

Exploring Community Engagement and Cultural Maintenance Among Forced and Voluntary West African Immigrants in New York City

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Abstract In recent decades, there has been an increase in the number of West African immigrants to the USA and greater variation in the circumstances underlying their migration, including political persecution and forced migration. This multitude of migration pathways influences factors, such as trauma experiences, level of preparedness for migration, and family separation and stability, and may have important implications for immigrant participation in ethnic and community-based structures, or niches, once in the USA. Using a grounded theory approach, this qualitative study explored the challenges faced by a sample of 32 adult forced and voluntary West African immigrants in New York City. Findings suggest that forced migrants may have more actively engage with, and have positive perceptions of, culturally based ties, resources, and support in their host country. In contrast, voluntary migrants may be less likely to emphasize these connections when discussing problem-solving strategies. Results are examined in the context of the Conservation of Resources theory of immigrant loss. Implications for addressing the needs of West African immigrants in social service interventions and future research are also highlighted.

Keywords African immigrants · Community engagement · Social capital · Acculturation refugees · Forced migration

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Introduction

In the USA, immigrant communities are often a stronghold of resources for both recently arrived and established immigrants, providing access to financial, social, and cultural support and resources (Bertrand et al. 2000). These communities serve as a gateway to social capital, which can be defined, in part, as resources mediated by non-family networks (Portes 1998, 2000) and can be protective against the structural discrimination experienced by the largely non-White immigrants that have entered the country since 1965 (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes et al. 2005; Chu 2014). Though immigrant niches are frequently discussed in terms of labor market segmentation (Wright et al. 2010) or ethnic identity formation (Waters 1994), few studies have looked at the relationship between immigrants' perceptions of cultural community¹ resources and the circumstances of their migration. Circumstances of migration are important because one of the key systemic stressors set in motion by forced migration is the loss of social networks and individuals' roles in those networks (Miller and Rasco 2004).

African migrants, including those from the 16 countries that comprise West Africa, are among the fastest growing immigrant groups in many urban areas in the USA (Kent 2007; Terrazas 2009; Thomas 2011). Understanding the experiences of African immigrants can pose a challenge to social work practitioners and policy-makers because of the diversity of their migration experiences. Much of the migration from Africa can be attributed to economic, social, and political instability throughout the region (Gordon 1998; Kanya 1997; Kent 2007; Takougang and Tidjani 2009; Takyi 2002; Terrazas 2009). This instability has created a large population of forced migrants from Africa; refugees and asylees represented nearly 30 percent of individuals who migrated from sub-Saharan Africa to the USA in 2007 (Kent 2007). The majority of African immigrants emigrate through "traditional" avenues such as family reunification or professional visas. In addition, many are undocumented (Blanch 2008; Wilkinson 2007). This multitude of migration pathways among African immigrants, and the concomitant diversity in factors such as trauma experiences, level of preparedness for migration, and family separation and stability, can have important implications for their adaptation in the post-migration environment, including their participation in cultural community structures.

Cultural Maintenance Among Immigrant Communities in the USA

Understanding the significance of co-ethnic and co-national community structures is important for social service providers and policy-makers who serve immigrant populations (Potocky-Tripodi 2002). Among immigrants, community can encompass a "shared notion of togetherness, united by common history or goals, sharing and participating in activities, culture, and ideology" (Young et al. 2006: 56). Traditionally, immigrant communities in the USA have marked urban landscapes with "Chinatowns," "Little Havanas," "Little Italys," etc. These areas have served as key

¹ We use the phrase "cultural community" to refer to any social entity that encompasses members of a co-ethnic group (e.g., members of the Fulani ethno-linguistic group) or co-national group (e.g., citizens of Sierra Leone).

resource sites for newly arrived immigrants seeking housing, entry into the informal labor market, and socialization opportunities. They may also serve as sites of cultural engagement and maintenance, i.e., the reinforcement of shared norms, values, and attitudes through social interaction and shared activities between group members. For immigrants who fall into the phenotypical ascription of “Black,” such as those from African countries, these resources may be especially important in the face of structural discrimination and institutional barriers to employment and other opportunities they face in the USA (Portes et al. 2005; Waters 1994). Moreover, African cultures are generally collectivist, valuing social support coupled with social responsibility over individual modes of action (Akinsulure-Smith et al. 2009; Whittaker et al. 2005; Guerin et al. 2004). Thus, these community resources may be important for both material support and continuity of social identity and interpersonal contact.

