

# “STUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE?” DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES AMONG 1.5 GENERATION AFRICAN IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETIES: DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES

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## Abstract

The migration and resettlement of people into new societies have created a host of problems for immigrants in host societies. The migration and settlement experiences are more complicated and challenging for the immigrant youth who arrive in the new societies in their teenage years. This group, now referred to as the one-and-a-half generation group in the Diaspora, straddle various worlds: those of the old home they migrated from, and those of the new Diasporic settings, but not fully belonging to any. For these teenage youth growing up in Diasporic settings, the issue of identity becomes more paramount. How they come to define themselves, as well as how others define them, have important implications for their successful integration or the lack thereof in new societies. This study, undertaken with a number of youth from Africa, who have migrated, mostly with their families, into North America, unearthed some pertinent issues surrounding identity deconstruction and reconstruction in new societies for migrant youth.

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**Keywords:** Africans, immigrant youth, North America, identity construction, identity struggle, immigrant settlement and integration

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand how first and the 1.5 African Diasporic generations in North America negotiate identity construction and sustenance. The study also seeks to understand the impacts on the African youth, of the process of negotiating identity construction in a racist and “othering” environment (Ogbuagu, 2007). As Baffoe (2011)

succinctly points out, “the-issue of identity is an important variable for all immigrant youth, particularly children of color, because it establishes the psychological points of reference and ability to cope with discrimination and prejudice which children of color are subjected to” (p.476) in North American societies. It is known that identity formation and construction can never happen in isolation, but through the instrument and sometimes deliberate or non-deliberate engineering of socialization agents, including parents and caregivers, family systems, peers, school and educational institutions and the wider society (Brunsma, 2006; Bulmer & Solomos, 1999; Connolly, 1998; Rassool, 1999; Loslier, 1998).

With increasing migration trends from Africa in the 1970s and the 1990s (Adesoji, 2011; Akinrinade & Ogen, 2011; Alex-Assensoh, 2010; Mberu & Pongou, 2010; Black, Ammassari, Mouillesseaux & Rjkotia, 2004; Ajibewa & Akinrinade, 2003; Mensah, 2002; Thompson & Morton, 1995; Afoloyan, 1988) Africans immigrants have struggled to balance the act of socializing their children and youth to integrate into mainstream American and Canadian societies. Simultaneously, they wish to hold on to their African cultural roots, (Ogbuagu, 2013a, 2013b) and identity, in order to maintain the cultures, mores and values of their countries of origin. Most of these Diasporas, as a sign of their enduring attachment to their homeland, become transnationalists by several acts, but especially through the remittance of pecuniary and in-kind products to these matrifocal entities (Ogbuagu, 2013a; United States Agency for International Development-USAID, 2007; Orozco, 2005; see also Kilson & Rotberg, 1999). This balancing act, encapsulated by self and group interrogation of “*Am I African or American,*” is occasioned by the monocultural nature of the North American society, which includes those from Europe. On the other hand, the same monocultural discourse purposefully and painfully excludes those from Africa and the Caribbean, creating the rationale for the evolution of identity issues and sometimes identity crises among the First and 1.5 youth generation.

### **How did we get here? Impact of Immigration policies in North America in the 1950s and 1960**

Prior to the mid-1950s, Blacks represented a very small proportion of the immigrant population to North America. Most of the Black populations on the North American continent before this time (Junne, 2003) reflected those descended from the Slave Trade (Walker, 1980), including fugitive slaves of the famous Underground Railroad, who mostly settled in Nova Scotia (Pachai & Bishop, 2006; Winks, 1997; Alexander & Avis, 1996; Bramble, 1988; Black Loyalist, n.d.). Changes to immigration policies in both Canada and the United States in the later 1950s and 1960s, resulted in

increased immigration of the Black population from both Africa (Kilson & Rotberg, 1999) and the Caribbean (Statistics Canada, 2003; Saney, 1998).

