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"Back Home, People Say America is Heaven": Pre-Migration Expectations and Post-Migration Adjustment for Liberians in Pittsburgh

Yolanda Covington-Ward[1] 🔘

Abstract The African-born population in the United States is now the immigrant group growing at the fastest rate, yet African immigrants are often overlooked in studies of immigrant incorporation and social adjustment. One factor negatively impacting immigrant adjustment is a lack of congruence between pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities. Existing academic literature on this topic largely overlooks African immigrants with the exception of refugees, and current studies of Liberians in the United States also focus overwhelmingly on refugees. This article reorients the discussion of African immigrant incorporation by exploring such issues with a sample of Liberian immigrants in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area who arrived with a range of visa types. Using the results of five focus groups ($N = 31$), I outline shared unrealistic expectations of abundant wealth and development, an easier life, and Americans having extensive knowledge about Africa. I also examine often unanticipated challenges such as communication issues, negative interactions (including racism and African origin prejudice), cultural differences, problems finding jobs and adjusting to American work culture, and high expectations from home, including remittances. The results suggest that non-refugee immigrants face many of the same challenges as refugees and can benefit from information and resources fostering more successful integration.

Keywords African immigrants · Liberian immigrants · Pre-migration expectations · Refugee · Non-refugee · Mental health

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Introduction

Winston came to the United States from Guinea in 2001 as part of a larger family, originally from Liberia, migrating through the refugee resettlement program. He looked forward to experiencing the great wealth of the United States for himself, but was incredibly disappointed when his expectation of receiving a free car went unfulfilled. "…when we went for the orientation, they said each person entitled to get one car, you know parking to your, I don't know, your apartment or to your house so when I came, I didn't see no car, I just saw the bus" (Focus Group #5, 09/12/2013). Yet, Liberian refugees are not the only Liberian migrants in the United States who came with high expectations. Ethel moved from Liberia to the United States in 1975 to live with her grandmother and finish high school. Although Ethel had direct family connections to the United States (her grandmother had lived there for decades), she still had some pre-conceived notions which were far from reality. "I didn't see no street of gold," she said when asked about her initial impressions of the United States. "I came to Pittsburgh, there were no skyscrapers" (Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013).

These vignettes demonstrate that although both of these Liberians came to the United States with different visa types (refugee vs. family reunification) and nearly three decades apart in time, they both harbored unrealistic expectations of their new host country. Previous studies have shown that a lack of congruence between pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities for immigrants can negatively impact mental and physical health and overall well-being, as well as influence decisions to migrate to other locations (Berry et al. 1987; Murphy and Mahalingam 2006; Fozdar 2009). Moreover, both existing academic literature on pre-migration expectations and post-migration challenges and current studies of Liberians in the United States focus overwhelmingly on refugees, often overlooking migrants with other visa types.

This article will add to and reorient the discussion around African immigrant incorporation in the United States by exploring the shared pre-migration expectations and post-migration experiences of Liberian immigrants in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area who arrived with a range of visa types. Using the results of five focus groups, I outline the often unanticipated challenges impacting Liberian immigrant incorporation in the United States regardless of visa type. It is important to examine these pre-migration expectations and post-migration challenges for all immigrants so non-refugee immigrants can also receive information and resources to support more successful integration into American society. Moreover, significant differences in the challenges that Liberian immigrants face compared to early twentieth century European immigrants to Pittsburgh reveal the importance of racism in shaping immigrant integration in Pittsburgh today.

Troubling the Immigrant/Refugee Distinction

In the larger field of migration studies, migrants are often categorized based on perceptions of their reasons for emigrating. Voluntary migrants (immigrants) are often separated from non-voluntary migrants (refugees) in the scholarly literature, yet, recent scholarship has begun to question this simplistic distinction. In particular, scholars have begun to interrogate the term "refugee" as a mainly bureaucratic label with origins in

humanitarian aid policy. "It is the refugee label itself that creates a distinction between refugees and other migrants by giving those who are recognized as refugees the right of a special treatment" (Scalettaris 2007, 41). Scalettaris (2007) and others (Bernard 1976; Hein 1993; Hayden 2006; Polzer and Hammond 2008; Bakewell 2008) have questioned this distinction between state or institutionally recognized refugees, and other migrants who in fact may have similar experiences or challenges but do not have the advantages or benefits coming with the refugee label.

Migrants coming from the West African country of Liberia represent a unique case troubling the simplistic distinction between refugees and immigrants, as their experiences are shaped by more than just their relationship to the state (Hein 1993). According to the American Community Survey, an estimated 84,914 people born in Liberia were living in the United States in 2014 (2014 one-year estimates, American Community Survey). Overall, Liberians came to the United States with a variety of visa types, as 52.3% of the 65,783 Liberians who became legal permanent residents between 1996 and 2013 came to the United States as refugees or asylees, while 47.7% came through other broad classes of admission: 24% as the immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, 15.2% through the diversity visa lottery, 6.3% through family-sponsored preferences, 1.6% through employment based preferences, and 0.6% through other means (Yearbook for Immigration Statistics, 1997–2013). Moreover, thousands of Liberians are living in the United States with the status of deferred enforcement departure (DED), formally known as temporary protected status (TPS), both of which are temporary statuses according rights to work but not permanent residency (Simmelink 2011). While the existing scholarly literature on Liberians in the United States is not extensive, the majority focuses on Liberians as refugees (Dolo and Gilgun 2002; Brown 2011; Ludwig 2013),[1] generally overlooking shared experiences or challenges that may occur irrespective of visa type.