Forced migrants may experience and engage with cultural community resources differently than those who have immigrated voluntarily. Unlike the departures of voluntary immigrants, those of forced migrants are often motivated by life-threatening circumstances and marked by abruptness and lack of planning (Akinsulure-Smith and O'Hara 2012). Forced migrants often do not know anyone in the country to which they immigrated and may not be able to access available resources and community networks. Moreover, access issues aside, forced migrants may not be as inclined to reclaim their role or position in a nationality-bound social network in their country of emigration because these networks may be as problematic as they are beneficial. For example, studying Salvadorian immigrants in the USA, Menjivar (1997) argued that co-ethnic support networks, and the social capital presumed to accompany such solidarity, may be tenuous when migrants emerge from violent conflicts driven by civilian factions. This aversion to engaging in cultural community ties can be framed in research that host countries may be more inclined to endorse the maintenance of cultural traditions among forced migrants, as compared to voluntary migrants (Gieling et al. 2011).

Social service provision for the increasingly diverse immigrant and refugee population in the USA necessitates an understanding of the unique issues faced by these communities and often requires specialized multilevel application of services and interventions, including those that support community structures (Potocky-Tripodi 2002). The study described in this article employed focus groups and individual interviews to identify the challenges faced by a sample of 32 adult forced and voluntary West African immigrants in New York City (NYC) and to examine the dynamics of cultural community ties, resources, and support, especially as they relate to help-seeking and well-being.

Research Design and Method

This qualitative study employed focus groups and interviews to explore the experiences of West African immigrants, including their experiences with cultural community structures. Our interest in West African communities derived from the authors' history of sociological and clinical work with forced migrants in a large public hospital and from the second author's experiences as a member of the Sierra Leonean immigrant community. We chose focus group interviews as our primary method of data collection

because group discussion is the preferred mode of discussion in many African cultures (Smith 2002). However, because we knew there were topics that were often avoided in groups, for example, topics related to familial conflicts, we conducted in-depth interviews to supplement the focus groups. All methods were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of New York University School of Medicine and the City University of New York.

Recruitment

Recruitment of the sample for this study was purposive, conducted with the help of an advisory network comprised of several community-based organizations, health advocacy groups, and legal defense councils that serve West African communities in the New York metropolitan area. After data collection, we consulted with network members to review themes and preliminary analysis in order to incorporate their feedback in our interpretation of findings.

Sample

Among the sample of 32 adults, seven focus group sessions, in which group size ranged from two to 12 people, were conducted, as well as eight individual interviews. Four sessions were follow-up sessions that were held no more than 2 weeks following initial interviews. Based on the short demographic questionnaire described below, specifically an open-ended question asking them to describe their principal reason for coming to the USA, 20 participants were identified as forced migrants (i.e., reported “war,” “refugee,” or related phenomena), while 12 were identified as voluntary (did not mention these things). Overall, the forced and voluntary groups were similar in age (the average age of the forced migrants was 43.7 years; the average age for the voluntary migrants was 42.1 years) and similar in terms of time in the USA (average time in the USA for forced migrants was 8.1 years; the average for voluntary was 7.8 years). Complete demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection

Focus groups and individual interviews took place at several different locations in the NYC area. The locations were selected in order to increase the opportunity for members of a diversity of West African communities to attend. Data collection was carried out until all of the researchers agreed that additional participants replicated categories or concepts that had been identified and data saturation had been reached.