According to Statistics Canada (2001) 31 percent of the Black population in Canada in 2001 was immigrants. Singer (2002) of the American Christian Science Monitor estimates that 15 million [other arguments for 20 million exist] Nigerians (more than 1 in 10 Nigerians, in a population estimated at over 150 million-some argue for 170 million) live in the Diaspora (Adebayo, 2010; Black, Ammassari, Mouillesseaux & Rjkotia, 2004; Kilson & Rotberg, 1999). What this figure means, according to Aseffa (2013) is that Nigeria as Africa's largest and fastest growing migrant population, has a lot of skilled manpower to contribute to their host countries, as well as Nigeria in the area of sustainable development. Immigration patterns account for a significant proportion of growth in the Black population of North American societies. Blacks living in the area of Nova Scotia (Pachai & Bishop, 2006; Williams, 1989; Walker, 1980) represent the oldest Black Community in Canada, where more than 84 percent is at least third generation Canadian (Jenne, 2003; Winks, 1997; Bolaria & Li, 1988b; Henry, 1973; Black Loyalist, n.d.). Overall, 10 percent of the Black population in Canada in 2001 were at least third generation Canadian. Another 19 percent were listed as second-generation or 1.5 generation individuals aged 15 years or older, who had at least one parent born outside of Canada.

Additionally, in 2001, approximately 48 percent of the immigrants claimed to be originally from Africa (Kilson & Rotberg, 1999), and had a population about the same as those with origins from the Caribbean and South America at 47 percent. Of these Black immigrants, Somalia contributed 10 percent, Ghana 8 percent and Ethiopia, 5 percent. To this extent, in 2001, the Canadian Black population was reported at 662,200 and represented 2 percent of the total Canadian population, as well as 17 percent of the Visible Minority population (Adebayo, 2010; Foster, 2005; Milan & Tran, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2003; Mensah, 2002).

### **African migration in the context of Black migration**

In 2001, Census Canada reported that 30 percent of the Black Community in Canada was under the age of 25, compared to only 19 percent for the general population. By contrast, only 5 percent of the Black population was aged 65 or over in 2001, representing less than half the proportion of 12 percent for the general Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2001).

## **Identity and Integrational challenges for the 1.5 African Diasporic generation to North America**

For the purposes of this study, *identity* is defined as having two components: a *personal identity*, which refers to how one views him or herself, and a *social identity*, which refers to how society and the world around us view us (Banks and Banks, 2004; Nagel, 1994). Black youth differ from White youth, due to the great importance of, but more significantly, the exclusionary practices of racism and “othering” in their daily lives and the lives of their families (Elabor-Idemudia, 2005; Foster, 1996). Through a predominantly White policing (Marger, 2003), they are watched, followed in shops and public places and sometimes arrested, detained and worse, for genuine, as well as frivolous reasons (Foster, 1996). In the judicial system, Black youth are much more likely, than White youth to be incarcerated or awarded stringent probationary conditions, when the courts have found them guilty for these real or imagined offenses (Fleras & Elliot, 2003; Marger, 2003; Foster, 1996).

This situation has resulted in an overrepresentation of Black youth and their families in the juvenile and adult judicial systems, as well as the social services throughout Canada, but particularly in Montréal (Williams, 1989) and major cities in the United States. If one thinks that the situation is bad enough in Canada, that in the United States forces it to pale into insignificance (Wood, 1998). Kerby (2012) argues that in the United States for instance, although people of color comprise only 30 percent of the total population, they make up 60 percent of the entire incarcerated population in this country.