Immigrant Expectations and Outcomes

Studies of new immigrant arrivals have often focused on their adjustment processes and experiences after arriving in their new countries of settlement. Yet, not as much attention has been given to pre-migration expectations that migrants may have about their new homes. This is important because immigration officials and other stakeholders can address these pre-migration misconceptions before departure so migrants are better prepared for conditions and realities in the United States. Most existing literature examining the difference between pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities focuses on Asian, Latin-American, Caribbean, and European immigrants (Baptiste et al. 1997; Bhattacharya and Schoppelrey 2004; Negy et al. 2009; Tuuli et al. 2013). With a few exceptions looking at African international students in the United States (Fischer 2011), the literature addressing African immigrants' pre-migration expectations and post-migration challenges focuses primarily on refugees, especially those from the Horn of Africa (Danso 2002; Fozdar 2009). More research is

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[1] Bernadette Ludwig does recognize that there is a great diversity of visa types within the Liberian immigrant community; however, her article focuses specifically on refugees and people's engagement with "refugee" as a concept and category.

needed on the pre-migration expectations and post-migration challenges of other African immigrant groups with a diverse array of visa types.

Research on African immigrant mental health also focuses overwhelmingly on refugees as they are often assumed to have worse mental health outcomes than other migrants (Bhui et al. 2003; Halcon et al. 2004). While this is true in some cases, migrants coming from the same countries as refugees through different modes of entry may also have adverse mental health outcomes. Recent research shows that in some cases, migrants with other visa types such as asylum seekers may have worse mental health outcomes than both refugees and other migrants largely due to their precarious immigration status (Iversen et al. 2010; Schubert and Punamäki 2011). This suggests research on immigrant mental health outcomes needs to include and consider immigrants across a variety of visa types to have a more complete picture of how diverse immigrants are affected by mental health challenges.

African and Liberian Immigration to the United States

The United States of America has long been recognized as a "nation of immigrants." The demographics of the immigrant population have changed dramatically due to key policy shifts including the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, family reunification policies, the Diversity Visa lottery program, and Refugee Resettlement programs, so that today the majority of new immigrants are from Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

Immigrants from the continent of Africa are now growing at the fastest rate among all immigrants in the United States (Elo et al. 2015). In the decade from 1950 to 1959, for example, there were only 13,016 Africans or 0.52% of the total foreign-born population who were granted permanent resident status. Fifty years later however, in the decade from 2000 to 2009, 759,734 immigrants or 7.4% of the total population granted permanent resident status was from Africa. This change represents an increase of over 1300% in regards to the African share of the larger immigrant population granted permanent resident status (Yearbook for Immigration Statistics 2013). Currently, there are an estimated 2,010,634 people living in the United States who were born in Africa (2014 one-year estimates, American Community Survey). The profile of Black African immigrants in regards to modes of entry differs in some ways from other immigrants. In 2007, about 21% of Black African immigrants were estimated to be unauthorized, compared to 30% of all immigrants to the United States. Moreover, an estimated 25% of Black African immigrants either entered the United States as refugees or received asylum, which is much higher than an estimated 7% of all immigrants arriving as refugees or claiming asylum (Capps et al. 2012). Other scholars have also emphasized that refugee migration flows are driving increases in African migration to the United States (Thomas 2011). Another 26% of Black African immigrants are estimated to legal permanent residents and 2% are legal temporary residents, which are both very close to comparison figures for all immigrants (28 and 3%, respectively). However, Black African immigrants are less likely to be naturalized US citizens (26%) when compared to the same category for all immigrants (32%) (Capps et al. 2012). These differences in mode of entry can lead to particular challenges in social and economic integration.

Liberians are a part of this trend of African migration to the United States as well. Liberian immigrants stand out from many other African immigrant groups because of the impact of the Liberian civil war, a deadly conflict lasting from 1989 to 2003, on their migration, leading to large-scale displacement. Liberian immigrants also have a lower median age (34.81), lower rates of marriage, and lower rates of post-secondary degree holders when compared to most other West African groups, especially Nigerians and Ghanaians (Covington-Ward et al. 2011). The social adjustment of immigrants is a topic of concern for not just scholars of population but also for public policy more generally, as there is a need for all immigrants to become productive citizens. What then have been the expectations and experiences of social adjustment and integration of Liberian immigrants in a city like Pittsburgh?