Upon arrival, potential participants were welcomed and informed of the purpose and content of the project as well as their right to refuse participation. Participants were asked for their consent and then completed a short demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire included age, gender, ethnic group, country of origin, principal reason for coming to the USA, ages and location of children, and housing situation.

During each focus group and interview, the same semi-structured interview format was employed, though probes and prompts changed to address emergent themes as the data collection process progressed. Participants were first asked to describe a recent problem or conflict they had experienced in their family. From that point forward, participants were allowed to converse freely. The moderator occasionally interjected

Table 1 Participant demographics, by reason for immigration ($n=32$)

	Forced migrants ($n=20$)	Voluntary migrants ($n=12$)
Mean age (range, 22 to 83 years)	43.7	42.1
Mean time in the USA (range, <1 to 24 years)	8.1	7.8
Gender		
Female	10	9
Male	10	3
Religion		
Muslim	11	8
Christian	9	4
Self-identified ethnicity/ethnic groups		
Bassa	4	0
Fulani	5	3
Mandingo	4	0
Mende	0	2
Mouride	0	2
Other	7	5
Country of Origin		
Burkina Faso	0	1
Chad	1	0
Gambia	2	1
Guinea	1	2
Ivory Coast	1	1
Liberia	8	3
Mali	0	1
Mauritania	2	0
Sierra Leone	5	3

with certain probes, such as asking about problem-solving techniques, i.e., “Where do you go for help with these problems?”

Each focus group was attended by two members of the research team: the moderator and a note-taker. Note-takers were charged with collecting three types of data during focus groups: the order of speakers, notable behaviors, and quotes that illustrated the primary themes of the research. Participants received US \$40 per focus group or interview.

Data Analysis

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data analysis began immediately following the first focus group, with the researchers meeting to identify sensitizing concepts for later groups and interviews, and to form initial ideas about codes. Data were analyzed based on a grounded theory approach in which data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently as an iterative process, patterns were identified in

the data through codes, and salient themes and concepts were developed based on interaction with the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The research team met twice monthly throughout data collection and analysis to discuss experiences and develop codes. Selected codes from a final list of 28 are presented in Table 2.

Transcriptions were entered into ATLAS.ti software for coding and analysis. In order to increase the reliability of coding, two coders, one of whom was the group moderator or interviewer, independently coded their assigned transcripts. These coders then met to merge their coded documents, discussing each portion of the coded text in order to create a consensus document. Transcripts were also coded along one methodological axis—whether the text represented a focus group or individual interview—and four theoretically relevant demographic axes: gender, religion, forced migration, or voluntary migration. All documents were merged into a single hermeneutic unit for thematic analysis. The intersection of the codes “cultural community support,” “voluntary [migration],” and “forced [migration]” with other codes listed in Table 2 presented

Table 2 Selected codes used for analysis

Code	Operational definition
“911”	In vivo code (i.e., must use the term “911”)
Africa	References to “Africa,” home country or region, own ethnicity, “back home”
America	References to America, Americans, the USA, “here” when referring to things in the USA or New York, American culture
Coping strategies	Efforts to deal with a problem, e.g., “patience,” working out, social comparison; includes talking about problem or talking to object of problem
Politics	References to governmental politics
Cultural community support	Community-based organizations, community support networks, advice-giving elders, groups of friends from own culture
Education and schools	References to education, schools, school personnel, things that happen in schools, higher education, lack of education, educational material
Extended family	References to other family members
Extracurricular activities	Children’s structured activities outside of school; includes after school programs and school-based sports
Financing	References to obtaining and giving money, including money, jobs, work, bills, remittances, insurance
Gender roles	References to the roles of males and females; may be in family or outside of family, children, or parents
Housing	Living situation, shelters, number of people in home
Immigrating	References to immigration, immigration authorities, means of migration, immigration documents
Interpersonal conflict	References to arguments, fighting, or general tension between people
Parent/child	References to parents, children, and interactions between them
Religion	References to religion, religious leaders, spiritual belief, religious buildings, religious bodies
Siblings and cousins	References to brothers, sisters, cousins, and relations between them
Spouses	References to husbands, wives, romantic partners, and relations between them
US secular/institutional authorities	Police (including “911”), Administration of Children’s Services, school personnel, public benefits, hospitals, immigration officials

