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research article

Coming To America: The Social and Economic Mobility of African Immigrants in the United States

—Tobi E. Afolayan (Edited by Brigid C. Casellini)

Imagine you had to start all over. None of your academic accomplishments mattered, not your high school diploma, not your bachelor's degree, not even your nursing certification. Imagine that those grueling years you spent working on papers, projects and exams, were for nothing—at least nothing you could use toward the career you have always wanted.

Some people don't have the luxury of just imagining this nightmare. For many of the Nigerian immigrants who come to this country looking for a better, more fulfilling future, this nightmare is their reality. Some of them come to escape sociopolitical turbulence, while others literally won the lottery—the visa lottery.

These are the people with whom I spoke. The purpose of my research was to evaluate the differences in culture and communication that impede Nigerian immigrants' social and economic success in America. I chose Manchester, New Hampshire, as the location for my study. As a Nigerian and an international affairs and communications major at the University of New Hampshire, being able to study my culture and heritage as a McNair research fellow has been an incredible privilege. I have always wanted to know what the immigrant experience was at its core, what things improved that experience, and what things made it more difficult. Now, at the age of 21, I barely remember what it was like as a six year old, to follow my mother and younger sister into this country. Certain moments, certain struggles are etched into my brain, but mine is only one experience of the millions of immigrants that have come before and will come after me. I needed greater insight into the experiences of my fellow Nigerian immigrants who come to this country with a significant amount of human capital and contribute to its diverse economic and social tapestry. What surprised me was just how difficult it was for these immigrants to establish themselves within this tapestry, even after being in this country for an extensive period of time.



2009 McNair fellow Tobi Afolayan

Where They Are Coming From

To truly understand how and why Nigerian immigrants are having such a hard time becoming successful within this tapestry, one must first understand their background and reasons for coming to America. And they are coming to America in growing numbers. In 2008, African immigrants made up approximately 4% of blacks in America, which is approximately 1.6 million people. This represents a twofold increase when compared to their proportional status in 2000 (Kanu 2008).

The fourteen immigrants (eight males and six females) I interviewed made for a very diverse set of participants. In terms of ethnicity, 43% were Ogoni, 7% were Ibo and 50% were Yoruba. The most likely reason for the major ethnic presence of Yoruba, of which I'm a part, is the phenomenon Ogbaa (2003) describes as the "brain drain." The "brain drain" is the ongoing trend within which Nigerians of various ethnicities, Yoruba included, are coming to western countries to pursue undergraduate and graduate degrees, due to the lack of space for them at reputable universities within Nigeria. The Yoruba ethnic group also constitutes a significant proportion of Nigeria's population.

The Ogoni participants were a major presence in the subject pool partly because the International Institute in Manchester is one of the resettlement agencies that assist immigrants fleeing persecution in their native countries. In the early and mid '90s, the majority of the Ogoni people had to flee their native land due to the massive pollution and degradation of their homeland and vital natural resources by the Shell Oil Company. Shell Oil colluded with the Nigerian government to suppress the dissenting Ogoni people who were sabotaging the company's operations in their area, the Niger Delta, the most oil-rich region of Nigeria. This suppression meant "silencing" the over 300,000 Ogoni who protested in 1993 against Shell and the Nigerian government's complicity in Shell's environmentally negligent actions. The silencing was done through systematic violence and widespread abuse of the legal system. Many of the hundreds of thousands of Ogoni protesters were kidnapped, or falsely accused, sentenced and then executed by the state. State-sanctioned murder was the fate of the activist leader of MOSOP (The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People), Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was sentenced to death after being falsely charged with the murders of four other Ogoni people. Most of this state-sponsored violence was conducted under the ruthless dictatorship of Sani Abacha (Okonta and Douglas 2001; Ratcliffe 1997). Therefore it is no surprise that many came to seek refuge in America.



Ken Saro-Wiwa at a MOSOP gathering

The reason for coming to this country cited by the majority of the interviewees was their hope for a better future; whether that meant escaping the negative sociopolitical conditions or the disheartening economic conditions of Nigeria depended on who I spoke with. To all of them America was the very symbol of opportunity; one Ogoni participant even joked that from the way people talked about America, one would suspect everything here was made of gold.

Research shows that America can be a land of golden opportunities for African immigrants, especially if they speak English. Eule and Kollehlon (2003) found that African immigrants who were more proficient in English earned, on average, higher salaries than those that were less proficient.