Pittsburgh: An Old and New Destination City

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has a long history of being a city of immigrants, having received thousands of European immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While touting this history, Pittsburgh is considered a former gateway city because it no longer attracts immigrants in the large numbers it did in the past (Singer 2004: 5). In 1900, for instance, 26.4% of the population of the city of Pittsburgh was foreign-born, while in 2000, only 5.6% of the residents of Pittsburgh were foreign-born residents (Census 1900 and 2000 Data, American Census Bureau). More recently, the percentage of foreign-born residents has increased, growing to an estimated 7% in 2014 (2014 one-year estimates, American Community Survey), yet still lagging behind other major cities across the United States.

In recent decades, the greater Pittsburgh metropolitan area has become a site of settlement for small groups of African immigrants, including Liberians. The Liberian community in Pittsburgh is small, with total estimates varying from a low of 125 people according to the 2007–2011 pooled American Community Survey to over 200 people according to the president of the local Liberian community association. Some Liberians came to Pittsburgh as students and have lived there for decades; others are recent arrivals who came as refugees. Drawing on focus groups cutting across cross-sections of the community, this paper explores how these disparate groups are adjusting to life in the Greater Pittsburgh area.

Methods

I have been conducting ethnographic research with Liberians in the Pittsburgh area for 6 years, from 2009 to 2015. For this qualitative study, however, my data is coming from five focus groups that I conducted (one in 2011, the other four in 2013), with a total of 31 people.

Recruitment

This study uses a non-probability sample, as I used purposive and snowball sampling for recruiting participants. As this is a pilot study where I want to describe the

experiences of this group of Liberians, purposive sampling works well in this instance (Bernard 2012, 182). Moreover, since the Liberian community in Pittsburgh meets the requirement of being a "relatively small population of people who are likely to be in contact with one another," snowball sampling, in which participants in the study help to recruit other participants, is an affective and appropriate sampling method (Bernard 2000, 180). I recruited participants for the focus groups in person through attending monthly Liberian community meetings. However, because there are some members of the Liberian community who do not regularly attend meetings, I also asked the president of the community association to send out several texts asking people to contact me if they wanted to participate. In addition, some participants learned about the study from friends within the Liberian community; I even had several people show up to focus groups who had not notified me in advance that they were coming.

Sample

The participants in the focus groups were very evenly divided by sex (15 male, 16 female). The median age was 33 years, with a broad range in actual age, as the youngest participant was 18 while the oldest was 69 years old. In one focus group (#3), all of the participants had moved to the United States before 2000, while the other focus groups (#1, #2, #4, #5), while mixed by decade of arrival, mainly had participants who arrived in 2000 or later, most (but not all) as the result of a refugee resettlement program. Thus, of the 31 participants, 20 were refugees and 11 came with other visa types. The median number of years in the United States was 12 years, with a range of 1 to 50 years of having lived in the United States. The participants also came from a number of ethnic backgrounds, with over 32% self-identifying as Krahn, the same ethnic group of former President Samuel K. Doe who had been killed by rebel forces in 1990 (see chart below)[2]. This particular composition differs a bit from P. Saucier's study of Liberians in Rhode Island where the largest ethnic group was Kpelle (23%) and only 11% identified as Krahn (Saucier 2011: 10). Some of these differences may exist because whole families came to Pittsburgh through the refugee resettlement program, which likely had an effect on the ethnic composition of the small Liberian population.

Data Collection and Analysis

The size of the groups ranged from three to eight people, and all of the groups were mixed in sex. The first focus group was held on the University of Pittsburgh campus with three participants. The other four focus groups were held in the homes of different members of the Liberian community in the Pittsburgh area, and each had from six to eight participants. I used a semi-structured interview schedule which consisted of nine open-ended questions. The questions asked about when and why the participants migrated to Pittsburgh, expectations of the United States before migration, challenges they faced upon arriving, personal transformations since migrating, how they maintained contact with other Liberians, and what they did in their everyday lives to maintain their Liberian identity. The focus groups were audio recorded and ranged in length from 1 h 17 min to 1 h 50 min. Both the author and a Liberian research assistant took notes during each of the focus

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[2] Some participants chose multiple ethnic groups (Table 1).

Table 1 Socio-demographics of focus group participants

Variable	N (31)
Sex	
Male	15
Female	16
Age (years)	
Median	33
Range	18–69
Number of years in the U.S.	
Median	12
Range	1–50
Year of arrival in U.S.	
Median	2001
Range	1963–2012
Educational level	
Less than HS	1
HS/GED	7
Some college	7
4-year degree	7
Masters	5
Professional (MD, JD)/PhD	0
Didn't respond	4
Ethnic Group	
Krahn	12
Kpelle	7
Americo-Liberian	4
Bassa	3
Grebo	3
Lorma	2
Gio	2
Kru	1
Gola	1
Gbandi	1
Mende	1
Immigration status upon arrival	
Refugee	20
Student	4
Diversity lottery	2
Visitor visa (which became TPS)	1
Family reunification	1
Other	3

groups. The same research assistant also transcribed the audio recordings. The transcribed focus group discussions were analyzed using a grounded theory approach where I used

open coding to find inductive themes which emerged from the texts (Bernard 2000: 462–463).

