Being an African Student: Stories of Opportunity and Determination

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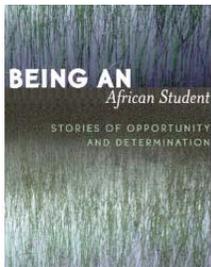
Being an African Student is a write-up of a study that investigated acculturative experiences of African international students at one university in the United States. The study also investigated different strategies by which African students adjusted to their new social and academic environments. The author examined pre-acculturative orientations of the participants portraying the mixed feelings associated with their sojourning experiences to the United States. As depicted from the stories of the participants, the period of departure from their respective home countries is characterized by a mixture of euphoric feelings of realizing the American dream and feelings of anxiety and fear of the unknown. However, upon arrival to the United States, the American dream begins to fade away and feelings of disillusionment are experienced. Contributing to these feelings of disillusionment are experiences of race and racism, negative stereotypes, and stigmatization.

The book proceeds to discuss areas of the academic and social life that African students strive to adjust to in the United States. These include communication styles (e.g. eye contact and physical distance), advanced technology, understanding of American jokes, etc. The book also investigated the strategies that African international students employ as they navigated into the social and academic fabrics of their host environment. One such strategy pertains to the mindset that they reportedly adopted to deal with issues of racial prejudice and negative stereotypes. As depicted from the stories of the participants, these personal strategies are complemented by various support structures such as the family, peers, and institutional resources.

Chapter 5 highlights the conclusions that the author drew from the stories of the participants while the last chapter discusses implications for practice for African international students themselves, professors, and counselors who deal with African students on a daily basis. The book concludes by discussing recommendations, purportedly drawn from the findings, on how to formulate culturally appropriate support programs for African international students.

Most conclusions that Omotosho drew from this study are quite applicable and usable in dealing with African international students at institutions of higher learning. Most of such conclusions were well corroborated with findings from the study. However, there were few sections where conclusions were purportedly drawn from the findings but without necessarily highlighting the result sections from where the conclusions were drawn. It would be more substantial if the author occasionally referred back to the findings in order to substantiate the conclusions. Failure to directly link the conclusions to the empirical findings has the danger of making the conclusions sound like they have been drawn from other sources such as commentaries, personal experience, or even common-sense opinions.

In a similar fashion, the author comes up with invaluable implications for African students, teachers, counselors, and other stake holders of particular interest to the welfare of African international students in US institutions of higher learning. For example, Omotosho recommends that university professors take extra effort into understanding the cultural background of African international students and how their cultural background influences their learning. In a similar fashion, Omotosho recommends African students to "reflect carefully on memories of their home families and consider which ones are nurturing and which ones are limiting in their present experiences" (p. 67). There were, however, some sections where the link between recommendations and research findings was rather weak and it became hard to tell where from the findings the recommendations were drawn. For example, the author discusses at length the need for university institutions to "make the recruitment and retention of minority and foreign students part of their goals and priorities" (p. 68). I did not see where from the research findings this recommendation was drawn. Furthermore other recommendations sounded very plausible; however, not very practical. For example, Omotosho recommends that faculty must "find ways to meet students especially those that seldom consult with faculty . . ." (p. 69). Although this move may indisputably create a positive 'speech climate,' as the author argues, it is not very practical for faculty to

accomplish this.

Omotosho begins the book by highlighting his own positionality in the research topic, which was quite plausible. He narrated his own story of sojourning from Nigeria to the United States to study, highlighting the ordeal of both his pre-acculturative conditions and his adjustment experiences upon arrival. Omotosho, however, does not discuss how much of his positionality might have influenced the various stages of the research process. The concept of self-reflexivity, as highlighted by Bott (2010), might have been very necessary in a study of this nature. The purpose of reflexivity is to enhance the quality of the research through understanding and expressing how one's own position and interests as a researcher potentially affects the construction of evidence and the processes of data interpretation and analyses.

The author purportedly approached the study from a phenomenological point of view. However, it is not clear from his brief description of phenomenology whether phenomenology was considered as an overarching theoretical viewpoint or a research design. This is made worse by the fact that phenomenology itself can be conceptualized as a philosophy, methodology, and/or a method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Although the kind of issues Omotosho seeks to investigate about African international students are typically aligned with a phenomenological approach of inquiry, the author does not delineate how the research questions progressed from phenomenology as an underlying theoretical perspective. Yet, as Denzin and Lincoln (2011) pointed out, there indeed is an inextricable interdependence between theoretical perspectives and research questions and this relationship could have been highlighted.

Phenomenology as a research design attests that the author must set aside his own assumptions and preconceptions in order to understand the worldview of the participants from their experiential point of view. Although the author purportedly used phenomenology, he does not discuss how he bracketed his preconceptions and understandings in the research process. Given the positionality of the author, i.e. that he was an African international student himself at the time of data collection; it is apparently evident that some form of bias was inevitable. A phenomenological approach, therefore, would purportedly deal with this bias by discussing the author's preconceptions prior to the beginning the study, and then bracketing or suspending them so as to be as open as possible to what

the participants would share. Omotosho does not discuss any theory or model of acculturation in the field of immigration; as such, the book lacks some theoretical foundation. This was quite surprising, given the numerous theoretical propositions and acculturation models abundantly available in literature that relate to sojourning experiences of international students and sojourners in general.

Despite the notable limitations in this book, the book provides invaluable insights into the adjustment experiences of African international students in the United States. Omotosho's book has provided important insight into some pre-departure orientations as well as acculturative struggles that African students experience upon sojourning to the United States. The book also highlights several strategies that African students employ as they navigate into both the social and academic systems of their host environments. Most importantly, Omotosho formulated very useful recommendations, which, if put into practice, may go a long way to ameliorate transitional difficulties, not only for African international students, but the entire international student community.

References

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About the Reviewer

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