Perceptions of sub-Saharan African International Students in United States: Mental Health Concerns and Help-Seeking Behavior

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Perceptions of sub-Saharan African International Students in United States: Mental Health Concerns and Help-Seeking Behavior

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education

By Adekemi Ekanoye

B.A. Olabisi Onabanjo University, 2005
M.A. Southern University and A&M College, 2017

May 2023
DEDICATION
This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and husband, who both supported me since the beginning of this professional journey. Their love, compassion, encouragement, prayers, sacrifices, and hard work made a huge impart in my life. The demonstrated and instilled values helped shape who I am today. I am solely grateful to have them in my life and pray the Lord continue to keep them both.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My profound gratitude goes to the Almighty God for the strength to carry out this study despite obstacles and detours along the way. My faith in God has kept me since the beginning of my professional journey, framed my identity, and given me the hope and strength to go-on. All that I am today is grounded on the backing of God in my life. The scriptures remind me always that whatever I am is because of the grace and favor of God poured out upon me.

The proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child”, can relate to the next set of people I would like to acknowledge for the different roles played helping me get to this stage. My perspective is that it also takes a “whole village” to get through a doctoral program. The help, commitment, and support of so many people is necessary for anyone to complete such a prestigious endeavor. To help make my dream of earning a doctorate a reality, the people listed below are the “village” that helped carry me through.

First and foremost, appreciation goes to my dissertation committee, Dr. Belser, Dr. Wade, and Dr. Panos. I definitely appreciate your time, guidance, and encouragement that each of you have offered me throughout my dissertation process. Your timely feedback and insightful input is duly acknowledged. I could not have accomplished this task without you. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with you all and the process was made more than a research study with your presence. Furthermore, I would like to appreciate all the faculty in the Counselor Education Program for each unique role played towards helping me grow personally and professionally. In and out of the classroom, you have provided guidance, knowledge and wisdom.

I would like to acknowledge my professors at the Counseling Program at Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge. The contributions that each of you provided throughout my master’s program helped prepare me for doctoral program. I will always remember the support, genuineness, and passion for the profession displayed during each class.
A profound appreciation goes to all the participants who were willing to participate in this study and share their stories and challenges with me. Thank you for your time and openness, without you, this study would not have been possible.

I would like to recognize my doctoral colleagues and friends who were wonderful cheerleaders and listening ears throughout this process. Thank you for always supporting and encouraging me, your presence made a huge impact during this phase of my life. Our time together was much needed and helped to keep me balanced through the doctoral program.

A heartfelt thanks goes to my wonderful and amazing husband, Dr. Femi Ekanoye. I would not have made it through the change in career path without your never-ending support and love. I appreciate your prayers, words of encouragement, presence and keeping our household running while I was in New Orleans. Thank you for the many sacrifices you have made in helping my dream become a reality. Thank you for being my listening ear, and for keeping me sane and loving me through it all. Love you so much and thankful that you are my husband!

Additionally, I would also like to acknowledge my darling children, Nifemi, Ifeoluwa and Jotham. Thank you for your utmost understanding and support, this educational journey would not have been possible without it.

I am thankful to my parents for instilling the value of education in me and for providing the needed support to achieve my dreams. Without the foundation and help you provided, I would not be where I am today. My family overall has been a great inspiration. You have all been a great support system and I could not ask for better. I am incredibly grateful for your unfailing love.
Last, but certainly not least, I owe much appreciation to my church family, Church of the Nations at University Baptist Church, Baton Rouge. I truly appreciate all the support and encouragement throughout this process.
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Abstract

International students face a lot of challenges while studying abroad, with or without the supportive system that their families provide. Sub-Saharan Africa international students consists of 3.7 percent of the population, which indicates a 2.1 percent increase prior to previous year. While in the host country, this population is saddled with the self-responsibilities of maintaining their values, cultural identities, personality, language ability, self-perceptions, and attitudes. African international students adopt a masking behavior in the form of adaptive strategies that could hide the mental health concerns experienced.

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the untold lived experiences of sub-Saharan African international students as they face various challenges and coping strategies, while adjusting to the cultural differences experienced in America. An intensive semi-structured interview method was adopted to gather data from the eight participants, and data was analyzed using grounded theory. The conceptual framework that was integrated to guide the study was the Health Belief Model.

The study shed light into perceptions about mental health and help-seeking behavior described by the participants. The five themes that emerged were: (a) ethnic group support; (b) psychological struggles; (c) thoughts about services; (d) counselor cultural responsiveness and humility; and (e) counseling process mistrust. The themes suggest that the participants experienced transitional challenges adjusting to the United States; and opting for counseling service was not a preferred help-seeking decision due to gaps in information. The outcome translates into different ways that help can be channeled to this population, whilst providing insights into culturally appropriate methods that the university counseling center can integrate to facilitate early services. Culture affects how mental health is viewed; an approach that tends
towards cultural lens needs to be applied when providing services to international students for them to complete the counseling process.

**Keywords:** mental health, transitional challenges, sub-Saharan African students, international students
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the hike in globalization, international students view the United States as the top destination for study due to the quality of higher education and the value that it offers the international labor market, as well as access to job opportunities after graduation (Chao et al., 2019; Nicholls, 2018). As of 2019 and 2020 academic years, roughly 1.1 million international students were enrolled in various United States institutions (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020). Although this indicated a slight reduction in the number of students that enrolled in the previous year, the growth has remained consistent for almost 10 consecutive years. The slight decrease in number may be attributed to (a) the rise in cost of higher education in the United States, (b) delays and denial of study visas, and (c) fresh study opportunities in other countries (Migration Information Source, 2021).

Over the past decade, the number of international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States has steadily increased to date with global recruitments surpassing 1 million in the 2018-2019 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2019). Data from the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA), also known as Association of International Educators, shows the categorization of international students who enrolled between the 2019-2020 school year in the United States. This data provided useful information in terms of population size, geographic distribution, top institutions, countries of origin, levels and fields of study, economic impact, and transition into the U.S. labor market. Despite a slight decline, this group still represents 5.5% of all students in U.S. higher education (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020).
Among competing countries for the international students, the United States has attracted more than Australia, England and Canada. The presence of this student population creates global diversity within the colleges and universities. Based on geographical distributions and leading institutions, one in three international students studied in California, New York, or Texas. Other states to which international students gravitated in large numbers were Massachusetts, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. It is important to note that international students were more evenly spread out cross-country than the overall U.S. foreign-born population; a typical example would be the State of California which plays host to approximately 15% of international students with about 24% of the total number of immigrants residing in the state (Migration Information Source, 2021; Student and Exchange Visitor Information System [SEVIS], 2020).

The United States immigration law refers to international students as non-immigrants. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2019, para 1), non-immigrants are foreign nationals granted temporary admission into the United States. International students fall within the non-immigrant classes of admission. They are referred to as foreign students coming into the U.S., solely for the purpose of educational advancement.

**Overview of the Study**

The United States supports international education and welcomes foreign students and exchange visitors. Students and exchange visitors initially must be accepted by their schools or program sponsors before applying for visas. There are three primary student visa types in the United States:

- F-1 Student Visa: for study at an accredited U.S. college or university or to study English at an English language institute. The spouses and children of F1 student visa holders are issued F2 as dependents.
- J-1 Exchange Visa: for participation in an exchange program, including high school and university study. The spouses and children of J1 student visa holders are issued J2 as dependents.
- M-1 Student Visa: for non-academic or vocational study or training in the United States. The spouses and children of M1 student visa holders are issued M2 as dependents (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], n.d).

The United States Department of Homeland Security requires an international student to have a valid visa upon admission into the country at the port of entry. The F1 and M1 students are issued a Form I-20 document, while the J1 students are issued DS2019. These are the legal documents that are issued by institutions of higher learning, which in turn allow the international students to maintain their legal status in the United States, even when their visa expires during studies (Education USA, n.d).

The United States institution, designated to issue Form I-20 and DS2019 documentation for student visas, must be certified by the Department of Homeland Security SEVP (Student and Exchange Visitor Program) or designated by the Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The United States Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security are two separate U.S agencies which manage an international student’s arrival and status while studying in the United States. The United States Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security are responsible for the initial visa application process and issuance. After the student arrives in the United States, the United States Department of Homeland Security then acts as the responsible agency granting entry into the country, as well as enforcing regulations that affect the international student pertaining to immigration once they are in the United States (Education USA, n.d).
According to the Open Doors Report (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020), over one million international students were enrolled in American institutions of higher learning during the 2019–2020 academic year; this number reflected a 1.8 percent decline from the 2018-2019 academic year. Among the top 10 places of origin, a large portion of this population come from China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada. Nonetheless, international students from sub-Saharan Africa continually experience an increase in enrollment each year.

U. S. colleges and universities hosted 41,697 international students from sub-Saharan Africa during the same academic year (Institute for International Education, 2020). Relative to other international student populations in the United States, these constitute 3.9 percent of the total population. This number indicates a 3.5 percent increase prior to the previous year (Institute for International Education, 2020), while international students from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya comprised the three highest totals during the 2019 -2020 academic year (Open Doors Fast Facts, 2020). Refer to Table 1 for the total number of sub-Saharan international students by top place of origin and percent of change during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years.

**Table 1**

*Enrollment Trends for Sub-Saharan Africa International Students (Top Five Exporters)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>2018-2019 Academic Year</th>
<th>2019-2020 Academic Year</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>13,423</td>
<td>13,762</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>3,661</td>
<td>4,221</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>3,451</td>
<td>3,710</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>2,061</td>
<td>2,356</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>2,042</td>
<td>2,224</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from the Institute for International Education Open Doors fact sheet, 2019*
Studying in the U.S is a rewarding experience with career opportunities promoting a better lifestyle (Olson, & Banjong, 2016). However, that process of adjusting into the new environment is influenced by academic, sociocultural, and psychological challenges (Gebhard, 2012; Park et al., 2017). This stressor sometimes stems from experiences of culture shock involving (a) confusion about role expectations, (b) loss of social support, (c) alienation, (d) discrimination, (e) language barriers, and (f) anxiety about fitting into the new culture (Mahmood, & Beach, 2018; Rice et al., 2012; Mori, 2000; Oberg, 1960; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). The term “shock” is a description of the discomfort that the new students experience when trying to adjust to a new way of life (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Ineson et al., 2006; Oberg, 1960). Another indicator of the cultural differences experienced has been described as a collective phenomenon known as “acculturation stress”, which triggers the development of a variety of physical, social, and psychological problems (Constantine et al., 2004; Hansen et al., 2018; Berry, 1997; Onabule & Boes, 2013). Acculturation is defined as changes that result from group encounters (Berry, 1997), ranging from psychological, socio-cultural, and economic adjustments which relate to adaptation in a new environment” (p. 19).