Not only do most Nigerians come to this country with the ability to speak English (Ogbaa 2003), many are arriving with even more human capital than American citizens, especially in terms of education (Casimir 2008). Surveys of Nigerian immigrants in the city of Houston, Texas, showed that about 37% of Nigerians have their bachelor's degree, 12% have their master's degree, and approximately 4% have their doctorate degree. This is interesting when compared to the white population of

that city, 19% of whom responded as having a bachelor's degree, 8% as having a master's degree, and 1% a doctorate degree (Casimir 2008).

Hearing their Stories

During this qualitative study, I conducted interviews of Nigerian immigrants 18 years of age or older regarding their socioeconomic attainment in America. Participants were recruited through a community church known for having a high proportion of Nigerian immigrants among its members. According to Ogbaa (2003), a church makes sense as a location for recruitment, given the Nigerian cultural norm of religious reverence that makes the church the usual gathering place for the Nigerian community. What later emerged as a significant obstacle was the participant's extended work schedules. Some people worked almost every day, all night long and slept throughout the day. During the days they had off, they usually were fulfilling family or other personal obligations.

I recruited other participants through referrals. This form of recruitment actually proved to be the most effective. Many participants indicated that they were employed as nursing assistants or worked for non-profit organizations and referred me to other Nigerians with whom they worked.

I met with each participant face to face for about an hour in order to ask a series of qualitative and quantitative questions. During the interviews, my goal was to capture the content of the subjects' remarks in my notes, but I left it to the audio recorder to capture the emotional context and exact wording of the responses.

Once all the interviews were successfully completed, the data from the responses were analyzed and coded. My goal was to analyze the data provided to determine what particular factors were affecting my interviewees' socioeconomic status. In reviewing the data, it became obvious that "length of time spent in America" was the key element in evaluating the

qualitative and quantitative information provided by the interviewees. What became even more evident was that several things were changing over time, but not at all in the way that I had expected them to. On average, their socioeconomic status had not improved the longer they had been in America.

The Social Side of Change

I designated an increase or decrease in social contacts as the primary indicator for social mobility. The information collected suggests that Nigerian immigrants in Manchester may be experiencing downward social mobility. Most people said they stayed in contact with fewer people on a weekly basis in the United States than they did in Nigeria, regardless of how long they have been in this country. Very few responded by saying they actually increased their social network in terms of how many people they interacted with regularly. Many also stated that a majority of these contacts were more like acquaintances that they saw every day at work.

The participants noted that one of the differences in culture that has made life more difficult for them is the emphasis on individualism in US society. This is understandable since they are coming from a cultural background that is more community oriented. In Nigeria, the saying “it takes a village to raise a child” is a widely held belief that is naturally adhered to by many Nigerians (Ogbaa 2003; Falola 2001). One Yoruba participant helps us better understand this cultural difference, “Here privacy is very much cherished, you must call before visiting... we as Africans relate with each other much easier.”

The Economic Side of Change

According to Eule and Kollhlon (2003) African immigrants who speak English earn, on average, 16% more annually than those who do not speak English at all or are not as proficient. This is interesting, considering that the official language of Nigeria is English (Ogbaa 2003; Falola 2001). Therefore, one would anticipate that Nigerian immigrants would then be earning higher wages than their African counterparts who are not proficient in English; alas this was not the case.

The data collected shows that Nigerian immigrants in Manchester may be facing economic stagnation due to a combination of structural, cultural and communicative barriers, such as the non-transferability of certain human capital,