To bring it into perspective, 1 in every 15 African American men and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated. Compare this number to 1 in every 106 white men. Consider these statistics. African American juvenile youth comprise only 16 percent of the entire American youth population, yet 37 percent of their cases, including misdemeanor offenses advance to criminal court. When this occurs, 57 percent of these youth are convicted and sent to adult prisons. Allow us to ratchet this up a little. Emerging data indicates that in the United States, during the 2009-2010 school year, 96,000 students were arrested and 242,000 referred to law enforcement by their various schools. Among these students, Black and Hispanic students comprised over 70 percent of the arrested or referred students (Kerby, 2012) while only 30 percent was White. Although the comparative (Thomas, 2000) incarceration rates in Canada are lower than those in the United States, Blacks are still overrepresented in Canada’s juvenile and criminal justice systems. In the disinheritance frenzy, by forces of racism and exclusion (see also Marger, 2003), Black youth have wondered where it is that they fit in within Canada and the United States (Ogbuagu, 2007; Laguerre, 1998;

Stepick, 1998, 2001). Black youth in North America, Europe or anywhere that Blacks are domiciled outside of their original homelands reside in such paradox that they are visible in one location and juggle this with invisibility in another.

Black youth have striven to adjust both to their parents' world, while at the same time struggle with the wider White, North American society, which rejects them in most spheres of their lives (Carbaugh, 1996). They are conscious of their acceptance in the cultures and world of their parents, all of which are persistently discounted by the majority White society. They are also conscious of their rejection in mainstream society, when they attempt to integrate, not mainly on account of the content of their character, but because of their skin color and heritage. How then do African and minority youth construct their identity in North America? The identity construction for the 1.5 minority youth in North America follows three main stages (Ogbuagu 2012; 2007). The first is *Identity Assuredness*, followed by *Identity Interrogation* and the final stage is *Identity Synthesis*. On its own, the *Identity Synthesis* paradigm traverses four other stages-*Synthesis I, II, III and IV*. The following shows how the three variables as enunciated, engender identity construction and reconstruction amongst the 1.5 youth generation.

### **Stage I: Identity Assuredness**

During this phase, identity is mainly constructed for the child by parents, caregivers and significant others (Ogbuagu, 2007), including [insular community- Diasporic native associations]-churches, mostly formed by those from similar cultures. Here, the children follow whatever directions that have been determined and dictated by their parents and caregivers without question. As one may guess, this stage is solely a determinant of milestone development-located in chronological and mental development of the child (Portes, 1996). Additionally, the child's consolidation of the *Identity Assuredness* stage is predicated on how its parents and caregivers have resolved their own identity issues. If the parents still have an unfinished business with their own identity, then the child's resolution and arrival at the assuredness stage stands to be convoluted and intractable (Waters, 1994).

### **Stage II-Identity Interrogation**

This stage comes full cycle when, the migrant, minority youth enters school or educational institution, with the *Identity Assuredness* repertoire that they acquired from home. The first stage now gets into competition and conflict with other discourses constructed by teachers and peers, mostly from the majority population and others who have power. Example is in the case of tracking (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Haycock, 2006; Oakes, 2005), whereby students [usually minorities] with subjectively titled less measured

ability are placed in low-ability units. Here, their curriculum is diminished or reduced in scope, content and tempo or pace, in opposition to students deemed to possess high-ability levels. Conversely, students [mainly from the majority population, who have been deemed to possess high-measured ability have curricular with expanded scope, content and pace (Rubin, 2006; Lucas, 1999; Wheelock, 1992). Subsequently, grooming student according to this model, creates immediate, but worse still, social stratification and class for the future. Those with the so-called low-ability measure become tracked into vocational education and blue collar careers, while those with the high-ability measures are groomed to become CEOs and leaders of those European and North American societies.

The other discourses that come into the fray include the media-newspapers, magazines, TV, the internet, politicians, and in recent times, the social media, including Facebook, tweeter, instagram, etc. The “assault” on the senses of the 1.5 youth forces them to begin to earnestly interrogate their state of *Identity Assuredness*, including the authority of their parents and caregivers previously held as sacrosanct. The question of “who am I really?” begins to jostle with a myriad of activities of daily living that already face the youth. Again, the chronological and mental age of the youth determines how they navigate the interrogation process and phase (Appiah and Gutmann, 1998). This stage is also the most delicate in that it may force the youth to reject everything that they have been socialized into, including their own family, community, culture and ways of doing things (Ghuman, 1991). If the youth is resilient, they will successfully enter the third and final phase, aptly termed *Synthesis*.