Pre-Migration Experiences and Reasons for Migration

The Liberian immigrant community in Pittsburgh is very diverse in terms of reasons for migrating. Georgetta is in her late sixties and knows the streets of Pittsburgh like the back of her hand. She has a measured manner of speaking and an easy smile, and self identifies as a Bassa woman (Bassa ethnicity). She came to the United States in 1963 to pursue her education, going first to Atlanta and coming to Pittsburgh a few years later:

> [I] came to Pittsburgh the summer of '66, '67. Yeah, I was in Atlanta, at Atlanta University…I received a letter…they were sending some students, some women to Pittsburgh for the summer in the School of social work. So I was one of the ones who came. And that's how I came to Pittsburgh. And well that's how I got here. Then I stayed here and I went to Pitt, and got my Masters from Pitt. (Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013, non-refugee)

Allen is a talkative, social man in his early fifties. He arrived in the United States in 2001, coming straight to Pittsburgh through a refugee resettlement program. Back in Liberia, he had a good civil service position working for the government. He fled to neighboring Guinea in 1998 in the midst of Liberia's civil war, when he realized he was being targeted because of his Krahn ethnicity.

> …one of the directors that was working with me told me how I was being hunted directly. Because what they was doing was going from ministry to ministry listing people that they were going to eliminate…having to come from that Krahn background I was one of those that were targeted…and that's how come I left Liberia. And then went to Guinea…then I spend I think 3 years in Guinea, and there you will have to apply for political asylum…[All] I wanted to do was just to get the hell out of Africa… (Focus Group #1, 10/30/2011, refugee)

These two very different stories of migrating, whether by force or by choice, reveal myriad reasons for migrating for Liberians in Pittsburgh. Especially for the smaller number of Liberians who came to Pittsburgh before the Liberian civil war, pursuit of higher education and family reunification were the main reasons prompting their migration to the United States. However, for the majority of the focus group participants, the Liberian Civil War was the factor driving their displacement from Liberia. One common pre-migration experience many participants seemed to share was being displaced within West Africa due to violent conflict. Guinea, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Nigeria were all mentioned as countries of refuge. Experiences of hardship such as lack of food, shelter, instability, unemployment, and hostility from local populations in host countries suggest that difficulties with adjusting to other countries began long before Liberian immigrants came to the United States. Indeed, many of them have gone through multiple adjustment periods, even before leaving Africa. Such experiences may have further impacted many immigrants' view of

the United States as a paradise or utopia, creating very high expectations that did not match with reality.

"Back Home, People Say America is Heaven": Pre-Migration Expectations

One of the questions asked in each focus group was about pre-migration expectations of the United States. Such expectations are important because they can impact the social adjustment process for immigrants, as well as on their overall well-being and state of mental health. In the five focus groups that I conducted, individual responses to this question can be grouped into three larger themes, including expectations of abundant wealth and a well-developed country, an easier life and many opportunities for advancement, and Americans having more extensive knowledge about Africa and Africans.

"Money Wasting in the Street": Expectations of Wealth and Development

The first theme was the most common across all the focus groups. Many Liberians expected there to be excessive wealth (money, jewels, vehicles, etc.) available to everyone in the United States. Lincoln, a more recent arrival to the United States, expressed such sentiments:

> I came to Pittsburgh…[in] 2012 and I came on diversity visa…For me, when I was back home, we watch television, see people playing with money…you just feel, you come here, you find money wasting in the street…Yeah, see money in the street! Walking in the street, walking on the street glass [streets made of glass]…Yeah back home, that's the thinking, what we see on television. Yeah, but the first time I enter America, my brother took me to Philadelphia, I saw people begging in the street, I say no, America is different. (Focus Group #4, 08/18/2013, non-refugee)

Lincoln's narrative clearly pinpoints media (i.e., television) as the source for many of the unrealistic expectations that he harbors. Other Liberians echoed similar expectations, referencing "streets of gold" and even "gold and diamond" streets (Focus Group #2, 07/13/2013 and Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013). Musa believed "money was just everywhere, you just go and pick it up" (Focus Group #2, 07/13/2013, non-refugee). Liberians are not alone in harboring unrealistic expectations about the United States and the West more generally. Other African immigrants (Stoller 2002; Besteman 2016) as well as immigrants from other parts of the world (Fozdar 2009; Kolozsvari 2012) often think of Western countries as places of great wealth and opportunity in comparison to their own native countries. Along the same lines, some Liberians had expectations that the United States would be well developed everywhere, as Georgetta explains:

> Well I first came to the States, what was shocking [was]…when I saw the trees, because at home you hear the foreigner saying everything, you know, the streets are all paved, you know all those things, you don't see trees….No bushes and what not. (Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013, non-refugee)

She clearly associated the United States with buildings and infrastructure and was surprised to see trees, bushes, and unpaved roads, which are also common in Liberia as 44.6% of the land in the country is covered by forest and only 6% of the roads are paved (CIA World Factbook). As a city, 42% of the city of Pittsburgh is covered by trees and shrubs and more than half of the city's roads are in ill repair (Nowak and Greenfield 2012; Belanger 2014). For many Liberian immigrants, this high bar for structural development also extended to social development, in particular, to socio-economic inequality. Clara revealed once again the influence of the media on such perceptions of the United States:

> …the media had a lot to do with it because when you're back home you have like this, like nice image of America like there is no homeless people. The street is not dirty, there is no…child hunger no like things like that you know. But when you come here it's definitely more prevalent here than anywhere else…Just the street…like trash being on the street, like homeless people on the street…I did not expect to see that (Focus Group #5, 09/01/2013, refugee)

Perceptions of the United States as uniformly developed and lacking in social problems are another pre-migration expectation that does not match reality. Similar "tall tales" also circulate in the Caribbean as well, where the United States is seen as a utopia that could solve all of an immigrant's problems (Baptiste et al. 1997: 349). High expectations that are unrealized in this regard can lead to a sense of disappointment for immigrants.

"Everything Was Going to Be Like…Bread and Butter": Expectations of Ease and Opportunity

Another common theme in pre-migration expectations for Liberian immigrants was that of an easier life and work situation in America, along with plentiful opportunities for advancement. Alberta captured this sentiment with her statement: "I thought that everything was just going to be like, you know, bread and butter or whatever, there's going to be no struggle, you know, everything was just going to be like easy and smooth but it's not really like that. You have to work for everything…" (Focus Group #2, 07/13/2013, refugee). The emphasis on an unexpected culture of excessive work was very prevalent for a number of participants.

Expectations of an easier life can be related to perceptions of the United States as a country of great wealth. In a similar way, participants also revealed that they expected there to be better job opportunities, and thus social mobility, as shown by William: "When I came here I seen people that came…5, 6 years before I came and I expected them to be doing better here but when I came it was all messed up." (Focus Group #5, 09/01/2013, refugee). As a rustbelt city formerly known for steel production, Pittsburgh went through a period of sudden deindustrialization in the 1980s and has been transformed from a manufacturing economy to one with diversified strengths in education, health care, finance, energy, and information technology (Bobkoff 2010). As this shift to a knowledge economy has occurred, however, the labor market in the region has bifurcated into higher paid "knowledge" jobs and low-wage service jobs. In the Liberian community in Pittsburgh, especially for the more recent arrivals, many

people have found work in the low-wage direct care sector—as home health or nursing aides, or providing care or supervision for elderly or mentally challenged patients (Covington-Ward 2017). However, these are not typically the occupations one envisions when thinking of the American Dream, especially because of the low pay. Somali and Ethiopian refugees in Toronto, Canada also expressed similar expectations of "unhindered access to well-paid jobs, financial security, and abundant opportunities for self-improvement" (Danso 2002, 6). When these employment expectations do not meet the realities, it may lead to problems with adjustment not just socially but also economically.

"America Doesn't Learn About Other Countries": Expectations of Greater Knowledge About Africa

Another recurring theme across the focus groups was that participants expected Americans to know a lot more about Africa and Africans. Many people were very surprised by the ignorance of both Black and White Americans about Africa more generally, and Liberia in particular. Jusu made a comparison between the United States and Liberia regarding education about other nations: "Our country learns about America but America doesn't learn about other countries, we learn American history…and everybody else that come is the foreign people that taking our jobs" (Focus Group #2, 07/13/2013, refugee). Here, Jusu suggests that not only are Americans lacking in knowledge about the rest of the world, but also that this lack of knowledge leads to anti-immigrant attitudes. Blamah lamented Americans' lack of geographical knowledge in telling the group about an encounter in a store where he worked:

> This guy came to me, you have an accent, where are you from? I said but you have an accent too, where are you from? He said oh well I'm from here…I said I'm from Liberia, I said have you ever heard that word before, he said well Nigeria, I said no no no, Liberia. He said, is that Germany? I said no…That is West Africa; he said is that near Egypt? I said no no no. Egypt is in the North! People just stood there, just looking at the both of us like two fools. I was trying to educate him (Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013, refugee)

Other participants focused on negative stereotypes that Americans have about Africans specifically. Robert discussed the ignorance of some of his African-American classmates in his community college:

> …I had a classmate, Black. Most of them don't know anything about Africa. They don't know what's going on…They think…Africa is a jungle. Because of what they see on TV, until they can read or do some research about Africa, then some of them get the understanding of what it is… (Focus Group #5, 09/01/2013, refugee)

Georgetta recounted the ignorance she encountered in the 1960s while living in Indiana:

When I first came I had whites and blacks who I thought was kind of, they didn't know anything about Africa… So I was invited to…some organization…and the people…these people say they were educated, what kind of questions they were asking me? Well, where do you live? Do you have cars in Liberia? Do you live in a hut? I say, I live in a house. Well, don't you live in a tree? So I said well do you? (Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013, non-refugee)

Problematic stereotypes and misconceptions about Africa are not limited to Pittsburgh or even Indiana. In fact, dealing with stereotypes and misinformation is one of the primary issues that African immigrants, regardless of origin and visa type, face in their everyday interactions with Americans of all races (Moore 2013; Okonofua 2013).