relevant data for this study. Constant comparison was implemented during the data analysis period, wherein instances of each theme that emerged from the data were compared to other instances and themes were integrated, limited, or refined (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This process of data condensation and interpretation was carried out until all of the researchers agreed that theoretical saturation had been achieved, that is, ongoing analysis revealed that no new codes or themes were being identified and existing themes, including those discussed in this paper, were well-developed.

Strategies for rigor included triangulation, verification, and auditability (Padgett 2008). Triangulation included the use of multiple disciplinary perspectives (psychology and sociology), multiple interview formats (focus groups and individual interviews), and multiple coders (two per transcript). Verification involved conducting follow-up interviews and reviewing themes and preliminary analysis with our stakeholder network. Our audit trail included dates and content of team meetings, interview schedules, relevant email messages, and stakeholder meetings.

Results

This research explored the challenges faced by forced and voluntary West African immigrants in the NYC area and identified any differences in their experiences with cultural community resources and support. The majority of the 32 participants, who ranged in age from 22 to 83 years, referenced some aspect of cultural community support during focus groups and interviews. Despite being similar in terms of age and length of time in the USA, the 20 forced migrants more frequently articulated positive associations and engagement with cultural community resources and support, whether in the form of access to community elders to arbitrate interpersonal conflicts, political or religious institutions, or informal sharing of child care resources with neighbors. Among the 12 voluntary migrants, community was mentioned much less frequently, with the exception of discussion about child care practices. The proceeding section presents quotes reflective of the following themes: community-based problem solving among forced migrants, expressions of solidarity among forced migrants, and emphasis on child care practices among both forced and voluntary migrants.

“Jamaa: Circle of Elders”: Forced Migrants and Community-Based Problem Solving

A number of the forced migrants spoke highly of their experiences with community structures, both formal and informal, as well as their cultural traditions of community support (e.g., a council of elders). Many, such as the following 50-year-old Gambian man who was a community leader in his country before being forced to migrate 6 months prior to the interview, felt they occupied new positions of leadership and respect within their immigrant communities. With his wife and three children still in Gambia, he lived in a house with several Gambian roommates and eagerly engaged in local politics, which he found to be a source of solace.

Yeah, for me, personally, what I do, I sit down with my fellow countrymen, and then we discuss. We talk about it. You know, exchange ideas, and then at least we

are doing something. Trying to see how we can restore democracy back home. And now, at this present moment, I think by next week we will be registering a non-profit organization so that we can be able to see how best we can bring back democracy and human rights in my country.

He also spoke of community elders as a support mechanism to assist families with various conflicts, including childrearing.

Sometimes too in our society, we the Gambians, you know, I live with some elderly people. So what I do is, if the child is giving a lot of problems and he doesn't understand well I talk to [name of elder] and [name of elder], and then they'll call all of them to the child. And they sit him down and they call to the house, talk some sense into the child. [*Moderator*: So you bring other elders.] Yes, they bring them. That's what we usually do here, we the Gambians.

Another individual who occupied a position of leadership in the African community was a 33-year-old man from Mauritania who arrived in the USA as a refugee 15 years ago. Like the man from Gambia, this man spoke positively of community elders as a source of support and guidance. In this example, he refers to cases of domestic conflict.

In the African community we have elders, we have people who come talk to the [husband]. Yeah, we can say: First step, go to them, tell them what's happen. They gonna give you a right to correct it. If not, they all gonna fight against him, [*Moderator*: So go to the elders.] Yes.