### **Stage III-Synthesis**

The *Synthesis phase* in itself involves 4 major stages, which include *Identity Confrontation*, *Identity Confusion*, *Identity Deconstruction* and *Identity Synthesis*, leading further to all the previous stages of Identity construction-Assuredness, Interrogation continuation or a combination of Stages I and II.

#### **Synthesis stage I: Identity confrontation**

Here the 1.5 youth reenters the *Assuredness* stage by claiming all the identities that they have been socialized into-I am Mexican and I am American or I am African, I am also Nigerian or Ghanaian and I am American. Here, and based on findings (Ogbuagu, 2013a, 2013b; 2012; Connor, 1986) among Africans, Latinos and other Diasporic persons everywhere in the world, there remains an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation. This collective memory and myth

about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements, become catalytic to a process that Ogbuagu (2013a) refers to as Diasporic TransNationalism.

### **Synthesis stage II: Identity confusion**

Here, there is a continuation of the Identity Interrogation phase II- “My parents are from Nigeria or Ghana, but I am from the US or Canada. My parents are from Mexico, but I was born in the US and I am American, not Mexican.”

### **Synthesis stage III: Identity deconstruction**

This sometimes involves a combination of Stages I and II, gravitating from one identity stage to the other. At one point, and predicated on the situation, the 1.5 generation youth may claim Mexican or African descent. At other times, they would deny that they are (African) or Mexican and claim American or Canadian identity solely and entirely. In some cases such 1.5 youth may completely reject their culture or that of the dominant culture that they found to be at the source of their discomfiture. In order to arrive at the *Identity Synthesis* phase, the quest for identity among the 1.5 generation youth may involve physical [in rare cases] or mental [in most cases] pilgrimage to the cultural homeland, leading to:

#### ***Maintenance/promotion of culture-Identity synthesis***

Some of these culture promotion and maintenance may include moving from perming their hair to growing curls [nappy hair] as is seen these days, especially among African youth. For clothing and attire, it may be moving from western to native, including *danchiki*, pronounced *dan-she-key*. In the case of language, the youth quests to speak their native language and vigorously blame their parents and caregivers (Ogbuagu, 2013a) for not imparting the native language to them. Such youth may begin watching cultural films and movies-Bollywood, Nollywood or “Latinowood” to assist them ground their identity.

## **Discussion**

### **Our Study**

Based on the various stages of identity construction and deconstruction outlined above, we set out to study a section of this 1.5 African immigrant and refugee generation youth in Canada and the United States. This qualitative study, “contextualized in concerns about the role of cultural identity deconstruction and reconstruction of minority youth within the context of an unequal society” (Baffoe, 2011, p.477), was done with a number of focus groups of twenty-five youth, their parents/care-givers and

some community leaders and elders. The research process was designed to recognize the participants as expert knowers in their own lived experience (Van-Manen, 1990).

The findings from the study confirmed the various stages of identity construction, deconstruction and reconstruction outlined above. On the stage of *Identity Assuredness*, we found out that the early life of the African immigrant and refugee youth in North America was characterized by a period (albeit short-lived) of hope and excitement, where they feel that they have arrived in the “promised land.” They have great expectations and hope that all the good things they had watched on television in their countries of origin may finally be within reach (Baffoe, 2011). At this stage, the parents/caregivers develop or adopt mechanisms to regulate the socialization of their children so that these children do not stray too far from their cultures of origin. They take the youth to visit families and friends in their own communities, on weekends or attend cultural events, their communities’ “national day” celebrations, and church services in the community, all in attempts to ensure that the children interact more with their own kind than outsiders (Baffoe, 2011). This stage, though, does not last for long before the next stage in the settlement process, during which identity issues set in and begin to jostle for attention and space in the youth’s physical and psychological world. The youth, however do not see these ethnic socializations and community cultural events as the right substitutes for their quest to “fit in” in the new society.