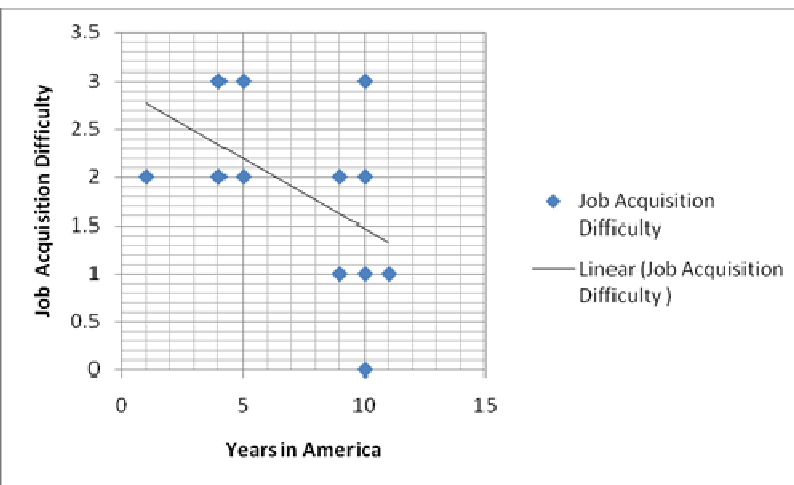


Figure 1. Job Acquisition Difficulty Question: How difficult or easy has it been for you to get a job here in America? Answer: A.) Very difficult B.) Somewhat difficult C.) Not at all difficult. The responses were numerically coded 1 for “Very difficult”, 2 for “Somewhat difficult” and 3 for “Not at all difficult.” Please note that in this graph and those to follow some of the participants (of the 14 total) had the same responses, thus their responses were merged into one data point (blue diamond).

such as academic achievement. One Yoruba interviewee said it best, “I’m a nurse. I believe they should give foreign nurses training, so they can pass the board exam, like in London they give adaptation courses to foreign nurses for six months.”

I created a data set to evaluate the relationship between the number of “Years in America” with the subjects’ perceived “Job Acquisition Difficulty” (Figure 1). According to the data, the longer people spent in America, the more difficult it was for them to acquire employment. This was fairly unexpected, since I went into this study with the premise that the longer immigrants spend in their host country, the more human capital they are able to accrue and the larger a social network they are able to build. I expected that a longer term in the United States would help them acclimate to the acceptable modes of behavior and norms in employment, such as filling out an application or behaving in a culturally appropriate way during a job interview.

There were several possible reasons cited for this difficulty. Five participants cited differences in culture and communication, three participants attributed their problems to the current economic downturn, one person said it was because of the popularity of his job, three people thought that it had to do with racism and discrimination by prospective employers and finally two people said that it was because they were not able to transfer their academic and professional certifications. All participants were interviewed at around the same time and were speaking about their past job searching efforts.

Discretionary income was the other factor I designated as an indicator of economic mobility. A large number, 71%, of the participants responded as not being able to save any percentage of their income. Many respondents echoed the sentiments of one Ogoni participant who said she saves “absolutely nothing, my expenditure is more than my income. The main reason I’m not able to save is because I’m underemployed. . . .” Others said they had barely enough money to cover their basic expenses as it was. This was another factor that did not improve over their time spent in America.

Impressions of America

One other variable that correlated with time was the participant’s “Impression(s) of America.” (See Figure 2) Over time, it turned out that the participants actually had a more positive impression of America the longer they spent in the country, a result that surprised me, especially when I compared it with the increase in job acquisition difficulty and the decrease in social networks. Most of the participants responded as having both a negative and positive impression of America. One Ogoni interviewee responded that, “there are areas where I have a negative [impression] and areas where I have a positive; [here] you’re not persecuted by the government.”

One outlier, an Ogoni politician in Manchester, NH, stated having “a very positive impression” of America; he feels that America is a place that “rewards hard work and recognizes talent, and allows you to be who you want to be.” In the end no one else cited having a completely positive or negative impression of America.

This result makes sense in light of the unstable sociopolitical conditions the Nigerians are coming from and the more stable ones they have found here in America. Although America may not have turned out to be as perfect as they might have hoped, on average, the interviewees seem to find that they are freer here in the United States than they were in their homeland.

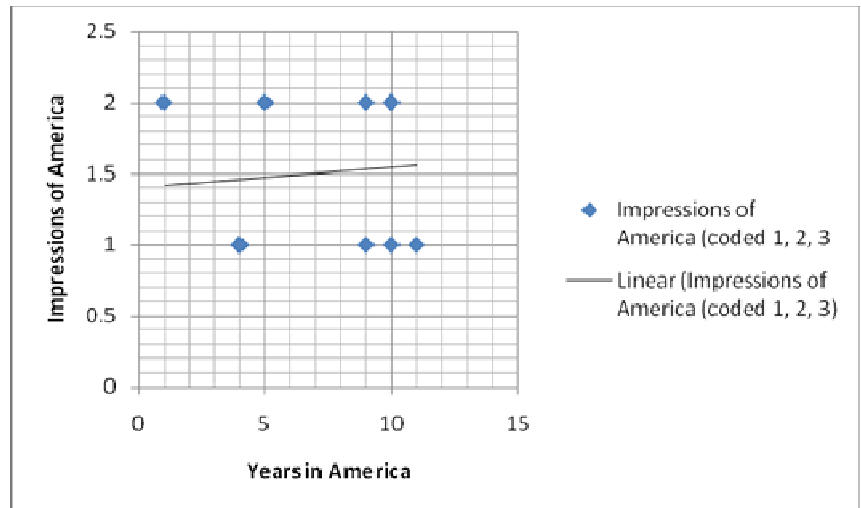


Figure 2. Impression of America. Question: “So far what is your impression (what do you think of) America? “Positive impression” (coded as 1), “negative impression” (coded as 3) or “both” (coded as 2).