International student acculturation experiences make campus counseling an essential service. Despite empirical studies indicating that international students experience significantly more adjustment challenges than domestic students (Brown et al. 2008; Gebhard, 2012), the reluctance to use counseling services is found to be less than that of domestic students (Onabule et al., 2013). When international students do use these services, they are more likely to terminate before the counseling relationship has had an opportunity to impact change (Hyun et al., 2007; Hwang et al., 2014). These challenges range from academic issues to cultural differences and
from personal to logistical matters (Chapdelaine et al., 2004; Constantine et al., 2004; Prieto-Welch, 2016; Poyrazli, 2015).

Treatment fearfulness is defined as psychological fears and concerns emanating from a subjective state of apprehension which in turn arises from aversive expectations surrounding the seeking and consuming of mental health services. Fearfulness is identified as one of the factors that influence an individual’s tendency to seek or avoid mental health treatment (Deane & Chamberlain, 2004). In fact, the international student’s continent of origin (such as Western) is more likely to seek counseling services than an international student of non-Western origins (Onabule et al., 2013).

Further, the international student who had experienced prior contacts with mental health treatments increased the likelihood of seeking counseling services (Dadfar & Friedlander, 1982). Nevertheless, with the unique challenges associated with cross-cultural transition, unaddressed mental health concerns of this population might result in psychological distress associated with disability which presents the threat of lower academic achievement (Mori, 2000; Yakushko et al., 2008; Bastien et al., 2018; Komiya et al., 2001). Also, a continued demand for higher education in American universities by African nationals brings a specific focus to the experiences of African students. The African students may incorporate a unique challenge based on a worldview, together with cultural value differences (Essandoh, 1995). The attitudes and negative perceptions, such as stigma, shame, and confidentiality issues towards seeking psychological help (Vogel et al., 2007) might hinder help-seeking decisions (Omotosho, 2018).

Counselors working in the campus counseling centers have a major role in helping the student population cope with the transition from their home country and overcoming acculturation stress (Abarbanel, 2009; Brown et al., 2008; Chapdelaine et al., 2004; Ineson et al.
The counseling styles and delivery methods implemented should be adapted to accommodate the needs of international students, such as handling social life stressors, and academic studies (Pantelidou & Craig, 2006; Hyun et al., 2007).

**Problem Statement**

As the number of international students in post-secondary education institutions in Canada and the United States continues to increase substantially, much scholarly attention is being paid to the wide variety of transitional challenges that the international student face (de Araujo, 2011; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Xu, 2015; Prieto-Welch, 2016; Hegarty, 2014; García et al., 2019; Glass et al., 2015). Despite the growing number of international students, many of these scholarly literatures focus on the collective challenges and coping strategies adopted by this population in the process of transitioning into the host country (Gebhard, 2012; Wu et al., 2015; Mahmood, et al., 2018; Sherry et al., 2010; Park et al., 2017; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Although there are significant number of studies on international students, there exists a gap in empirical literature that specifically explores the acculturation stress of sub-Saharan African international students’ adjustment in the United States (Monteiro, 2015; Skeen et al., 2010; Constantine et al., 2004; Constantine et al., 2005). The mental and emotional challenges experienced in adapting to a new culture, sometimes pose significant stressors, such as, language barriers, loneliness, homesickness, and sense of isolation.

To this end, this study explored the relatively untold cross-cultural transition experiences of sub-Saharan African international students resulting in stress that could trigger the onset of serious mental health concerns and help-seeking behavior adopted by this population in America. Overall, the study outcome could possibly enhance the implementation and delivery of culturally
relevant and appropriate counseling services to these populations (Prieto-Welch, 2016; Essandoh, 1995).

**Purpose of Study**

Regarding international student cultural adjustment challenges in the host country, different contributing factors were specified, depending on the nature and degree of such experience. Some of the challenges relate to (a) cultural and language barriers, (b) academic stress, (c) financial stressors, (d) problems in daily life tasks, (e) lack of social connectedness, and (f) role conflicts (Wu et al., 2015; Awuor, 2021; Xu, 2015). Culture shock and learning shock become a reality to the international student, which in turn may spiral into mental health problems. This study seek to examine the transitional challenges faced specifically by sub-Saharan African international students and to determine approaches culturally relevant and in line with an underlying theoretical basis (Pruitt, 1978). Exploring and gaining insight into the lived experiences of these students will help provide counselors with culture-centered information about working with this population. The findings will also add to the body of literature, seeing that few documentations are available concerning the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of international students from African nationals as they experience challenges adjusting to the American society.

**Significance of the Study**

With this study, the author’s aim addresses a gap in the literature concerning sub-Saharan African international students. Although scholarly literature addresses transitional challenges of international students, the diversity among this population and their unique challenges as they transition into the United States to study is found to be limited (Prieto-Welch, 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Constantine et al., 2004; Constantine et al., 2005). An increase in the number of
sub-Saharan African students in United States universities exasperates the need for concern (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020).

This study seeks to highlight the importance of cultural competence while working with this population. International students present themselves for counseling at lower rates than American-born students and are more likely not to return after the first session. Some studies show utilization rates as low as 2%, and no-show rates of over 35% after the first visit. It is important to be culturally sensitive and attuned to the student’s reasons for coming in while gathering as much clinically relevant information as possible (Hwang et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2007; Nilsson et al., 2004; Onabule et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the growing demand for counseling among students can be attributed to more people needing mental health treatment (Abram, 2020; Prieto-Welch, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to explore the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of international students from the continent of Africa. My conception is that counselors working with this population can provide the necessary help required to manage stressors experienced in the process of transitioning. Moreover, researchers have highlighted that cultural adjustment difficulties can result in mental health challenges in a reflection of psychological distress syndromes such as depression (Constantine et al., 2004).

**Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is an interpretative approach, providing understanding of the topic. Jabareen (2009), defines conceptual framework “as a network, or “a plane,” of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena” (p. 51). On this ground, application of the Health Belief Model (HBM) as a conceptual framework would be useful toward understanding the decision adopted by sub-Saharan African
international students to either seek counseling in the face of cross-cultural transitioning stress. Employing the HBM constructs might postulate that sub-Saharan African international students experiencing acculturative stress are likely to engage mental health care if they (a) perceive selves as being susceptible to mental health problems; (b) perceive the seriousness or consequence of the mental health problem toward inhibiting personal daily functioning; (c) believe that accessing mental health services would be beneficial in controlling or coping with the severity of the symptoms; (d) and perceive that barriers or costs associated with engaging in treatment (such as time, cultural difference, competence, discomfort, etc.) would be surpassed by the benefits (Henshaw et. al., 2009; Rosenstock, 2005; Smith, 2009).

In addition to the four constructs mentioned above, some researchers suggest that (a) exposure to triggers can prompt actions (i.e., cues to action); (b) personal belief or confidence in ability to perform actions which would result in desired outcome (i.e., self-efficacy); (c) psychological factors (e.g., distress, shame) might also contribute to the student’s likelihood towards engaging in help-seeking behavior (Rosenstock, 2005; Hayden, 2017; Glanz et al., 2015; Castonguay et al., 2016). Ultimately each construct will be viewed individually and relationally to conceptualize the untold experiences of sub-Saharan African international students’ mental health concerns as they transition into American society with particular interests in help-seeking behavior patterns.

Furthermore, Henshaw and Freedman-Doan (2009) suggest that “to increase mental health care utilization, efforts should focus on: (a) an increase in the clients’ understanding of the perceived severity and susceptibility, (b) a decrease in common barriers to treatment; and (c) an increase in perceived benefits of treatment” (p. 423). Answers to these basic decision-making questions could help to gather the vital information from individuals about engaging in mental
health treatment: (a) severity (When are my symptoms ‘‘bad enough’’ to seek professional help?); (b) benefits (Does professional help increase my chances of feeling better soon?); (c) barriers (Are the financial, emotional, or other costs of seeking professional help worth the possible benefits?); and (d) self-efficacy (Am I capable of making the changes necessary to improve how I feel?; Henshaw et. al., 2009). Table 2 below further explains the tenets of HBM.

**Table 2**

*The Health Belief Model: Constructs and Definitions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HBM Constructs</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived susceptibility</td>
<td>How vulnerable individuals believe they are likely to experience a health condition (e.g., mental health problem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived severity</td>
<td>Beliefs about the seriousness of developing a health condition, including the consequences (physical and social), as the condition inhibits daily functioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived benefits</td>
<td>Beliefs about the effectiveness of adopting a health behavior to reduce risk or seriousness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived costs/ barriers</td>
<td>Beliefs about possible obstacles associated with taking an action to improve health (such as logistical and emotional barriers).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cues to action</td>
<td>Strategies that activate “readiness to change”. These could be internal (e.g., personal perception of the body) or external (e.g., media publicity, discussion with others) as factors that could trigger the health behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived self-efficacy</td>
<td>Personal beliefs (confidence) regarding ability to carry out actions to produce desired outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: [Adapted from Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, (2015, p.100-103) and Rosenstock, (2005, p.6-9)].*
Overview of Methods and Research Questions

For this study, I have chosen a qualitative research design as the method of inquiry. Qualitative design helps the researcher to understand the underlying behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions that determine a phenomenon. It thus sheds light into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011; Wertz, 2011; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Taylor et al., 2015). This concept aligns with the research study, which explores participant views, experiences, and actions as they construct their social reality.

Grounded theory methods will be utilized as the research strategy for my topic. These methods employ systematic flexibility in the data collection process, data coding, and the emergent theory generation from data collection. Hague (1972) defined theory as a set of concepts with a series of relational statements integration. Development of new theory from data about a phenomenon that has been collected and analyzed is the main feature of grounded theory. New theories are developed based on the genuine explanations that emerge from new knowledge, as opposed to phenomenology, which is a philosophical study of observing people or events as they appear without any further study, explanation, or theory development (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin, & Strauss, 2014).

Taking everything into account, grounded theory involves collecting and analyzing data through use of a constant comparative data analysis method. Transcription and examination of data follows immediately after the collection of data. In grounded theory, the concept of new theory begins as new ideas are recognized by the researcher together with themes emerging from events observed or from what people stated. A review of raw data memos formed in the researcher's consciousness is then performed; hence the theory becomes grounded in the data (Astalin, 2013; Bryant, 2017).
Research Questions

The researcher developed the questions listed below to gain perspectives concerning the cross-cultural transition stressors experienced by sub-Saharan African students, some of whom might reflect adapting to a new university system, establishing an identity in an unfamiliar culture, communication, financial worries, adjustments to unfamiliar social support systems, homesickness, and loneliness. Such situations trigger mental health concerns and subsequent decisions to seek help (Komiya, & Eells, 2001; Abarbanel, 2009; Brown et al., 2008; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Ineson et al. 2006). The central research question will serve as a single, overarching question to guide the study, followed by one sub-question (Creswell, 2007). These research questions were selected meticulously to foster participant reflections.

Central Research Question: What theory explains the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African international students?

Research Sub-question:

- What are the perceived factors contributing to the transitional challenges that led to the help-seeking behavior (s) adopted in the new environment?