A 70-year-old Sierra Leonean woman who had been in the USA for over 20 years also spoke of existing community structures. Having initially come to the USA in the 1950s as a college student and then returned as a refugee during the Sierra Leonean civil war in the 1980s, this participant further characterized the role of elders in addressing the wrongdoing of community members.

They have what they call a circle of elders, [traces a circle in the air] that's a *jamaa*.... And if anything happens you go to one of them. And they call a meeting of the elders and they bring you to the *jamaa*. They say, "Well, if you do this or if this happens to you, you are not the only person that will be ashamed. You put the shame or the problem...on all of us, on the *jamaa*." And then they'll say, like, "What has this *jamaa*, [grimaces] what has the *jamaa* do for you?" So that the shame will be on all of us, all the elders.

The forced migrants commonly viewed religious institutions, such as mosques and churches, as another valuable resource, particularly in regard to childrearing and dealing with familial discord. For example, a 54-year-old Sierra Leonean woman who had been in the USA for 12 years discussed issues of corporal punishment and her fear that school teachers and other authority figures may intervene in disciplinary practices. When asked how she dealt with this issue, she stated: "Well you try to talk to your kids....You try to bring them in the mosque."

“You are African, I am African”: Forced Migrants and Solidarity and Support

In addition to referencing formalized and semi-formalized community structures such as political associations, elders, and religious institutions, a number of the forced migrants discussed the importance of personal outreach in their communities. In one instance, a 48-year-old Mauritanian woman who had been in the USA for 10 years expressed the need for community members to support each other. When her fellow focus group participant talked about the role of prayer in solving one's problems, she argued that prayer could only help to a certain extent; Africans needed to go out and actively help each other.

Pray is good [looks up]. Me too, I pray. But looking also is very good. You have to look everywhere, you see? If you stay here to pray [and] nothing is coming, you have to go out [looks at the other participants, uses hands], see people [laughs]. You are African, I am African, but before I don't who was [name of other participant]. Now I know who [name of other participant] is. If I see something, I can call [her]. I can call [the social worker at their clinic], say I don't know [her] address, but you have to give this to [her]. Because before, [name of other participant] helping me. Now I have to help her.

Another forced migrant, a 37-year-old Liberian man who had been in the USA for 10 years, was a member of the tight-knit Liberian community in the NYC area. He saw himself as a role model to others.

I achieve a lot, and I think I can make a difference in my life. And a lot of Liberians in this community try to follow what I'm trying to do. And that's because I talk to them most of the time. There's the one guy that I met, he's here almost 15 years. When I came, [I was] you know, in the street, doing the street thing. I called him one time, I said, “Look, you know what I think? You [are] my African brother, we all from Liberia. But the way you're running your life is not good.” He said, “How, Big Brother?” I said, “You have to leave the street and work.” I said, “What you work in this country and what you achieve is for you. But the street will only send you to jail.” And he promised me, he said, “I will not smoke no more. And I will look for a job.” And right now I'm very proud that he married, he's stable, he got a job, he bought a home. Most of the time we got to advise each other.

However, in discussing community solidarity, the 70-year-old Sierra Leonean woman referenced above also hinted at the notion that community can take a more malicious form of unwanted surveillance.

We live as a family, the community. And you respect them if you see, you know....If you're quarreling in the street and you see your neighbor coming, you close your mouth [touches mouth]...and pretend that it's no

different to anything. Otherwise she'll say, "You, [name], what's wrong?" And she would interfere.

"Back in Africa...the Children Are Never Alone": Communal Childrearing as a Common Theme Among Forced and Voluntary Migrants

Both forced and voluntary migrants spoke favorably about cultural community engagement and resources in Africa, and the deficit of such resources in the USA, in relation to childrearing. This was the single theme common among both groups. Both men and women expressed how they missed a sense of communal child care, that is, the normative practice of relying on others within the community to assist in child care, that they experienced in their home countries, or described instances in which they attempted to engage in such practices in the USA.