A Chance at the American Dream

I don’t think I could have anticipated that my findings would diverge so much from my initial hypothesis that the length of time spent in America would correlate with higher socioeconomic status for these immigrants. If my study proves anything, it is that the playing field is very much uneven due to cultural and communicative differences and structural barriers that may hinder new arrivals attempting to gain a higher socioeconomic status. If immigrants competed on an even playing field, with the ability to transfer their academic credentials instead of having to start their post-secondary education from scratch, I might have found more evidence of upward mobility. A couple of people indicated that the degrees they spent years earning in Nigeria were largely non-transferrable to American universities or were unusable in obtaining employment in skilled occupations, making it difficult for them to advance their careers in America.

Steps should be taken to try to make the playing field more even for Nigerian immigrants. One step could be providing adaptive or supplementary education that would allow those who already hold degrees in skilled occupations to adapt their knowledge to the particular methodology of their host country.

To solve such a problem, it is essential to first realize that it exists. This has been my endeavor to show to what degree this problem exists in Manchester. Despite the obstacles, my interviewees conveyed a pervasive optimism and a strong belief in the American dream. Success in an adopted homeland often cannot be achieved without the help of formal or informal resettlement assistance from the host community. Acquiring more knowledge of the nature of these socioeconomic barriers in our society is the first step towards creating effective resettlement initiatives for these immigrants who daily are striving for their own piece of the American dream.

In Closing

Conducting this research was a distinct privilege. I often think of my life before and after this research project, only because of the profound changes I went through while compiling all this information and hearing all these immigrants stories. Not only has this experience been a profound one for me, it has also been a humbling one. I can no longer look around at all the advantages, all the privileges that are at my disposal and easily take them for granted. The fact that I have access to such things as clean water, reliable healthcare and a college education is something that has forever been put into perspective for me. This project has opened me up, not only to my origins, but to another way of life—another way of thinking that I used to know but have forgotten. It has allowed me to take on a larger perspective on where we are as a society in comparison with the rest of the international community. It has become abundantly clear to me that if we as members of this great society negate the valuable human capital that flows into this country, we are not only putting immigrants at a severe disadvantage but ourselves as well; we are forgoing the opportunity to enhance our communities even more.

I would like to thank my faculty advisor Professor Cliff Brown; without his strategic support and intelligent feedback this project would never have become what it is today. I would also like to thank all the staff and advisors at the McNair Graduate Opportunity Program, which provided the fellowship that made this research possible in the first place. Furthermore, I owe an immense amount of gratitude to the various individuals who shared their compelling and beautiful stories of coming and living in this great country of ours. I would also be remiss not to thank the editorial staff of this publication, who helped me to more eloquently and more fully express my research findings. Last, my parents must be mentioned as their encouragement to apply for the McNair fellowship was what launched me on this incredible journey to begin with.

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Author Bio

*Originally from Nigeria, **Tobi E. Afolayan** is pursuing a dual major in international affairs and communications, along with a Spanish minor. He conducted the research for his Inquiry article through a research fellowship awarded by the McNair Graduate Opportunity Program at UNH. Tobi says that studying the African immigrant experience has given him a wider perspective on human experiences, as well as making him a more effective and scholarly researcher and writer. After obtaining a bachelor's of art in May 2012, Tobi hopes to pursue a PhD in political science: "I'm really interested in furthering my research in African affairs," says Tobi.*

Mentor Bio

*For the past fifteen years, Associate Professor **Cliff Brown** has taught and researched many topics within the Department of Sociology at UNH, including race and ethnicity, environment and society and social inequality. He has mentored a handful of UNH students through the McNair Graduate Opportunity Program, including Tobi Afolayan. Brown says one of the challenges of the project involved supervising research that was significantly different from his own scholarship but adds that he learned a lot from Tobi's research. "It was interesting to see how the project evolved over time—both the research questions Tobi was interested in as well as the picture that started to emerge once Tobi had collected his interview data."*