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses that must be clearly stated and acknowledged by the researcher. Occasionally, these limitations are out of researcher control (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). A significant limitation associated with this study would be the positionality of the researcher. I am an international graduate student of African descent and am aware of the cross-cultural challenges of adjusting to the host country. My professional knowledge and background
as well as experiential understanding have helped framed my perspectives regarding this topic and caused a formal interest towards the study.

Although awareness and knowledge of my positionality as the researcher might help to gather insights from my proposed participants, these assets could also influence data collection and interpretations (Creswell et al., 2018). Patton (2002) discussed how interviews may have an impact on the emotional state of the research participants, which could result in distorted responses, self-serving responses, and error in recall. Recognizing that my participants might feel compelled to behave or share their experiences in an uncharacteristic manner, I avoided this by analyzing data across participants, utilizing a triangulation process.

Another likely limitation would be generalizability of the research findings. The proposed sample size for the study is a fragment of the whole population of sub-Saharan African international students in the United States. The applicability of the findings might also not reflect the perceptions of international students from other parts of Africa and general international students’ population. A third limitation might reflect in the environmental context of the study. Originally, a face-to-face and online presence was considered for this study, however, an online location was selected with all the participants.

For this study, some delimitations are put into place, so that the study’s aims, and objectives may be achieved (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The first proposed delimitation is the criteria is found in selecting study sample. The rationale includes selecting international students from sub-Saharan Africa (specifically, first- and second-year graduate students) who meet the criteria for this study. Participants for the online location are required to have access to the internet, be available for the study interview process. Finally, only
sub-Saharan African international students who may have experienced cross-cultural challenges are chosen for the study.

**Assumptions of Study**

In understanding methodology used and conclusions drawn in this study, assumptions are disclosed intentionally. The research study will allow an understanding of the lived experiences of sub-Saharan Africa international students as they experience cross-cultural transition. The study will also show how these students interpret their experiences.

The second assumption is that the study will highlight a framework for counselors working with sub-Saharan Africa international students. It will help provide a link between intervention and academic success, whilst creating awareness to the importance of cultural sensitivity in counseling. A third assumption is that participants will be willing and honest to share accurate information with the researcher, based on their lived experiences. A final assumption is that sub-Saharan African international students adopt a masking behavior that prevents seeking help during psychological distress/stressors.

**Definitions of Terms**

In relation to this study, definitions are provided to major terms to represent the meaning.

*Sub-Saharan Africa international student:* In this study, these are referred to as foreign students from sub-Saharan African countries, who travel to the United States for the purpose of pursuing academic or vocational studies.

*International students:* International students are foreign nationals seeking temporary admission to the United States, for the sole purpose of pursuing a full course of academic study in a university or college (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020; Student and Exchange Visitor Information [SEVIS], 2020).
Acculturation: The concept of acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change an individual experiences as a result of contact with a new cultural environment at an individual or group level. Successful acculturation depends upon the individual and it has both positive and negative aspect (Berry et al., 1987; Hansen et al., 2018; Poyrazli et al., 2010).

Acculturative stress: The phenomenon is expressed as stressful behavior that take place during the process of adjusting to a new culture/environment/society which often results in a lowered mental health status such as physical and psychological health (Berry et al., 1987; Hansen et al., 2018; Poyrazli et al., 2010).

Culture shock: In this study, the perspective of culture shock refers to the psychological and social processes involved in the intercultural contact experienced by international students. This includes learning new culture specific skills, managing stress, coping with a new/unfamiliar environment, cultural identity changes, and intergroup relations enhancement (Ward et al., 2008).

Psychological distress: In this study, the concept of psychological distress such as homesickness, loneliness, depression, and anxiety experienced by international students is due to adjustment issues faced in the new environment (Yakushko et al., 2008; Bastien et al., 2018).

Summary
Different researchers have highlighted the challenges that an international student population faces as the individuals adjust to cross-cultural differences in the host country. The cultural heterogeneity of the international student population is marked with diverse backgrounds which reflect in nationality, race, ethnicity, cultural norms and customs, physical appearance, and linguistic background (Hanassab, 2006). The next chapter presents a review of literature that relates to the study. This is meant to give insights pertaining to the study population.
CHAPTER II

General Introduction

In many ways, international students contribute to the United States most especially in areas of economic development and contribution in helping the United States to compete innovatively (NAFSA, 2019). Zhang (2016) noted that international graduate students contribute to the enrichment of intellectual capital of U.S. universities and workforce through the vast range of skills and knowledge they bring into the host country. Along the same lines, Ward et al. (2015) explained how international students reinforce the promotion of internationalization of the United States higher education through campus diversity enrichment.

According to research, the mental health of international students has been impacted by such difficulties as language barriers, finances, adjustments to a new educational system, social customs and norms, and homesickness (Gold, 2016; Ma, 2020; Mukminin, 2019; Tang et al., 2018; Telbis et al., 2014; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Research shows that about 15% to 20% tend to experience mental health issues due to acculturative stress and acculturation-related problems (Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Berry, 2006).

Different researchers have conducted studies on international students’ acculturative stress and adjustment in the United States (Luo et al., 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Telbis et al., 2014; Xiong & Zhou, 2018) however, there has not been much research on culture centered counseling interventions in the higher institutions counseling centers.

Background on International Students Experience in United States

The United States has a long history of hosting international students who enroll to strengthen their academic and professional skills (Mclachlan & Justice, 2009; Bevis & Lucas, 2007) and currently receives the highest number of international students of any country in the
world (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020). According to the Council of Graduate Schools 2019 report, the number of graduate international students studying in American universities increased by 3 percent between Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. Similarly, the Institute of International Education’s Open Doors data indicated a 5.5 percent increase in international student enrollments from 225 countries (Institute of International Education, 2019). The year 2019 marked a consecutive upward trend in the admission cycle with over one million international students in American universities (Institute of International Education, 2019; SEVP data; Mahmood & Beach, 2018; Kawamoto et al., 2018).

The diversity within international students reveals the cultural heterogeneity of this population, distinguished by nationality, race, ethnicity, cultural norms and customs, physical appearance, and linguistic background (Hanassab, 2006). Their presence within the campuses, however, provides a mirror through which domestic students may interact with persons with differing backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives (Yan, & Pei, 2018; Andrade, 2006). International student enrollment has also added to the financial assets alongside the intercultural personality of the university environment. According to the Open Doors Report (Institute of International Education [IIE]), 2019, international students contributed $41 billion to the U.S. economy in tuition and expenditures for living expenses during the 2018-2019 academic year (Prieto-Welch, 2016; Hegarty, 2014; García et al., 2019; Glass et al., 2015).

**Sub-Saharan African International Student**

People come from various nations to study in the United States whilst learning new experiences. There has been an increase in the number of African students studying in the United States. According to a 2015 research, 1.7 million sub-Saharan Africans lived in the United States, which accounts for 4 percent of the 43.3 million immigrants in the US (Echeverria-
Estrada & Batalova, 2019). The change in the United States visa rule represents a large contributory factor to this surge, together with the vast opportunities that abound in a free society to travel, pursue realizable dreams, and live in the United States for various reasons, which included attending universities. Research also shows that many people of African descent in the U.S. have a high education attainment, compared to foreign and native-born populations. The study conducted by Echeverria-Estrada and Batalova (2019) showed that Nigerians comprised 57 percent bachelor’s degree holders or higher, followed by Kenyans at 44 percent and Ghanaians at 40 percent. Overall, students from African nations outperform total foreign-born populations (29%) and US-born populations (31%) for bachelor’s degree holders 25 years and older (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2019).

Sub-Saharan African students have been of immense contribution to the United States history by making indelible marks by means of their various migration tales (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012). The sub-Saharan African population in the United States comprised of individuals who voluntarily seek asylum as refugees or who seek education/economic opportunity. Schulmann (2017) noted that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute of Statistics, reports “from 2006 to 2014, the number of African students pursuing postsecondary degrees abroad grew 24 percent, rising from 343,370 to 427,311” (p. 1). It is notable that the increase in number of sub-Saharan African students has a direct implication on higher education learning in the United States (Chien & Kot, 2012).

**International Students’ Transitional Challenges**

International students are subject to an array of challenges in their new environment ranging from social interaction with host nationals, understanding of the culture and participation, fluency in spoken language, difficulty in familiarizing with the academic system,
as well as depression, and loneliness due to being distant from home (Brunsting et al., 2018; Safdar & Berno, 2016; Shadowen et al., 2019; Smith & Khawaga, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). One of the major challenges that the international student faces is diasporic identity, also referred to as diasporic marginalization. Students of African descent in the US, find it difficult to navigate challenges such as sacrificing their identities for acceptance, whilst facing discrimination and are subject to hyper-marginalization amongst racial/ethnic minority and majority groups. International students of African descent experience racism differently, based on their identity in higher education and due to their color (Hunter 2008).

Studies show that anyone can feel lonely in any culture (Sawir et al., 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Girmay & Singh, 2019). According to research conducted by Leung in 2001, international students’ experiences of loneliness displays a universal phenomenon, as evidenced by investigation within a variety of cultural contexts (Leung, 2001). Ascher and Paquette (2003) assert that this is a challenge perceived as deficits in relationships. International students report higher levels of loneliness than domestic students due to the psychosocial complex phenomenon of being lonely. Acculturation and adjustment difficulties for international students have been attributed to a myriad of issues, such as race/ethnicity, geographical region, marital status, sex/gender, age, English proficiency, length of residency in the United States, social connectedness, self-esteem, and academic adjustment (Hirai et al., 2015; Lopez & Bui, 2014; Luo et al., 2019; Telbis et al., 2014). Despite the various challenges posed, international students with better social connectedness show less adjustment strain, better adjustment to the host culture, and better academic performance (Luo et al., 2019; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). International students with less social connectedness face the challenges of academic
performance and may probably dropout of school due to stress. For successful acculturation, social connectedness of international students cannot be over-emphasized (Li et al., 2010).

**Discrimination**

Individual biases and negative perceptions towards members of other groups breed prejudice and discrimination. According to Nieto (2004), privileges, rights, and opportunities enjoyed by one group but denied from other groups denotes negative or destructive behaviors which are discriminatory in nature. Discrimination is usually based on prejudice, defined as the attitudes and beliefs of individuals about entire groups of people. These attitudes and beliefs are generally, but not always, negative (Nieto, 2004). Unfavorable experiences and relations with host nationals have been found to seriously affect the psychological well-being of international students (Paige, 1990; Schram & Lauver, 1988).

International students benefit from cross-cultural opportunities when they travel to the United States for studies. On the other hand, the host country benefits from the immense international experiences that the international students bring. This helps to broaden the perspective of the international whilst promoting professional, academic, and personal growth, in addition to providing an understanding of another worldview (Andrade, 2006; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Host countries also stand to benefit academically, culturally, and financially from the international students (Burslem et al, 2004).

