use
What age were you and/or your parents when you/they immigrated to the U.S.?	My mother was 29 years old when she immigrated to the United States, and my father was 32 years old.	Both students are 2 nd gen American	My mother was 19, and my father was 39 years old.	Family immigration story
What are some of the cultural norms (or values) you have experienced which come from your/your parents' home country? Please describe	Most Haitians identify as Catholic or Protestant due to substantial European influences when the country was colonized and populated. Religion has always been an important part of my upbringing. I was practically raised in a church and went to church multiple times a week as a child. Members of my church acted as relatives to my two siblings and me, disciplining me with my mother's permission. They were active participants in my upbringing, shaping my norms and teaching me what was considered acceptable and unacceptable. For example, I was taught to greet adults and elders by kissing them on the cheek. I was taught not to address adults by their first names and, most importantly, always to keep my mouth shut.	Faith: Since colonization by Europeans, Christianity is dominant in most places	Most Congolese people identify as Catholic, including most of my family. However, after my mother immigrated to the U.S., she became more nondenominational, with which my sister and I grew up. We didn't start being a part of the church regularly until middle school, since before that, we had moved a lot and didn't have a stable environment. Besides that, my mom always made sure we knew the core values of Christianity, praying before we ate and having us learn the Lord's Prayer.	Intercultural, Inter-generational, historical variables
	Family life is significant to most Haitians. Family is essential to these people, and as a result, most houses have numerous generations. Everyone in the family watches out for one another and everyone's well-being. Families in Haiti are continuously collaborating to achieve daily activities. Most Haitians in America do not consider themselves primarily one of the two cultures but rather live a life that incorporates both. As a result, many Haitians will travel back and forth between the two countries. In Haitian culture, elders are held in high regard. They are frequently consulted for various concerns (sickness, mental/emotional disturbances, civil disagreements, etc.) since they are wise and have life experience. Grandparents often assist in the upbringing of their grandchildren. It is customary for adult children/family members to look after the elderly. In traditional Haitian culture, people ask for elderly people to nurse homes to unlearn of.	Family: Elders held in high regard, consulted for their wisdom; youth expected to comply without question	The family was always kind of complicated to me growing up. Since my parents divorced when I was two, most of my extended family still lived in Africa for a large part of my life. But my mom always valued parents highly and made sure we did as well. The largest importance was always respecting those older or in authority, especially your parents and grandparents. You did what they said without questioning it because the elders always knew better.	Family, Inter-generational care-taking practices
	Rice and beans are the national cuisines and the most widely consumed meal in urban areas. Sweet potatoes, cassava, yams, corn, rice, pigeon peas, cowpeas, bread, and coffee are traditional staples. Spiciness, mangoes, sweetbread, melted brown sugar plantain, and sesame seed clusters, Rappadou is a simple but nutritious sugar paste made by locals. Food is also seen to have healing properties and is used in conjunction with medicine.	Food: Rice and beans are staples; dishes are locally and culturally specific	The main meals included rice, beans, fish, and fofu in the Congo. Pendou is also a popular vegetable. In the US, chicken is a large part of the diet because the chicken was expensive in Africa, so they could only have it on special occasions like Christmas. So since it's a lot cheaper in America, my family eats it all the time. We usually eat fried plantains, mangoes, gallettes, and shortbread cookies for treats.	Family daily routines
What are the norms around mental health in the household culture you grew up in?	Problems are frequently externalized, reduced, rationalized, or blamed on God. Depression symptoms can either be somatized or spiritualized. Family members, both immediate and extended, have powerful bonds. It is usual for individuals to suffer direct mental health consequences due to their family members' dire life circumstances. Se'izisman is the most common symptom unique to Haitian culture, and it is imperative in the aftermath of a disaster. The accompanying state of paralysis, which means "Seized upness," is brought on by powerful sentiments of rage or despair. The most common reasons are receiving unpleasant news, seeing a traumatic event, or seeing dead bodies. The symptoms are headaches, high blood pressure, vision loss, disorientation, frequent sobbing, reluctance to eat or sleep, unresponsiveness, and shortness of breath.	Religious attributions for mental illness are common; Se'izisman is a culturally specific illness which occurs in Haiti	At first, my mom did not see mental health as important or blamed it on the Devil. Still, since getting her nursing degree, she has been more open about mental health and its importance. She has been educating other family members about mental health, but it is still hard for the rest of my extended family to understand.	Beliefs about illness and wellness

In instruction about cultures, there's often such emphasis on the Hispanic/Latinx immigrant communities that there's a lack of recognition for other cultures, perhaps especially if they're Black, due to pervasive racism. Do not assume that your Black students are African American. They may not identify that way, and importantly, their home life and cultural practices may not be similar to those who consider themselves African American. Ask before assuming; invite sharing about home cultures and multiple identities from all students on a routine basis, not just in classes that are specifically multiculturally oriented. In research, disaggregate the findings from groups which were assumed to be similar based upon superficial characteristics. Ask about lived experiences, family practices and inter-generational and multicultural encounters, and consider these meaningful variables. Continue to center the experiences of immigrant families.

Reference

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Contact

The first author may be reached with any questions or feedback about the poster: andreadennison@tstate.edu