Post-Migration Challenges

When asked about difficulties in adjusting to life in the United States and in Pittsburgh, there were a number of issues mentioned in all five or at least four of the focus groups. These include communication issues, negative interactions with others (including racism and incidents colored by negative stereotypes about Africans), cultural differences and difficulty fitting in, problems finding and adjusting to jobs, and high expectations from home. Other themes in initial social adjustment to the United States mentioned less frequently include adjusting to the weather (winter and snow), a lack of African stores, immigration problems/enforcement, paying bills, homesickness, boredom, transportation issues, difficulties continuing education, feelings of guilt, difficulty making friends, and problems with law enforcement. The rest of the article will focus on issues that received extensive discussion across groups. The first such issue is communication problems.

"I Don't Understand What You're Saying!": Accents and Communication Issues

Although Liberia is an Anglophone country, participants in all five of the focus groups discussed the difficulties they had with people in the United States being unable to understand their accents. Participants mentioned having to repeat themselves constantly and noted that their accents seemed to be a major impediment in communicating with Americans of all races. Rose was particularly frustrated by the inability of most Americans she encountered to realize they too had accents: "…they say you talk with an accent, I say well, you talk with an accent too. You don't hear yourself and I don't hear myself so…I have an accent to you and you have an accent to me! Then they say well I don't have an accent…" (Focus Group #3, 8/17/2013, non-refugee). What Rose seems to be implying here is if Americans understood that everyone has accents, perhaps they would be more understanding and tolerant of people with accents differing from their own.

Within the many discussions of language adjustment issues across the focus groups, two particular sub-themes emerged. The first is having communication issues in school. For my participants, "school" included both high school and college level classes. In these contexts, especially for participants who attended high school in the United

States, communication issues were a significant problem in their everyday lives, as Mohammed demonstrates: "Like when I went to high school, I can understand what the teacher was saying or whatever but when I try to speak it seems like I was speaking a different language…And it bothered me that somebody had to tell me to repeat stuff over and over and over" (Focus Group #5, 09/01/2013, refugee). Several of the participants expressed that even though they spoke English, they had to take ESL classes in high school because it was so hard for people at their schools, including the teachers, to understand them.

A second sub-theme to emerge from the discussions of communication issues was Americans assuming that Liberian immigrants were intellectually inferior because of their accents. This occurred both inside and outside of school settings. Ciatta described the difficulties she had in high school: "When I came here I started in high school. So, it was actually about trying to get them to understand me…it sucks when someone makes you feel stupid and you try to make them understand you all the time and they just keep acting like they don't understand nothing that you saying" (Focus Group #2, 07/13/2013, non-refugee). Ruth, yet another Liberian who attended high school in Pittsburgh, expressed how she was treated differently once people realized she was in ESL classes: "I think with ESL, having been a ESL student, soon you tell people you're English is a second language, they look at you different. It's like they want to talk to you in like a slower level. Do you understand what I'm saying, are you used to this? It's like listen, I understand what you're saying, don't talk to me like that. So it kind of like makes you feel inferior in ESL…" (Focus Group #5, 09/01/2013, refugee).

While 7.4% of the population of the city of Pittsburgh was foreign-born in 2010, only 3.1% of the population of the Pittsburgh metropolitan area was foreign born, with 74.5% of them living in the suburbs rather than the city (Wilson and Singer 2011). As a result, native-born people in the region are not as exposed to different accents as would be native-born populations in gateway cities like New York City, where the foreign-born population is much higher (28.8%, respectively) (Wilson and Singer 2011).

Having accents perceived by others as foreign can impact interpersonal relations and perceptions of stigma for immigrants (Gluszek and Dovidio 2010). Existing research also shows that native accents are a type of embodied cultural capital that even well-educated African immigrants lack, which can directly affect their employment opportunities (Creese and Wiebe 2012), further impeding their successful integration into society.

"You Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place": High Expectations from Back Home

Another common theme discussed in four out of the five focus groups was dealing with the pressure of high expectations from family and friends back home in Liberia and those displaced in other neighboring African countries. Whether immigrant or refugee, regardless of occupation, Liberians living in the United States were expected to send remittances back home, as Jacob explained:

One of the challenges too that you face once you come into America is that high expectations people back home have for you, expecting you to be the breadwinner, and then you stuck between a rock and a hard place, because at the same time you want to send money back home, but then you have to take care of all these bills and all that stuff, so you make promises you can't fulfill. (Focus Group #2, 07/13/2013, non-refugee)

Jacob highlights the double obligation of meeting extensive financial pressures here while simultaneously providing financially for family and friends in Africa. Georgetta provides greater detail about the types of monetary obligations she faced:

I'm supporting, one of my sister's grandchild died and she left two kids…my niece, she calls me, so I'm paying tuition for them…she said you got to pay for their seat, their chairs that they sit on, they got to pay for that. So I send money for that too. Then, you know I have a nephew in Ghana, that I pay his tuition. He's calling me all the time… (Focus Group #3, 8/17/2013, non-refugee)

The pressure to send money, which is partially influenced by the stereotypes of easily gained money in the United States, often pushes Liberian and other African immigrants to take multiple jobs and/or work extensive overtime hours to make sending these remittances possible (Covington-Ward 2016). Moses, for example, worked at multiple jobs during his first year in the United States in order to send remittances home: "I was working like 4 or 5 jobs…I do the job, get the money…and I send it" (Focus Group #1, 10/30/ 2011, refugee). There can be negative consequences for such overwork, however, in regards to physical and mental health and overall well-being (Yoo et al. 2014).