Notwithstanding, international students bear a huge cost before they can benefit from the host country. Often, international students are stereotyped as being handicapped, confused, lacking good command of English as well as being unfamiliar with the educational system of the host country (Mestenhauser, 1983; Paige, 1990; Pedersen, 1991). Other stereotypes that are ethnic and cultural also ensure in host countries like the United States (Lee & Rice, 2007;
Spencer-Rodgers, 2001). Consequently, international students face various forms of discrimination (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; Schmitt et al., 2003; Sherry et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2001; Yeh & Inose, 2003), which leads to exclusion, isolation, and unfriendliness from domestic students (Gu et al., 2010; Wang, 2008). Discrimination is one of the most harmful acculturative strains endured by cultural minorities in the United States. (Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006). This strain carries an immense impact on how international students open to their host communities in terms of acculturation.

**Language Barriers**

International students’ ability to excel in academic work, relating with faculty members and colleagues, and developing new friends in America is significantly influenced by a proficiency in the English language (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). This places those international students with ineffective English communication ability in a precarious position. Confidence and proficiency in speaking English becomes a huge advantage for international students when adjusting to the United States culture. Some colleges and universities in the United States have various innovative programs to stem the tide of this challenge. The schools’ pair an international student with a faculty, student, or staff member, attempting to bridge the gap by way of “conversion partners.” The essence of the plan is to help the student to improve English language proficiency and to assist cultural adjustment (Zhai, 2002). Another manner in which some colleges and universities address this issue is through cultural sharing model which pairs international students with American students as buddies (Shigaki & Smith, 1997). Additionally, research showed that international students who interact with American hosts may experience
less of a culture shock, since they are coached about cultural rules and social skills acceptable to the host country (Shigaki & Smith, 1997; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

It is important that international student have social support system when they first arrive in the United States. The absence of a social support system leads to lower academic achievement and negative psychological experiences such as tension, confusion, and depression (Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2007). Communication skills in English can bring about a positive approach to forming relationships with Americans. Students begin to have more positive views of the host culture when they start to build relationships. This tends to lower stress and develop relationships with other students from the host culture, as well as improve communication with faculty members (Yoon & Portland, 2004).

**Depression & Loneliness**

The United States has been the most preferred location for international students (Hegarty, 2014). Approximately 600,000 foreign students from different continents were enrolled during the academic year of 2005-2006. Asian students represented 58% of all international students followed by students from Europe (15%), Latin America (11%), Africa (6%), the Middle East (4%), and 6% from North America and Oceania (Institute of International Education, 2007). However, adjusting to a new educational and social environment can bring stress to the international student. Culture shocks tend to add more serious stress to the international students’ experiences (Gaw, 2000) amid other sociocultural aspects of settling into a new environment (Luzio-Lockett, 1998). It is not uncommon that an international student encounters language barriers, immigration related issues, adjustment to a new social life, and loneliness due to being home sick. These negative experiences carry an adverse effect on students, thereby making them feel hopeless, which in turn can lead to depression (Mori, 2000).
Cultural differences can cause misunderstanding which in turn yields diverse experiences that are not encouraging to the international student. This can cause a feeling of estrangement or anxiousness and the student may enter depression as a part of the process of adjustment (Adler, 1975). According to Spielberger (1966), anxiety is related to stress, and Furukawa (1997) asserted that people who are exposed to foreign cultures may face depression or become anxious and display maladaptive behaviors due to acculturative stress. In creating and implementing programs that support international students academically, it is of importance to understand their experiences. Hence, awareness on the international students’ problems vis-a-vis their various perspectives regarding the factors that are involved in their adjustment and adaptation process must be increased (Luzio-Lockett, 1998).

**Academic Difficulty**

International students bring new divergent ways of thinking and catalyze academic competition in the United States institution of higher learning (Wu et al, 2015). Their home culture and ethnic experiences enrich the cultural diversity of campuses around the United States. However, international students often face many challenges within the academic setting, one of such is the language hindrance. Language is considered one of the greatest academic issues hindering smooth adjustment for international students in the Unites States. According to the study carried out by Robertson et al. (2000), 31 staff responses compared with responses of 38 international students (undergraduate), used an open-ended questionnaire. Findings showed that the staff were non-empathetic, due to the students’ language proficiency, rather the staff criticized international students for not taking responsibility for their academic advancement. Lack of English proficiency can cause a barrier for a student’s successful participation in host community. This can be visible in everyday issues faced by the student ranging from solving
everyday problems, such as taking the correct buses, grocery shopping, or asking for help. Many studies have shown that students that were less acculturated experienced significantly more difficulty in academic life, both with language and with medical/physical health than those students with higher levels of acculturation (Kilinc & Granello, 2003; Yan et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2015; Sherry et al., 2010).

**Anxiety**

International student enrollment in U.S. higher education is encouraged by academic, economic, and cultural purposes. The higher institutions owe it as a responsibility to welcome, serve, and maintain the well-being of international students, as well as create a multicultural interactive environment with host students (Sumer et al., 2008). International students project global perspectives to American students. The host students learn about different cultures and the history of the cultures. Through the foreign students, American students can learn about international issues, acknowledgement and respect of cultures, and individual differences, as these broaden their perspectives, thereby preventing stereotypical thinking (Sumer et al., 2008).

Despite the positive contribution of international students, the acculturation process generally contributes greatly to anxiety levels among this population. The experience of anxiety can crop up due to stress from being apart from family and friends, pressure from school, difficulties with language, work, and finances, more so than students with permanent US residency (Fritz et al, 2008). Stressors may aggravate, thereby culminating mental health issues among international students, and which in turn can intensify psychological symptoms such as anxiety (Misra et al., 2003). Anxiety is associated with an autonomic arousal and subjective experience of worry and tension. Although there has been literature on differences between dispositional and situational coping strategies but despite the effectiveness of the potential
coping strategy, there is scant research on the role of attenuating the negative outcomes of stress induced anxiety experienced during international studies vis a vis full involvement in the higher institution of learning (Jackson et al., 2019). Additionally, previous studies in reference to international students pursuing their studies in a foreign country were unsuccessful in clearly establishing the association between coping styles and different levels of stress induced anxiety symptoms (Akhtar et al., 2019).

Experiences of African International Students in United States

Nevertheless, the uniqueness of students’ countries of origin, lived experiences, and the degree of separation between home culture and American culture were emphasized. Despite international students’ common adjustment challenges, experiences might differ due to the heterogeneity of these population (Perkins, 1977). However, research focusing distinctly on the cross-cultural transition experiences of African international students is very limited (Monteiro, 2015, Skeen et al., 2010). According to the Open Doors Report (2019), the number of international students coming from sub-Saharan Africa has increased from previous years to over forty thousand. During the 2018-2019 academic year, 50 nations from sub-Saharan Africa had students studying in America, Nigerian students were the highest population, followed by students from Ghana and Kenya (Institute of International Education, 2019).

Consequently, an understanding of how sub-Saharan African international students conceptualize and handle psychological distress could bridge the research gap and therefore broaden the literature on international students’ cross-cultural transition in new environments. This study relates to a practical issue, given an overview of a day-to-day experiences of sub-Saharan African international students’ cross-cultural challenges (Okusolubu, 2018) and help-seeking behavior.
Help-Seeking Behavior among African International Students

African international students adopt an African-centered perspective to life. They value group survival, communalism, collective responsibility, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective (Essandoh, 1995; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Atilola, 2016). However, the cultural gap can be overwhelming, thus resulting in culture shock (Inyama et al., 2016; Constantine et al., 2005; Kawamoto et al., 2018). Furthermore, the transitional process can be challenging (social integration, academic integration, psychological adjustments, and financial hardship) and thus could create barriers to fulfilling and successful experiences (Sparks et al., 2019; Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996; Pettigrew, 1998; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Kawamoto et al., 2018; Osikomaiya, 2014; Phinney & Onwughalu, 1996).

Family & Friends Support

Despite some commonalities, international students of different nationalities experience cross-cultural transition issues differently (Gebhard, 2012; Wang, 2009). Nevertheless, adjusting to American society can be a gradual process, depending on the individual student (Li & Zizzi, 2018). Also, the coping methods adopted vary, such as personal attempts to resolve the problems, relying on friends, and social support. However, individuals can also choose avoidant coping methods, thus repressing or ignoring acculturation stressors, which often lead to depression and anxiety (Sherry et al., 2010; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Hendrickson et al., 2011; Folkman et al., 1986).

University International Students’ Organization

It is typical for international students to experience alienation, marginalization, social loss, loneliness, and helplessness. Physical and mental health can increase life satisfaction. International students can benefit from the presence of friendship, which can translate into goal
stability, higher self-esteem, and improved adjustment (Li & Zizzi, 2018). This can be achieved with the availability of social circles which are beneficial for the purpose of acculturation as a coping strategy (e.g., offering informational and emotional support).

International students’ social networks, referred to as international organizations in various universities, help students to overcome social barriers and thus create much-needed social support. The international students’ organizations within the campus develop ideas on how to work with the students and how to proactively support the adjustment of international students in the United States. Some of these organizations provide international students opportunities to engage in practices of their cultural background by mixing with other students that originate from their country or continent (Zhou et al., 2008).

**International Students and Mental Health**

While international students’ study in the United States to obtain their degrees, they experience challenges which might impact their mental well-being (Prieto-Welch, 2016). As previously stated, some of the challenges that international students face is social isolation, unfamiliar academic systems, an uncertain and difficult-to-navigate legal status, lack of family support, and language barriers for those from non-English speaking countries (Mori, 2000; Zhang & Goodson, 2011; Tung, 2011). The challenges could be the ripple effect of cultural differences between home and host country. The likelihood of international students reporting high levels of stress and depression, as well as lower levels of psychological well-being, and a lower quality of life in comparison to domestic student is quite pronounced (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

It is immensely important to assess the mental health of international students due to its direct impact on the students’ academic performances, scope of satisfaction, and suicidal
ideations (Prieto-Welch, 2016; Zhang & Goodson, 2011, Anandavalli et al., 2021). Despite efforts that have been made by some higher institutions to support the mental well-being of international students, there have been scant studies that capture international students’ mental health challenges relating to their unique cultural backgrounds. As asserted by Carmack et al (2016), mental health assessments and interventions for international students need to be culturally sensitive and conducted by culturally competent professionals. Culturally competent practices will enhance the awareness and sensitivity of professionals to international students’ diverse cultural backgrounds. This will play a major role in avoiding the misinterpretation of international students’ mental health needs and providing appropriate or adequate support in regard to formal mental health diagnosis, therapy sessions, and a recommended leave of absence for international students (Carmack et al., 2016).

**Role of Culture in Mental Health**

Culture plays a critical role in mental health treatment and the eventual outcome for racial/ethnic groups (Wilton & Constantine, 2003). According to a study conducted by Huang and Zane (2016), the diversification of the U.S. is occurring quite rapidly, and mental health researchers are working to respond to the needs of a multicultural society. The openness and willingness expressed by clients to disclose personal information during a session is essential in fostering good client–therapist relationships. As the population of people from different race and ethnic groups grow in the United States, clients of a certain race or ethnicity would prefer therapist of the same race and ethnicity (Huang & Zane, 2016).