One such participant was a woman who was over 75 years of age who voluntarily immigrated to the USA from Sierra Leone over 10 years ago. As the primary caretaker for her grandson, she spoke of being able to leave him in the care of an African family in her neighborhood.

We are lucky, we have this pastor's family...I take my grandson there to sleep over. They are Africans too. He has his own children, and one of them is about the same age as my grandson.

Among the forced migrants, community resources and support were referenced numerous times in relation to child care. Like many of the participants, the 70-year-old Sierra Leonean woman discussed community resources and support in the context of difficulties with childrearing in the USA.

Back home in Africa, you don't have that problem [of finding child care]. Even if your parents aren't there, your neighbors are there. When you go out all you have to do is tell your neighbor, "I'm going to market. I'm going to this place or that place. A child, number one child, will be coming [home] at so-and-so time." [The neighbors] know what time [the children] come home, and they're supervised. They're supervised. The neighbors will pitch in. "Have you done your homework, you have to do your homework, your mother says so so so so." Then they will say, "Okay, come get your food."

Some participants linked the lack of communal childrearing in the USA to the loss of communal discipline. One woman, a 47-year-old voluntary migrant from Mali who had been in the USA for 9 years, lamented that, in the USA, when she saw neighborhood children misbehaving, she could not confront them. She described the scenario if she were to approach them.

[They'd say], "Why are you talking to me? Do you know me?" Yeah, you cannot say that in Africa. [In Africa] if two kids are in the street doing something [and] you say, "Well, what are you doing here?" they *run*. And they say, "Sorry, I don't going to do it, please don't tell my parents." They beg you [puts hands together in

front of face] not to tell their parents. But here, if you did that, you give them spank [and] they are only your neighbors...[If] you see a kid do something wrong and you give them spank....if they go home and say, “Okay, Mommy somebody give me spank,” then *you* did something wrong.

While some participants discussed the loss of disciplining norms as problematic for parents and communities as a whole, others expressed what was often at the root of their apprehensions—concern for the basic welfare and safety of the children. A 45-year-old Gambian woman who was a forced migrant and who had been in the USA for 1 year spoke of her concern for seemingly unsupervised children on the subway.

And the small kids, they [are] normally left in the train traveling from one corner [of the city] to another going to school. I think that it’s not even proper, especially in New York. You would see a seven-year-old boy inside the train....[Other participant: Maybe the father can’t provide a car, or the mother....] That’s right, but let them go and pick their kid from school. It’s not safe because somebody can do something. When I look at this seven-year-old boy...he knows where to pick [up] the train and where to drop [off]. But it worried me, because [of] the way I am seeing things here.

Moreover, some child care arrangements mentioned by the participants involved far more than the occasional neighborly baby-sitting or disciplining and illustrated deep-seated and reciprocal community ties. For example, the 70-year-old Sierra Leonean woman spoke of long-term arrangements in which adolescents from other families lived with her full time while they attended high school or college in her neighborhood, a suburb of NYC.

If somebody lives on Long Island and the college is here in the city, they can send the child to you. But [they] also would bring some grocery or provisions. If they grow rice over there, they bring rice, they bring palm oil...they bring, you know, some food stuff, fruits. Sometimes, if they can afford, they pay the child’s school fees. Or, if you can afford, you say, “Oh no, I pay the child school fee,” and the child will serve you, you know. [Moderator: So the child will be like your child, or it’ll be more like a servant?] No, no...not like your servant, like your child. And then some of them will go home during the vacation time. And you can even send your own child with her [for a] visit. That’s a type of relationship we have.