In addition to the constant demands for money (which callers from Liberia often refer to as "small thing," as in "send me small thing"), those sending the money cannot be completely assured the money that they send is actually being used for the intended purpose. Requests for funds for tuition, housing, hospital procedures, business start-up funds, and other worthy and necessary causes may actually be going towards buying clothes, entertainment, or other frivolous ends. Wilhemina expressed such frustrations:

They will tell you say, oh I'm in the hospital, what am I supposed to do, oh I in the hospital, I need blood. And you know you have to send so much money… Can you send me the money…cause I want to start the business…And you need to send three hundred…I send it but no business started, you know… (Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013, non-refugee)

The pressure to send remittances back to countries of origin happens for many immigrants. According to a recent World Bank report, however, for Liberia in particular, remittances constituted an estimated 26.1% of the country's GDP in 2014 (World Bank Remittance Data Inflows, October 2015). Thus, Liberian immigrants in the United States may be shouldering much of the responsibility for not only taking care of relatives and friends but also supporting the economy of Liberia more generally.

"I Have to Work, Work, Work, Work": Jobs and American Work Culture

Another issue mentioned in most of the focus groups as a significant challenge post-migration is finding a job. Lincoln, a more recent arrival, describes his difficulty in finding work:

> When I came newly, yeah, when I just entered in the US, yeah to get a job was very difficult. Yeah, because no one wants to show your way out. Ask African, they say they not hiring. Yeah so while going…to downtown you know a white dude in the bus, so I make friends with him, he the one show me the way out. (Focus Group #4, 08/18/2013, non-refugee)

Here, he describes his search for employment and the role of a stranger in helping him to find a job, rather than receiving assistance from his co-ethnic group. Existing literature on immigrant employment (Waters 1999; Waldinger and Lichter 2003) mainly focuses on the significance of ethnic social networks, yet Lincoln's experience suggests attention needs to also be paid to alternate methods of securing employment for African immigrants.

Another work-related issue focus group participants discussed was the nature and expectations of employment in the United States. Namely, that excessive hard work seems to be the norm in the United States, while this is not necessarily the case back in Liberia. Decontee explains being surprised by the 8-hour work day:

> I didn't know that you had to work eight hours job…and when you go, they make sure you work that eight hours. Not like you going to say I'm going for eight hours job and just do maybe do three hours and leave. You have to make sure and work that eight hours. (Focus Group #2, 07/13/2013, refugee)

Here, it is clear that Decontee had to adjust to different expectations in American work culture, where working an 8-hour workday is expected and monitored (through check ins and punching the clock for instance), while in Liberia the actual amount of time worked in a day is much shorter. David compared his first trip to the United States as a student funded by Liberia's government to his most recent working conditions:

> Yeah, for me I came to America 1985 on a Military study, and when I came, I came through the government so things were just ok for me every day. It's not like now that I have to get up 5 o'clock in the morning to go somewhere. The time I came before, I got paid without work, I only go to school to make my grade and I get my pay. But now I have to get up 5 o'clock in the morning. You know, I have no time home, with my children, I don't have much time with my children. I have to work, work, work, work… (Focus Group #4, 08/18/2013, refugee)

The culture of excessive work defining many workplaces in the United States has moral and religious roots and expanded during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Rodgers 2014). Adjusting to American work culture has also been an issue for other African immigrants, such as Somali migrants in Lewiston, Maine who often experience difficulty with American expectations of timeliness and general

accountability (Bates College Department of Anthropology 2008). Learning these new expectations about work culture and quickly adjusting one's habits and behavior are one aspect of socio-cultural adjustment for Liberian immigrants to the United States with significant consequences, as unemployment will be the result if changes are not made.

"They Don't Recognize Your Humanity": Fitting In, Cultural Differences, and Interactions with Americans

Another theme appearing across several focus groups was participants having the expectation of having more genuine interactions with Americans. By this, focus group participants honed in on everyday interactions, such as greetings. Georgetta explained:

> I had problems with people…not speaking. When I came first, people just stared at me….I think that's rude…If I speak to you, all you got to do is say hello and keep going. Because at home we say that, in Bassa, my language, if you speak to somebody, and they don't speak then that means they don't recognize your humanity…That really bothered me when I first came. (Focus Group #3, 08/17/2013, non-refugee).

Yet, cultural differences could have even larger consequences, as they could even impact one's employability, as Edward explains:

> In my culture, when we first came here, when you go out to look for job, the employer, the HR personnel will look in your face. Usually when talking to an older person, you don't look in their face, you look down…So we were brought up in that kind of culture…it's a negative effect…when looking for employment… and then here, what I do know, is that if you are talking to an employer and you don't look in their face…they will say what you are saying is not true… (Focus Group #1, 10/30/2011, refugee)

Here, Edward highlighted the impact cultural differences can have on employment and the hiring process in particular. Lack of knowledge of American cultural norms in interviewing and workplace interactions can leave some Liberian immigrants at a disadvantage that can negatively impact their access to employment.