There has been a persistent disparity contributing to the poor utilization of mental health services by international students of African descent. This is due to factors that may influence their help-seeking behavior and the outcome of mental health treatment. One key factor is the
way each student visualizes mental illness (Igboin, 2011). Many international students of African
descent see mental illness as a stigma that influences their recognition of or desire to utilize
mental health care. Another factor is the willingness to disclose the mental illness to the therapist
(Constantine et al., 2005). During the therapeutic process, the client’s participation and
disclosures determine treatment outcome. Furthermore, client willingness to open-up and share
with the therapist promotes the relationship between client and therapist. As a result, the
treatment outcomes will be tailored to help determine the goals for therapy, such as reductions in
psychological distress (e.g., reduced depression levels). One other key factor is the confidence
level. Culturally, international students of African descent would prefer to be seen by therapists
of the same race/ethnicity, which tends to generate more confidence in both their therapists and
the skills of practice (Huang & Zane, 2016; Atkinson & Lowe, 1995).

African Cultural Values and Mental Health

Acculturative stress, inclusive of culture shock, confusion regarding role expectations,
loss of social support, alienation, discrimination, and language barriers represents one
phenomenon that Africa students experience while in the United States to study (Mori, 2000;
Tung, 2011; Boafo-Arthur, 2014). Some of these acculturative stressors tend to make the student
develop physical, social, and psychological problems (Constantine et al., 2004; Sandhu, 1994;
international students in the United States as laced with racism. In relation to cultural
adjustments, race plays an important role historically in the African international students’
adjustment process in their new environment. African international students that were raised in
cultures where being Black is the norm are used to the racially homogenous contexts, whereas
the United States society offers a more diverse environment with the likelihood of discrimination or racism (Constantine et al., 2005).

In African culture, traditional and faith healers (TAFH) constitute a key part of the mental health care system. Rather than formal mental health treatment, the African culture provides patients with culturally relevant explanations of the cause of illness, in tandem with cultural belief systems of the communities where they are located (Mbwayo, 2013; Igboin, 2011). Diagnosis and treatment practices influence the possible perceptions of the appropriateness and effectiveness of such treatments. As asserted by Van de Watt et al (2018), culturally specific understandings of mental illness have shown evidence that psychiatric disorders which are biomedically defined are not only present but are also recognizable in cultures that do not subscribe to biomedical paradigms (Van de Watt et al., 2018).

**Culturally Responsive Counseling**

Increasingly, diverse student populations require a diverse workforce of counselors with whom the students can relate (Proctor et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2004). The essence of this is to reduce the disproportionalities in these demographics and to curb the excessive risk of inaccurately diagnosing, treating, or misrepresenting the client’s strengths for weaknesses due to cultural differences (Davies et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2004; Anandavalli et al., 2021). Immediate action is required in addressing this growing diversity, by preparing professional counselors with much-needed competencies in cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to responsibly work toward the best outcomes for students from diverse cultures (Kim et al., 2019; Kronholz, 2014).

Culturally responsive counseling lays emphasis on the cultural identity role of psychosocial adjustment for international students. According to Jones (2009), clinicians are
required to provide counseling that effectively blends culturally based skills and awareness. Clinicians in this domain are required to be knowledgeable about the client’s worldview and possess the requisite skills in developing appropriate interventions and counseling techniques. Additionally, the proportion of international students enrolled within the counseling profession (master’s level and doctoral programs) has experienced increase from 2015 to 2017 (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2018). Identification of the strengths of these counseling students within the counseling profession, could bridge the gap through collaboration with counselors who work with international students to provide a culturally responsive mental health service.

**University Counseling Center**

In recent years, universities have experienced an increase in the number of diverse student populations which generates a need for psychological and vocational services for the students (Arthur, 2003). Therefore, university counseling centers have been encumbered with the responsibility of being the front-line help to students in negotiating psychological and educational needs. University counseling centers help the diverse student population to better understand and plan their personal needs as they seek mental health counseling (Kitzrow, 2003; Kim et al., 2019).

According to a study by Perloe and Pollard (2016), university counseling center therapists have an ethical obligation to protect the confidentiality of students receiving services at the counseling center and are also required to protect or warn potential victims when a student poses an imminent risk of violence. Campus mental health providers also grapple with questions regarding mandated counseling, their competence to conduct violence risk assessments, and whether they should be the first point of contact with students of concern. An effective method
of preventing and managing the risk of violence must be understood and proactively discussed among university counselors (Perloe & Pollard, 2016).

Interventions/Preventive Approaches

As previously stated, international students face diverse challenges while pursuing their educational goals and dreams in the United States. Integration into a new environment, new culture, and within a different educational system comes with some level of stress which if not managed properly, could result in psychological distress (Sandhu, 1994; Misra et al., 2003). Service delivery to encourage these students whenever they seek professional help requires a comprehensive approach. Further, incorporation of a holistic approach could result in an effective counseling process, thereby reducing dropout rates for this population (Yakushko et al., 2008; Arthur, 2003).

Different scholars have recommended some counseling approaches that might work with international students to manage their psychological distress. Anandavalli et al. (2020) highlighted the integration of an intersectional framework during counseling service with international students. The researchers found that experiences of international students might differ, based on different factors that directly and indirectly impact adjustment process. Kim et al. (2019) described the importance of multicultural counseling competency required by counselors working with international students. They further addressed different ways counselors can engage in advocacy for systemic changes to help this population. Hook et al. (2013), in their research concerning integration of cultural humility in counselors who work with diverse clients, stated that “therapists have their own beliefs, values, and worldviews that likely guide how they understand psychological distress and how people make changes in their lives” (p. 2). Thus, in order not to struggle, but to work effectively with diverse clients, counselors are required to
create a therapeutic environment that fosters openness to different beliefs, values, and worldviews. The authors proposed that the concept of cultural humility is needed to help create a safe and strong working alliance with this population. Together, these researchers have shown that a culturally responsive counseling approach might help adjustment challenges with international students.

Many individuals could likely benefit from counseling, but international students from sub-Saharan Africa might require additional help due to scholastic stress in the United States. Also, the counseling process can be explained to normalize seeking help for those who might not be familiar with what a university counseling center can offer. Informational resources that targets their needs can be created specifically for this population.

**International Students use of Counseling Services**

Revealing personal issues is regarded as a weakness, or the inability to resolve personal issues, lack of determination and thus bring shame to the family. To “save face,” the individual is discouraged from revealing and expressing concerns and resolves toward seeking help from family or close friends. This decision strongly affects the possibility and reluctancy of the students to seek professional counseling services (Mitchell et al., 2007; Hwang et al., 2014) in comparison with their domestic counterparts (Constantine et al., 2004; Russell et al., 2008). An awareness of international students’ cultural differences and unique challenges by professional counselors could improve the efficacy of counseling services (Kim et al., 2019; Anandavalli et al., 2020; Yoon & Portman, 2004; Mori, 2000) while reducing dropout rates after the first session.

Furthermore, different studies have documented the importance and under-utilization of counseling services among international students. Nilsson et al. (2004) conducted a study with
41 international student participants who sought counseling services. Based on the result, only 2% of the international student body (8%) sought counseling, about a third did not show up after the initial intake session. The presenting concerns reported by these students’ included depression, a lack of assertiveness, academic majors, and anxiety. Similarly, a study conducted by Hwang et al., (2014), 834 international students sought counseling services for five consecutive years (2005-2010). The result indicated significant under-utilization of counseling services in all years but one. The presented concerns included relationships, anxiety, mood, and adjustments. On this premise, the need exists for an inductive exploration of the phenomenon of the lived experiences of sub-Saharan African international students in the utilization of counseling services.

**Applicability of Health Belief Model**

In this section, some research highlights will be examined in relation to theoretical applicability of health belief constructs toward predicting health "behaviors" of individuals, based on their beliefs and perspectives. Nobiling et al. (2017) in their study with university undergraduate students, aged 18-24, the author explored HBM constructs and self-medicating behaviors, regarding mental illness and mental health service utilization within the population. The research indicated that sociocultural concerns (such as stigma/negative beliefs about mental illness) coupled with challenges navigating the system (such as finding a provider) serve as perceived barriers to accessing mental health services. Preferred substances for self-medication were alcohol, marijuana, and prescription medications. Czyz et al. (2013) in a qualitative study noted that self-reported barriers to professional help-seeking among 165 non-treatment college students (vulnerable to suicidal behavior) from September 2010 through December 2011. From participant responses, the authors reported that perceived barriers to counseling services in terms
of percentages were as follows: treatment not needed (66%), time constraints (26.8%), preference for self-management (18%), and stigma (12%). The study concluded that gender, race, and severity of depression and alcohol abuse also were notable factors that interplayed with the study results. Efforts to help this population should be sensitive to these barriers and connect them to appropriate professional services.

Furthermore, Castonguay et al. (2016) analyzed narrative interviews of 34 participants who sought treatment for depression. The participants’ uncertainty regarding the condition and treatment were found to drive each element of the health belief model. The “Fear of the treatment process appeared to be the largest barrier to seeking help, and the perceived difficulty in navigating the help-seeking process limited self-efficacy” (Castonguay et al., 2016, p.299). This means that until after treatment was sought, susceptibility to depression and the benefits of treatment would be rarely acknowledged. To help minimize the fear of treatment process, interventions should target not only depressed individuals, but also their friends and family, to provide specific information on how to navigate the treatment process (self-efficacy) and clear treatment options. A pilot study conducted by Ayosanmi et al. (2020) with 185 international students at Western Illinois University also explored HBM constructs in predicting HIV screening decisions. A 25-item survey questionnaire was used and 73.5% of the participants accepted, while 22% refused the HIV screening. From those that accepted the screening, 90% perceived it to be beneficial to their health, while 76% chose to accept, because screening was offered. For those that refused the screening, 83% reported not being sexually active, and they did not think they could be susceptible to HIV. Based on the HBM constructs, they concluded that participant decision-making was influenced by perceived benefits, cues to action, and perceived susceptibility.
Additionally, among young adults between ages 19 and 34 years residing in the northeast region of the United States, Luquis and Kensinger (2019) conducted an online survey of 40 questions to explore whether perceived susceptibility and seriousness of health outcomes influenced access to preventive services. Although 946 participants completed the survey, only 821 participants met the criteria for the study. On the perceived seriousness of eight major health conditions (cancer, diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, poor mental health, obesity, and STIs), the study found that participant scores showed significant differences (p-value ≤ .05, p-value ≤ .01, p-value ≤ .001) based on gender, health status, and age. The results also indicated a significant difference (p-value ≤ .05, p-value ≤ .01) between males and females regarding use of prevention services, based on perceptions of susceptibility and seriousness. The authors concluded that young adult use of health preventive services might eventually be influenced by the HBM constructs of perceived susceptibility and perceived seriousness (Luquis & Kensinger, 2019). Also, Kim and Zane (2016) in a study at west coast public university, examined the potential reasons for under-utilization of mental health services. The research found that despite reporting greater psychological distress, Asian Americans showed relatively lower help-seeking intentions than Caucasian Americans. The authors reported that “regardless of race/ethnicity, the perceived severity of symptoms, benefits of treatment, and barriers to treatment, significantly influenced help-seeking intentions” (p. 10). The participants were 656 undergraduate students (60.2% Asian Americans and 39.8% Caucasian Americans). The authors suggested that to address under-utilization of programs related to mental health services, focus could be on promoting the benefits of seeking help for psychological distress (Kim & Zane, 2016).
Despite substantial research highlighting the applicability of HBM constructs to predict and explore individual involvement in health-related behaviors, specifically few research studies have explored the help-seeking intentions of international students in regard to mental health challenges resulting from acculturative stress. The parameters of HBM theory posits that individual behaviors can influence health outcomes.