The findings from our study, confirms the next stage of the identity construction process: the *Identity Interrogation* phase. This is the stage when the migrant, minority youth enters school or educational institution, with the identity assuredness repertoire that they acquired from home. The first stage now enters into competition and conflict with other discourses constructed by teachers and peers, mostly from the majority population and others who have power (Alvarez, 2006; Haycock, 2006; Rubin, 2006). As Baffoe (2011) points out, “the clash between school culture and home culture then become actualized” (p.481). See also (Ogbuagu, 2007). The youth realize that the lifestyles of their peers, which include language skills, mode of dressing, music and food, are all different and often strange to them and in dissonance with the norms that they have been acculturated into. The schools also do not validate or make any effort to understand the cultural standards and values that these minority youth bring (Alladin, 1995; Sleeter, 1992; Beady & Hansell, 1981). This situation forces the new immigrant and refugee youth to question the authenticity or value of their own cultural backgrounds.

The above, leads to the *Synthesis* stage, where, a combination of cultural negotiation and partial acceptance or total rejection enter the fray. This is the stage, where the youth attempts to imitate the lifestyles of the new



society and those of their peers from their own ethnic backgrounds who may have already “fit in.” These are all attempts to also “fit-in.” The study unearthed the fact that this process does not work or help in the identity struggles of the minority African youth in North America. The process leads to *cultural clashes*, *alienation* and *identity loss*. Immigrant communities place high premiums on cultural values, which they regard as the cornerstone for establishing a sense of identification, affiliation, belonging to a community and intergenerational homeostasis and continuity. Contingent on the tension and internal struggles of the youth that is orchestrated by juggling two diametrically opposed cultures, they easily lay the blame at this stage, on their cultural values (of their community) as the source of their discomfiture.

The contradictions between cultural norms required in their homes and cultural communities, and the values they require to be accepted in the new society become the lightning rod for a menagerie of identity issues. These youth of the 1.5 generation, express great discomfort and dilemmas of being torn and pulled apart by two different cultures: that of their original culture (which most now regard as their parents’ culture) and the culture of their new society which, ironically, is not yet theirs but to which they aspire, but oftentimes in futility. Eventually, the new society’s cultural pull becomes stronger because of their need to “fit in.” The process therefore leads to a *Clash of Cultures*. The immigrant parents in this study however, describe the phenomenon as *cultural alienation* of them [as parents and caregivers] from their children. The youth, who adopt the ways of the new society become alienated from the family structure and system, and are seen as *culturally lost*. Those that stick to their parents’ cultures are also alienated from their peers. It is a lose-lose situation for the youth and their families.

Most of the youth in this study were of the opinion that their parents and community elders do not have the knowledge, understanding and experience of the harsh realities of the streets of the Canadian or American society, which they as youth must navigate, and often they don’t. Most, believe that their parents and elders are still associated and stuck or perpetually glued to the old world of “how it was in Africa” (Baffoe, 2011, p.479), accusing them of being outmoded “bunches” who keep clinking to a “bunch” of outmoded customs of their original homelands. Those that do not totally reject their community cultures, adopt double personalities, one for display at home to please their parents, and the other for the outside, to enable them “fit in.”

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion drawn from this study is that the process of navigating two turbulent cultural worlds of integrating into a new cultural milieu in North America for this 1.5 African immigrant generation is fraught

with unusually difficult struggles. These challenging struggles can sometimes become traumatic. Their attempts to find a balance, between two opposing cultural spheres, in the early years of their lives in North America, be it Canada or the United States, have led to identity confusion, identity deconstruction and reconstruction that breed and perpetuate more identity confusion.

The issues unearthed in this study raise critical and best practice questions for practitioners in social work and other disciplines, especially for those practitioners who work with new immigrant population groups. They raise the urgent need for cultural sensitivity and cultural competency training for practitioners. These practitioners in the North American society, in order to effectively assist the migrant youth in the transition process, must articulate their world and harsh realities of the integration and acculturation process that they frequently, sometimes, endlessly endure as gauntlets for initiation into the new societies.

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