Discussion

In this exploratory qualitative study of West African immigrants in NYC, forced migrants were overwhelmingly positive in their depictions of cultural community support and endorsed the facets of cultural maintenance that it represented. In comparison to voluntary migrants, forced migrants characterized community as something they actively engaged in and facilitated. This engagement encompassed

organized activities, such as religious institutions, political groups, and councils of elders, as well as informal personal outreach to fellow Africans.

The prominence of community engagement among the forced migrants in this study is consistent with some previous research. For example, in a qualitative study of refugees from a diversity of countries living in the USA, Nsonwu et al. (2013) found that refugees valued community bonds and expressed a commitment to assisting newly arrived cohorts. Sherwood and Liebling-Kalifani (2012) also highlighted the importance of social networks in the coping strategies of African refugee women resettled in Great Britain. This emphasis on community ties may be indicative of self-selectivity among politically active immigrants who leave their country of origin due to persecution. The circumstances under which forced migrants leave their home country often include political persecution of themselves, as well as their families. Upon relocation, these individuals may be especially attuned to the political events in their home country; this may lead them to interface regularly with their immigrant community institutions. On a fundamental level, if these migrants were politically active before migration, this sense of community-mindedness and solidarity with others may carry over after migration.

Another explanation may rest in the fact that voluntary and forced migrants often have very different human capital resources coming to the USA, such that forced migrants may access community resources out of necessity. Some voluntary migrants must meet certain skills and/or education levels to be able to live and work in the USA; others arrive through family reunification and thus likely have the support conferred by immediate family. Forced migrants may have neither the educational or linguistic skills to thrive in a post-migration environment nor a family-centered social network. Within Portes and Rumbaut's (1996) typology of US immigrant groups, involuntary migrants, particularly those without desirable occupational skills, face the most significant challenges to adaptation. Consequently, they may rely more heavily on cultural community support, especially in relation to help-seeking.

Emphasis on community engagement and cultural maintenance may also be a by-product of the forced migration experience itself. One of the key systemic stressors set in motion by forced migration is the loss of social networks and individuals' roles in those networks (Miller and Rasco 2004). The findings of this study may be framed in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory of stress (Hobfoll 1989, 2001), which holds that the loss of resources is more salient than their gain. Resources can be broadly defined as entities that individuals see as valuable and "strive to obtain, retain, protect, and foster" (Hobfoll 2001: 341). These valued entities may take the form of finite assets, such as financial stability, employment, and housing, as well as interpersonal and social entities, such as strong relationships with others and the support of their community. The inherent loss of material, social, and cultural resources associated with forced migration, in conjunction with the inability to return to their country of origin, may set these individuals apart from their counterparts who migrated voluntarily. COR theory also posits that those who suffer greater loss are more likely to be impacted emotionally by subsequent gains. That is to say, gaining the ability to connect with and engage in cultural community mechanisms in the USA (e.g., the 50-year-old Gambian man's exchange of ideas with fellow countrymen, or the 33-year-old Mauritanian man's ability to seek counsel from elders) may be more meaningful for those individuals who lost those connections back home.

Another finding of the study was that cultural community ties and support related to child care was a common theme discussed by both forced and voluntary migrants. Both groups spoke positively about the child care practices back home and often contrasted them with US practices. Multiple individuals discussed their attempts to recreate the support systems in their countries of origin (e.g., the 47-year-old Mali woman leaving her grandson with the local African pastor, or the 70-year-old Sierra Leonean woman taking in African teenagers who wanted to attend school in her district). However, in keeping with the COR theory of the salience of loss, participants spoke primarily of the limitations they faced.