Bonnie et al. (2019) in a study, exploring psychological distress, mental health literacy (MHL), and help-seeking attitudes and intentions among 148 domestic students and 209 international students, found that international students were predictive of lower scores than domestic students. The study concluded that interventions tailored towards mental health knowledge and attitudes might be beneficial toward increasing student engagement with mental health services. These studies altogether show how the HBM constructs can be used to explore the influenced by different barriers and benefits on help-seeking. On this premise, integration of HBM as a conceptual framework to explore the mental health concerns and help-seeking behavior of sub-Saharan African international students will conceptualize intentions and barriers to seeking professional help during adjustment challenges in the host country.

Summary

The review of literature provides a tremendous awareness into the cross-cultural challenges experienced by international students in general and specifically sub-Saharan African students. Discrimination, language barriers, depression and loneliness, academic difficulty, and anxiety have been highlighted by different researchers as adjustment challenges faced by this population as they transition to the host country. Another stressor experienced by this population is acquiring a student visa to study in the U.S (which is a big hurdle for international students).
Each country has different visa processing requirements by USCIS. To maintain the “F1” visa status while in school, international students are required to enroll as full-time students (9 credit hours), irrespective of any current financial challenge (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], n.d; Student and Exchange Visitor Information System [SEVIS], 2020).

The coping strategies adopted have also been identified. The possibility of masking behaviors in the form of adaptive strategies adopted by sub-Saharan African students could somewhat tend to hide the mental health concerns experienced. Unattended mental health needs and help-seeking behavior of this population might be due to the disposition of home country in regard to mental health issues, unfamiliarity to the university’s mental health services, religion, cultural difference, added to a host of other barriers. The purpose of this study is to explore the relatively untold cross-cultural transition experiences of sub-Saharan African international students that result in psychological distress, triggering onset of mental health concerns, and the adoptive help-seeking behavior. An inductive exploration of the phenomenon would also contribute to the existing gap in the literature concerning this population.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter details the methodology used in exploring the mental health concerns and the importance of help seeking behavior of sub-Saharan African international students, as well as inclusion of research design, research approach, data collection and instrument, instrument reliability and validity, and the sampling technique. I discussed the interview protocol and gave explanation to highlight the mode by which the interview will be conducted. I will also present my data collection strategy, collection methods and consideration of ethics. The chapter concludes with an interview presentation protocol, as well as its confirmability and dependability.

Purpose of Study

With regards to international students’ cultural adjustment challenges in the host country, different contributing factors were specified, depending on the nature and degree of such experience. Some of the challenges relates to cultural and language barriers, academic stress, financial stressors, problems in daily life tasks, lack of social connectivity, and role conflicts (Wu et al., 2015). Some other common problems faced by international students are climate, communication with Americans, discrimination, homesickness, depression, irritability, and tiredness (Shadowen et al., 2019; Smith & Khawaga, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011) Culture shock and learning shock become a reality to the international student, which may spiral into mental health problems. Few documentations are available concerning the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of international students from African nationals as these students experience challenges in adjusting to the American society. The few studies have found
that sub-Saharan African students just as all international students, face frequent controversial conversations pertaining to adjustments to the reality of a new environment, such as whether instructor’s teaching methods are adapted to support learning (Awuor, 2021; Xu, 2015). The purpose of this study is to examine the transitional challenges specifically faced by sub-Saharan African international students and to determine approaches that are culturally relevant aligned with an underlying theoretical basis (Pruitt, 1978).

The purpose of this study is to explore and gain insight into the lived experiences of sub-Saharan African international students during the cross-cultural transition challenges. The findings will help provide counselors with culture-centered information about working with this population, and thus add to the body of literature. Taking the purpose of the study into account, I will explore the mental health concerns resulting from those stressors and help-seeking decisions which become adopted. The Health Belief Model (Glanz et al., 2015; Rosenstock, 2005; Hayden, 2017) will be adopted as a conceptual framework to contextualize the perceived severity (seriousness) of mental health concern, perceived susceptibility (vulnerability) to mental health conditions, perceived benefits of treatments (counseling), and perceived barriers to treatment which will influence the intentions to seek help. Figure 1 below represents how the constructs would be integrated into the interview questions generated for this study.

Figure 1: Diagram representing Application of Health Belief Model
Research Question

The central research question to this study is: What theory explains the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African international students?

Research Sub-question:
- What are the perceived factors contributing to the transitional challenges that lead to the help-seeking behavior (s) adopted in the new environment?

Research Objective

- To explain the lived experiences of sub-Saharan African international student in United States universities.
- To explore the mental health concerns of sub-Saharan African international student and their help seeking intentions.
• To enhance the implementation and delivery of culturally relevant and appropriate counseling services.

• To promote the benefits of seeking mental health services for psychological distress.

• To increase university counselors’ cultural understanding of sub-Saharan African international students.

Grounded theory methodological precepts, the objective of the research, and the research questions have been established to provide the investigative grounds in providing the needed focus for the inquiry (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I will constantly refer to the overarching research question during my study, to determine whether revision or any fine-tuning is required, which will be paramount in reflecting the investigative direction of the study. This will be done throughout the emergent of the categories.

**Research Paradigm**

The constructivist theory approach has been chosen for this research study. Constructivism is also referred to as interpretivism, which defines reality as a socially constructed phenomenon where people make sense of themselves and the world around them by means of their social relationships (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The approach of constructivism is entrenched in principles of relative ontological and subjectivist epistemological perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Social reality becomes fluid in relativism with the assumption that there is no single observable social reality. Relativism is subjective in nature and co-constructed in the minds of social actors (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Knowledge is subjective according to the transactional/subjectivist epistemology stance. People by means of their physical and social
environments, interact and mediate with the aid of signs and symbols recognized by members of a given culture (Grbich, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, objective knowledge does not exist independently of individuals with understanding. As reality and knowledge alike are a construct in the minds of social actors, the constructivism paradigm, and the ontological and epistemological alike become blurry (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Findings of constructivism research are jointly created by a researcher and what has been researched in an influential transactional approach (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Research on how people make sense of their lived experiences and behavior in a social context becomes the research goal in a constructivist tradition (Grbich, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2011).

For this study, a constructivist approach is deemed appropriate, since experiences of individuals are better conveyed through the constructivist inquiry on how meanings are construed. From an intervention perspective, the study also provides grounds on how mental health practitioners or counselors perform their services in relation to the help-seeking behavior of sub-Saharan African international students.

In addition, this study poses an assumption that participants engaged in the research will uniquely possess different understandings of the phenomenon of study, based on their social, cultural, and historical situations. Hence, this study presents a research design with a rationale that aligns with the research method.

**Research Design**

In this section, I provide a descriptive outlook of the research methodology and the study design. Also, I mentioned the rationale for choosing the design and the methodological approach in addressing the appropriateness of the research questions posed. I unpinned the qualitative
research design with the philosophy of constructivism of grounded theory as the methodology of the research (Charmaz, 2014).

Qualitative Inquiry

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) broadly defined qualitative research as “… an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world.” (p. 10). Qualitative researchers study social phenomena in their natural settings. The interest is how people make sense of any phenomenon of study through their experiences. Quantitative research transforms data into numbers to find patterns and averages, to make predictions, test casual relationships, and generalize results to a wider population, whereas qualitative research involves the collection and analyzing of non-numerical data, such as text, video, and audio in order to understand a phenomenon or participants’ experiences (Smith, 2008).

Qualitative research has had unifying features given the polarity of its historical philosophical, and disciplinary influences. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), five attributes of qualitative research method are as follows: (1) emphasizes meaning and understanding, (2) researchers as the tool for data collection and analysis, (3) inductive in nature, (4) descriptive in nature, (5) richly describes the product of the research. Other characteristics are as follows: (a) context dependent inquiry; (b) emic perspective focus; (c) researcher is immersed in the natural setting of the participants; (d) close relationship between the researcher and the researched; (e) reflexivity of the researcher; and (f) data collection and data analysis are integrated in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

Rationale for Qualitative Design

A qualitative research method with a constructivism paradigm is appropriate for this research study, due to the understanding of a reality based on social exchanges within an
environment (Lincoln et al., 2011). Participants experience access and a frame of references shaped by qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The purpose of the study is to subjectively explore and examine the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African international students in the United States. A qualitative design enables a nuanced understanding of how mental health practitioners construed involvement in this kind of intervention. A qualitative design situates the study participants’ experiences in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), thereby allowing the researcher access into the field or place where the issue can be addressed.

In investigating new areas of study, qualitative inquiry is deemed to be appropriate where little empirical research has been conducted (Pope & Mays, 2006). This premise supports the rationale for qualitative method to explore the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African international students during cross-cultural transitioning into the new environment.

**Grounded Theory**

In this research, I will adopt the constructivist grounded theory as the research methodology. Grounded theory offers systematic flexible guidelines for data collection, analyzing, synthesizing, and conceptualizing qualitative data to support the construction of theories directly from collected data. In grounded theory, the central phenomenon is that the data forms the basis for the foundation for inductive development of categories through a process data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This systematic process of research methodology gives rise to theories that are ‘grounded’ in data, hence the name grounded theory.

Some grounded theorists have identified a common method of developing the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2010). The following are important points: (a) data are collected and
analyzed concurrently, (b) rather than theme and structure, emphases are on action and processes; (c) data are constantly compared; (d) new concepts are developed using generated data rather than using the data for corroboration of preconceived understanding; (e) data are then grounded in analytic abstract categories; (f) instead of conceptual descriptions, emphases are on construction of theory; (g) theoretical sampling; (h) checking for variations in the emerged categories; and (i) rather than trying to cover a specific topic, allow the categories to be pivotal to the study investigation.

Grounded theory has been regarded as one of the prominent qualitative research methodologies. According to Strauss & Corbin (1998), grounded theory has been used by researchers in many disciplines and fields of practices such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, social work, and nursing. Grounded theory influences by means of competing philosophical orientations and changes in the socio-historical landscape.