"The Racism Here is Not Easy": Racism and African Origin Prejudice

Racism was a topic that came up in every focus group. In particular, focus group participants were struck by the importance of race and perceptions of race in everyday life, as captured by Ruth's statement:

> …when you're back home you don't notice like race issues. But when you come here, you're like ok, maybe I am Black, like your Blackness actually like sticks out…but back home we don't count that. Oh, I'm Black, I mean you are Black, but we don't focus on the race part of it. But America definitely reminds you that you're black when you come here. (Focus Group #5, 09/01/2013)

Ruth juxtaposes here the importance of race in the United States with its lack of importance in Liberia in comparison.

Focus group participants shared many stories of their encounters with racism in Pittsburgh. One example can be seen in Winston's story of racial profiling by police after he moved to Pittsburgh after living in another state:

> I didn't realize the racism, until I came down to Pittsburgh…So some of my friends told me say…the racism here is not easy. We had started seeing the cops them here harassing my friends them, taking them to jail for no reason. So one day…I was walking down the street…[with]…one of my friends so the… policeman came and stop. He said, we…scaring the kids, walking around the street. So I was like we just walking down the street going to 7/11. He said you guys walking down the street like this, the kids see y'all, they get afraid…Ok, how about the other person that sitting right there?…do you see all the kids or just us?… It's because we black? So as soon as I said because we black he said, if you think you black then you black. Yeah so especially around this…area, the racism you see it clear, it's too much. (Focus Group #5, 09/01/2013, refugee)

Both Mary and Winston's comments support similar research with other Black immigrants who were also dismayed and unprepared for their encounters with racism in the United States. Sociologist Mary Waters, in her oft-cited work on Black West Indian immigrants to New York City, demonstrates that Black immigrants are often not as prepared for interpersonal racism in both its more overt and subtle forms, from "the overarching concern with race in every encounter, the constant role race plays in everyday life, and the subtle experiences that are tinged with racial suspicions and overtones" (1999, 153).

Another theme emerging in the focus group discussions relating to interpersonal interactions was African origin prejudice. While participants discussed experiencing prejudice based on being African from Americans of all races, overall they were especially bothered by some of the negative interactions they had with African-Americans. Stanley summarized his own experiences with African-Americans by focusing on their ignorance about Africa:

> And, you know, the African-American, themselves that on the same level as me, when I try to…find something that I can identify with you know, the discussion that we have you know, they were just miles, miles apart. You know, they would ask me about things that I don't expect them to ask of Africa and you know I'm not blaming them for that because they don't travel a lot so they think Africa just a big jungle…they always try to put Africa down. (Focus Group #2, 7/13/2013, non-refugee)

Stanley's efforts to connect with African-Americans are troubled by their lack of knowledge about Africa and the many stereotypes they have about the continent and its peoples. It is clear that he expected they would know a lot more about Africa and Africans. These unexpected social interactions can have a negative impact on how Liberian immigrants view African-Americans more generally.

Conclusion

This article illuminates the discordance between pre-migration expectations of the United States and actual post-migration challenges for a sample of Liberian immigrants and refugees in the Greater Pittsburgh area, making contributions to existing literature on pre-migration expectations, segmented assimilation, and the refugee/immigrant distinction. First, by demonstrating that Liberian immigrants, like immigrants coming from other countries in the global South, often harbor unrealistic expectations of the United States, the findings support similar results emerging from other studies of pre-migration expectations. Second, Liberian immigrants face many of the same challenges that earlier European immigrants to the city of Pittsburgh encountered in the early twentieth century, such as communication barriers and cultural differences. However, problems with racism and people harboring negative stereotypes provide a significant difference, as Liberian immigrants cannot change their skin color, while European immigrants of the previous century did not face color-based discrimination. The salience of racism in the experiences of Liberian immigrants supports segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993), where color-based racism is a major factor impeding the successful integration of non-White immigrants in general, and Black immigrants in particular. While segmented assimilation theory originally was applied to the immigrant second generation, it is also applicable here, such as when a focus group participant was racially profiled by local police. Repeated encounters like these can have detrimental consequences that can lead to downward assimilation and limited social mobility. Third, by examining pre-migration expectations and post-migration realities for both refugees and non-refugees, I show that irrespective of initial visa type, Liberian immigrants share many of the same misconceptions and challenges that can negatively impact their successful integration into American society. Health care and social service providers, educators, and other personnel assisting immigrants should be aware of these difficulties and ensure that available services are not only targeted for refugees. One suggestion for future research is to explore similarities and differences in mental health outcomes according to initial visa type for Liberian immigrants in the United States. Such research would enable us to make inferences about whether non-refugee immigrants need to be explicitly included in existing private and state funded programs focused on refugee health, well-being, and social integration.

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