Previous research supports the notion that a loss of informal child care, most often in the form of extended family members, as well as a lack of access to formal child care, can create significant challenges to African refugee families (Morantz et al. 2013). Obeng (2007) found that African immigrants placed great importance on the collective nature of childrearing and that their child care choices were reflective of this. Reduced social networks and financial hardship may compromise African voluntary and forced migrants' ability to actualize their preferred child care structures. These issues were borne out in this study, as was a sense of loss expressed by both groups. The parity between immigrant groups in expressing this loss may be indicative of parity in the loss of a functional schema of child care. That is, while forced migrants may speak more supportively than voluntary migrants about certain aspects of community cultural support that were severed when they left their home countries (for example, communal leadership, camaraderie, solidarity), both groups experienced equal loss in other, more functional, aspects of community life (i.e., communal childrearing).

Cultural community networks or ethnic networks can be both a positive and a negative resource. Portes (1998) argues that, among immigrant groups, negative consequences of social capital can include restrictions on individual freedoms. Of note, the 70-year-old Sierra Leonean woman who was wary of surveillance by her neighbors was a forced migrant. This sense of caution supports Menjivar's (1997, 2000) observation that co-ethnic relations may be problematic among migrants who emerged from conflicts driven by civilian factions.

Implications and Conclusion

Potocky-Tripodi (2002) argues that best practices for social work with forced and voluntary migrants necessitates both an understanding of, and intervention at, micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of influence on clients' lived experiences. Meso-level cultural community support structures such as religious institutions, political organizations, and social clubs may serve as useful sites for social service outreach and interventions directed towards immigrant groups, including forced migrants (George 2012; Potocky-Tripodi 2002). Researchers have indicated the need to build a knowledge base of effective community-based approaches among forced migrant groups (Miller and Rasco 2004; Nsonwu et al. 2013), as well as among the increasing African immigrant population (Venters and Gany 2011). Due to the collectivist nature of these communities, community-level engagement may lead to improved well-being and empowerment among groups that are often underserved by existing social service, health, and welfare institutions (Rasmussen et al. 2013).

The current study suggests that community-based interventions directed towards the needs of West African immigrant populations should address the possibility that valuations of community structures and support can vary depending on the circumstances of migration. While strengthening community ties and facilitating the emergence of cultural community structures could benefit some individuals, this effect may not be uniform. Just as Portes (2000) warns against the spurious attribution of outcomes related to structural level forces to social capital, we caution against promoting cultural community support as a “one size fits all” approach to serving West African immigrant populations. Though it was not a focus of this article, we would also emphasize that the relationship between gender and community engagement should be considered critically, as previous work has indicated that community ties can be damaging for women who find themselves outside of social norms, e.g., seeking assistance for intimate partner violence or raising children alone (Lenette et al. 2013; Akinsulure-Smith et al. 2013).

However, our findings also suggest that both voluntary and forced migrants would benefit from resources that specifically support and strengthen communal child care practices. This was one aspect of community life that seemed to bridge the two groups of migrants. Future research should address the child care needs of this population, specifically the loss of communal experiences of childrearing, and how culturally competent remediation of such losses can be developed from within the community. For example, further exploration of long-term child care arrangements that families participate in, e.g., caring for others’ children while they are enrolled in college away from their home, may provide insight into how this migrant group applies a communal orientation towards child care in the USA. Family-based interventions may be an efficacious route to respond to the broad child care needs of this population; however, they should consider how voluntary and forced migrant families may engage differently with community structures and resources.

There were limitations in the study design. As a qualitative study utilizing a small convenience sample, findings derived from these data are not representative of the West African immigrant population as a whole. Moreover, the ethnic and national diversity of the sample may be seen as a limitation because the findings lack cultural specificity. Another limitation concerns the lack of information on the socioeconomic status of participants. Given that sub-Saharan African immigrants in the USA have a greater diversity of educational attainment than other immigrant groups (Capps et al. 2011), this information should be included in future studies. Relatedly, though “time in the USA” served as a crude proxy for participants’ level of acculturation, more detailed or in-depth exploration might have provided insight into their level of community engagement. Despite these limitations, we believe the emergent themes from this research provide valuable and rich insight into the lived experiences of forced and voluntary West African immigrants and highlight areas to be examined in greater detail in future research.

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