**The Constructivist Approach of Grounded Theory**

Towards the end of the last century, grounded theory gained prominence with motivation by Charmaz, a former student of Glaser and Strauss, two researchers who motivated by means of a constructivist philosophy. Chamaz was instrumental in forging a new constructivist adaptation (Birks & Mills, 2011). Charmaz (2014), asserted that a key assumption of the constructivist approach is that truth and reality are contingent on individual perceptions and experiences thus acknowledging the presence of multiple, and diverse social realities. This means that research is conceptualized and co-constructed by way of an interaction between researchers with the researched.

The constructivist grounded theory is in tandem with Glaser and Strauss’ original work (1967); these include inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended styles (Charmaz, 2014).
Charmaz (2000, 2014) argued that positivism and postmodernism are being bridged by the constructivist approach. Giving voice to the participants is the central precept of the grounded theory approach, based on a relativistic epistemology. This approach ensures that multiple voices of the participants are represented in the final product.

**Rationale for Adopting the Constructivist Grounded Theory**

The constructivist grounded theory is chosen due to the following: (a) suitability to the type of data gathered, (b) fitness to the research paradigm framing the study, (c) logistics of the literature review process, and (d) congruence with the researcher’s personal beliefs on reality, knowledge, and research. The approach displays a sense of capturing the participants’ voices, whilst unfolding the recognition of manifold truth (Breckenridge et al., 2012; Kenny & Fourie, 2015).

Constructivist grounded theory was considered because of the views it holds on researchers’ involvement in the research process. In this approach, the inquirer is a “passionate participant” in the constructivist theoretical framework (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 196). The researcher shapes meanings and knowledge together with the research participants, whilst acknowledging the researcher as the social actor whose histories, experiences, knowledge, ideas, and assumptions color their interactions with the study participants and their understanding of the social processes under investigation (Charmaz, 2014).

**Role of Researcher**

According to Walker and Myrick (2006), the choice of methodology “is more about the researcher and less about the method” (p. 558), other scholars agree (Bryant, 2009; Fendt & Sacks, 2008; Fernandez, 2012). First, I chose the constructivist approach as an intuitively creative theory and because it is flexible. Due to its ontological and epistemological background,
the constructivist grounded theory tends to resonate personally (Charmaz, 2014). I believe in the subjective nature of truth and that individual relate based on co-construction of the social reality around them. This has shaped my worldview and clinical observations of people who have different interpretations of events based on their personal histories, beliefs, values, and cultural factors.

In capturing the plurality of participants’ meanings of a phenomenon, the existence of social realities is assumed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Researchers who adopt the grounded theory method align themselves with the constructivist perspective by advocating a mutual relationship between themselves and their research as co-creators of meaning and knowledge (Charmaz, 2014). As a doctoral student in the counseling profession, I lean towards advocating for international students and how they cope in a foreign land, I develop concepts that align with this population and people in general, considering their unique challenges, and their social realities.

As constructivist grounded theory draws attention to issues of power inherent in the research process, the constructivist theorist shifts the power back to those participants under study. The role of the researcher is redefined by the challenges posed by positivist assumptions of a “neutral” investigator. The constructivist grounded theorist is not an objective reporter that is discovering hidden events. Rather, the constructivist grounded theory researcher becomes co-creators of meaning, and therefore impact the research process (Mills et al., 2006).

The interview process integrated a systematic framework with each participant for data collection. The process of rapport building with each participant was first identified to enable a trustworthy environment; giving space and time to each participant to share experiences. The interview applied follow-up questions in order to explore experiential meanings.
Researcher’s Preconception and References Framework

My research interest in mental health concerns and help seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African students in the United States started during my masters program in counseling, which further grew when I enrolled with the University of New Orleans doctoral program in Counselor Education and Supervision. While conducting an empirical review for an assignment, I found that within the international student population, many stated experiencing mental health challenges due to loneliness, culture shock, and discrimination. The situation that this population of students pass through prompted me to carry out interactive/conversational research with international students from African nations, and to consider how this population might be helped. I also realized that my insight from interacting with this population is that university counseling departments have not progressed much in helping these students to seek mental health counseling. The scars that some students carry who fall within this category undeniably cause trauma, frustrations, and resentments in regard to present-day help-seeking behavior.

Participants

Identifying the research participants is the next step of the qualitative study. The participants’ experiences will shed light on phenomenon under investigation which will aid in answering the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to the collection of data, I searched the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) website for the list of certified schools in Louisiana with international student enrollment. The researcher found nine institutions hosting international students from Louisiana cities (Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lafayette, and Monroe). The target population was international (graduate) students from sub-Saharan Africa, enrolled in universities around Louisiana.
In a grounded theory study, the location of participants in a single site varies, such that their dispersal might provide important contextual information. In the axial coding phase of the study, this information will be useful in developing categories (Creswell, 2007). This brings a balance to data gathering from different perspectives within the state. Achieving such a balance is instrumental in answering the research questions. According to Creswell (2007), finding participants or places is an important step in a research study, as well as gaining access to and establishing rapport to develop good data.

**Sampling Strategy**

Theoretical and initial sample strategies as the two critical stages have been adopted for this study. Theoretical sampling serves the purpose of giving direction to the research process, and also provides the researcher with much-needed access to the study data. The initial sampling criteria also contributed to the research study as well as recruitment. Potential participants who (a) understood, and (b) met the sampling criteria, and (c) contributed to the research study, were established for the study.

According to Charmaz (2014, p. 192), theoretical sampling strategy is important because of its inclination toward grounded theory. In this sampling strategy, the researcher engages in the collection and analyses of data based on emerging constructs and then decides on future data to be collected based on nacent theories. It is therefore a process of evolving theory based on emerging theories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Sampling Criteria**

In a grounded study, participants must be selected based on an ability to contribute to the research topic, and be specifically able to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). The selection of individuals and sites for a study are selected purposefully to
inform understanding of the research problem. The central phenomenon is known as “purposeful sampling” (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This technique of sampling is applied in a case where the knowledge and the experiences of the participants play a vital role in adding richness to the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants from sub-Saharan Africa are eligible to join the study if they have experienced difficulties in adjusting to American society while studying. Participants have to be recognized as graduate international students of African descent.

Additional criteria used in selection of participants are: (a) over 18 years of age; (b) first and second year in graduate program; (c) currently enrolled in graduate programs; and (d) able to speak, understand, and write in English. Finding an appropriate sample size that included students from countries within the sub-Saharan Africa region was ideal to capture a much spread out population. Availability and accessibility was also be considered in the selection of participants.

**Sampling Size**

Though there is no rule in determining the number of cases that are needed to generate finding that is trustworthy within qualitative research, however, there are some number of things to consider before the sample size can be determined, such as the nature of the research questions, the type of data being gathered, the course of the data analysis, and the available resources supporting the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), achieving saturation on a new case is the basis for halting any further theory generation in grounded theory approach.

The homogenous sample that was selected included 10 sub-Saharan African international students. The sample size choice principle is based on Creswell (2013). However, after the 8-interview session, theoretical saturation was reached. I noticed that my participants used different
choice of words to describe and explain their lived experiences. Analyzing the data that had already been collected also supports the theoretical saturation of the research study.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Before the study began, permission was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of New Orleans for the purpose of human subjects that will be used. Until approval was gotten (see Appendix A), data collection did not commence. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Orleans, I commence the initial sampling by getting in-touch with the potential study participants through email (LISTSERV platform) and by voice, to acknowledge my invitation to participate in the research for this study. The document sent to the participants included an invitation letter (see Appendix B) and consent form (see Appendix C) which the participant completed.

A purposeful sample of graduate sub-Saharan African international students from Louisiana universities to recruit participants was necessary. I made a list of the institutions hosting international students in Louisiana. Using the list, I did a Google search on the Internet for the contact details (e.g., email and phone) of each university’s Graduate School and International Office. I also checked whether a university had the presence of an African student organization in order to obtain the contact details. In turn, I sent an invitation/recruitment letter (see Appendix B) to recruit participants via e-mail.

After one week, I followed-up by contacting the International Graduate Offices of the universities and on-campus African students’ organizations, for possible participants. In addition, the study considered a snowball sampling method to recruit more participants. The snowball sampling method allows hidden populations to be reached and recruited for the study (Noy,
2008). Once sub-Saharan African international students gave consent to participate in the study, an interview method (online HIPAA Zoom) and interview dates were agreed upon via e-mail.

A semi-structured interview was initially meant to be face-to-face; however, the participants opted for an online method when asked to choose a preferred platform for the interview, due to time constraints.

**Description of Participants**

In this section, an introduction of the eight participants is presented. The study assigned all of the eight participants pseudonyms after omitting university affiliations to ensure confidentiality. Six participants were masters-level students while the remaining two were doctoral level students. Five participants responded to the email solicitation sent to the university’s international office, while within the African student organization, the study gained three additional participants through snowball sampling. The researcher avoided overrepresentation of any singular university, because the study selected participants from different universities within Louisiana.

All study participants are from five different universities located in the cities of Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Lafayette, and Monroe. Participants Theo and Kwame are from the same university; Sola and Tope are from the same university; Francis and Kevin are from the same university; while Edward is the one participant from his university, as is David. These participants consist of one female and seven males. Four sub-Saharan African countries were represented by the participants: two from Ghana; three from Nigeria; two from Cameroon; and one from Zambia. Saturation was reached with eight participants, so no additional attempt was made to recruit more participants. The demographic information for all participants is represented in Table 3.
Table 3
Participants Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Degree Program</th>
<th>Length of Time in U.S (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>M.B.A</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sola</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>M.B.A</td>
<td>1 year 2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tope</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>M.S.E</td>
<td>1 year 10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>M.S</td>
<td>1 year 7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwame</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>M.S</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>M.S.E</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

Edward

Edward is a 27-year-old male from Zambia. He is currently enrolled in a Master’s course in a business administration program (M.B.A) at a predominantly white institution (PWI). He is in his final semester. Edward’s prior experience with transitional challenges happened during his first two semesters. Edward took the constant advice from friends before he sought counseling. He reported that it took having different counselors before he finally found the one who understands him and is willing to help. He indicated he plans to continue seeing his present counselor even after graduating from school. Edward is the only participant in my study who has experienced counseling. He stated that he is passionate about advocacy and social justice. He has no family member here in the United States. After he arrived in the U.S., he later travelled to Zambia to see his parent and siblings.

Sola

Sola is a 26-year-old male from Nigeria. He was previously employed in one of the banking systems in Nigeria before he decided to travel to the United States for a graduate Master’s degree in business administration (M.B.A). Sola is from a middle-class family and has
a family member here in the United States. He indicated that the family member played a vital role in his decision to pursue a graduate degree abroad. He is in his third semester in an historically black college and university (HBCU). Sola’s prior experience with transitional challenges happened during his second semester when he decided to move into the school’s accommodation for proximity. He reported having a strong religious belief and those practices helped him during stressful movements. He has never been to counseling and only discloses his struggles to family members. Sola plans to study for a doctoral program after his Master’s degree. He has a passion to become a lecturer and to travel to Nigeria during the holiday.

Tope

Tope is a 25-year-old female, also from Nigeria. She was employed in a private organization while in Nigeria. She earned both a Bachelor’s degree and a Master’s degree in business administration while in Nigeria. She is currently in a doctoral program with a concentration in Financial Economics. Tope has spent two years in the United States. She is in her fourth semester. Her prior experience with transitional challenges started from her first semester. She reported not having any family member in the United States. Tope stated that both of her parents are educators and she would like to follow in their footsteps. Tope is fluent in English and speaks two other Nigerian local dialects. She has travelled to Nigeria twice to visit her family members. She is the only female participant in my study.

Theo

Theo is a 28-year-old male from Ghana. He was employed in the educational system before deciding to travel to the United States for his Master’s degree in engineering. He was in his third semester at the time of the interview. He is from a middle-class family that places value on education and hard work. Theo speaks three different languages apart from English. He
comes from a family that has a strong religious belief. He indicated that his experience with transitional challenges started during his first semester, while trying to adjust to his new surroundings. He stated that his friends who were already studying in the United States have been supportive. He is the first in his family to travel abroad for educational purpose. His plan after school is to work for a while to gain international experience before travelling back to Ghana. Theo has not travelled to Ghana since he arrived in the United States.

**Kevin**

Kevin is a 29-year-old male from Cameroon. He is from a middle-class family, who place a strong value in education. He is the first child in the family of five. At the time of the interview, he had spent one year and seven months in the United States studying for a Master’s in computer science. He is in his third semester. Kevin indicated that the application process for transitioning into the new environment posed a challenge to him. However, he was able to cope with the help of a few Cameroonians at his university. He has no family member here in the United States. He has not been able to travel back home since he got to the United States, due to financial constraints. One of his favorite fun activities since he got to the United States was visiting the museum and parks. He stated that he is an outgoing person.

**David**

David is a 30-year-old male from Nigeria. He is the second child in a family of six. He was also the first to travel abroad for educational purposes. He is currently in his fourth semester and working on his Ph.D. engineering program. He completed both his bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Nigeria. David stated that both parents are educators, and all his siblings have Master’s degrees. He was working in a private organization before choosing to travel to the United States for educational purpose and international experience. He shared that he has no
family member here in the United States, however, he has friends who study here. He stated that he chose his present university environment because of his friends. Despite having the support of friends, David shared that his prior experience transitioning to the new environment happened during his second semester. He has been resilient while managing the different challenges ever since. He travels to Nigeria to visit his family and he often communicates with them. He is an outgoing person and likes to try new food.

**Kwame**

Kwame is a 25-year-old male from Ghana. He is the first child in a family of four and the only one studying in the United States for Master’s in computer science. He shared that he grew up in an environment with a reputation for toughness and self-reliance. This motivated him to overlook the rigorous application process and immigration hurdles. While trying to adjust to the new surroundings, Kwame shared experiencing some stressful situations. He is in his second semester and plans to travel to Ghana during the holidays. Apart from his native language, he speaks two other languages. He likes to site see and visit historical places.

**Francis**

Francis is a 29-year-old male from Cameroon. He is currently in his final year at an historically black college and university (HBCU). He is working on his Master’s degree in engineering. He was previously employed in Cameroon before choosing to travel to the United States. He has 2 years working experience. Francis shared that he grew up in a loving and supportive environment. He stated that his parents were involved in his life, providing encouragement and advice. He shared that upon arrival into the United States, his first semester was stressful as he adjusted. He indicated that his resilience and the help from few friends kept him going. His plan is to work for a while after school, using his Optional Practical Training
(OPT). Francis shared that during his leisure time, he likes reading and taking a walk around the park.

Data Collection Method

A researcher’s open-mindedness and creativity impacts the richness of the data collected. The data collection process for this study involved a circle of interrelated activities: location of the site and/or participants, gaining access and building rapport, sampling purposefully, collecting data, recording the information, and storing the data securely (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The most common type of interview is a person-to-person interview where the researcher and participant engage in conversation focusing on questions related to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them.” (p. 108).

Interest in the possibility that past events can be replicated also makes interviewing necessary. This study, applied structured, intensive, online interviews to gather rich and relevant data by means of research questions. By conducting semi-structured online interview, there was no need for a follow up interview. Each participant gave a detailed, focused, and full expression of their lived experiences. The initial reason for follow-up interviews was based on the following criteria: (a) to bring clarity to possible discrepancies during the initial interview, or (b) in pursuance of any theoretical construct as a result of emerging data. Each interview session lasted approximately an hour. For this study, I conducted 8 interview sessions with 8 participants and all interview sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Constructivist Approach of Intensive Interview

The research developed analytical insight, by conducting an intensive interview with a constructivist approach. This methodology fostered a more transparent exchange between the
researcher and interview participants. According to constructivist grounded theorists, interviews do not provide a reflection of reality, yet these are emergent constructions in terms of validation of the interviewee’s experience, of emergent understandings, and legitimation of identity (Charmaz, 2014, p. 91). According to Charmaz, (2006), intensive interviewing fosters an in-depth exploration of the researcher’s topic by asking participants questions that allow them to describe, as well as to reflect, upon their experiences.

During the interview session, close attention was paid to how language and the data are co-constructed (Charmaz, 2014). This was accomplished by giving the participants an opportunity to define and clearly explain any statements that sounded vague. This reflected their level of involvement in the interview session and how the involvement shapes the richness of the data. To shed light on the study, I listened carefully, observing, and encouraging participants to respond based on their experience(s) of the phenomenon.

In addition, establishing rapport, being nonjudgmental, authentic and trustworthy are some of the vital dispositions conducted during each interview. Other skills that guided each interview session involved “asked genuinely open-ended questions; being clear so that participants understand what is being asked; asked follow-up questions and probing (as appropriate) for greater depth and detail; and made smooth transitions between sections of the interview or topics” (Patton, 2014 p. 630).

**Guide to Interview Session**

After consent was received from the participants (see Appendix C), data was collected through an online semi-structured interview. To direct the data collection process, the research integrated an interview guide (see Appendix D) to ensure that the conversation was aptly steered, as well as a supplied provision of a copy of the interview guide to each participant. The study
designed the interview guide to follow normal protocol to avoid derailing the interview by, leaving the participants to wander from the subject of discussion. Other areas of non-initial discussion captured steered fresh conversation with the aid of the interview guide with the participants. This helped to enter the participant’s worldview and perspectives.

The interview guide consists of between 5 and 10 open-ended questions that ranged from broad to focused questions, and other follow-up questions in between. The process provided a framework in which to develop questions, arrange those questions, and finally decide which information to pursue for further insights. Participants responded, based on their personal experiences and understandings rather than shape their responses by the researcher’s preconceptions and values (Charmaz, 2014). Participants were given the freedom to reflect more deeply on the phenomenon due to the richness of the data that was gathered. Responses that emerged from the asked questions answered to the research objectives and important topic areas.

According to Patton (2014), interviewing people provides an understanding of what we cannot observe, such as prior behaviors at a point in time; situations that impede the presence of an observer; how people organize their world, and the meanings attached to happenings in that world (p.628).

Attention was also paid to each participants non-verbal responses, together with their verbal responses. This was pointed out to the participants, who had time to reflect before further sharing their thoughts. It helped to elicit information useful to the research study while gathering their stories. According to Charmaz, (2014), “rich data reveals participants’ views, feelings, intentions, and actions, as well as the contexts and structures of their lives” (p. 73). Researchers are empowered to track leads that emerge, due to the flexibility of qualitative research.
Online interview

For this study and access to participants, I conducted an online semi-structure interview. The research problem also focused on the method of data collection. The online interview uses videoconferencing technologies which permit real-time, synchronous communication, such as HIPAA Zoom comparable to a face-to-face interview. This was done to protect participants confidentiality and data. The online aspect increased the reach of participants, especially those ones who were distant from the interviewer. An online aspect also increases the number of diverse participants who could not be reached physically, due to constraints of finance, time, and location.

Collection of primary data through the Internet is known as internet-mediated research (Hewson, 2008). Internet availability and growth has encouraged the use of online interview session for qualitative inquiry over the years (Hooley et al., 2012). A synchronous, verbal, and visual interface is achieved through Web conferencing. This style of videoconferencing woks appropriately with semi-structured interviewing. The online interview is similar in many ways to the traditional face-to-face interview in terms of purpose and design of the study. As much as the online interview has a lot of advantages, the downside of it is when the participants do not have entrance to good internet access. A glitch in availability of internet connectivity could cause loss of data or connection down-time during the interview session.

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews adds more flexibility for questions to be added and clarity to be sought during the session. Given that the focused group participants feel more comfortable and relaxed, this facilitates the collection of personal data hence making the in-depth interview a conversation rather than a calculated interrogation of questions and answers. The
interviewers explore the questions deeper and use it to gather qualitative data which ultimately lasts a little longer (Corona, 2017).

A structured format was introduced during the interview to gather participants’ demographics (such as age, gender, level of education, country, etc.). For the most part, the remaining section of the interview was more open-ended, flexible and semi-structured. This approach helped gain insights and understanding from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview session started with appreciating the participants for volunteering, reviewing the consent form, and thereafter confirming permission to videotape.

Although the interviews were conducted online, I established rapport with each participant in a way that, as an interviewer, my neutrality concerning all that was shared was not undermined. I maintained a nonjudgmental position, to encourage openness and trust in each participant. With this approach, the subsequent questions permitted the participants to express their thoughts and feelings, as well as to validate their knowledge, experiences, attitudes, and feelings, with these thoughts being vital to the topic.

**Data Analysis Method**

The quality, depth, and scope of data determines its quality and credibility. To ensure these characteristics, the study gathered first-hand data from each participant through field engagement, which is the starting point for the constructivist grounded theory procedure. I kept memos of records that emerge from my analytical ideas through observing what transpired, both in the setting of the interview process and during the process of transcribing the gathered data from my audio recordings. Without delay, I commenced the transcribing of my recording and the analysis. According to Charmaz (2014) and Glaser (1978, 1998), views differ as to classical and
constructivist grounded theorists’ opinions on whether interviews should be recorded and transcribed.

Glaser is of the opinion that in order not to lose any salient details, note taking is more favorable than recording. For researchers to gain a wide view of the data, coding from the notes taken is helpful. This also aids the transitioning process to theoretical abstraction (Charmaz, 2014). In this study, coding commenced immediately after the interview to gain a deeper level of engagement with the data. Ultimately, it is a reiterative process where analysis of data is ongoing to gain insight, and continuously done if the researcher is still working on the study. This was accomplished via closely examining the data, and by disassembling and reassembling to make analytic interpretations. The gathering of sufficient data aided the data analysis process and provided a full picture of the study. According to Charmaz (2014), considering the design of the study “a researcher can rarely make persuasive, much less definitive, statements from limited data” (pg. 87).

Before conducting the online interview, the questions used were reviewed by two of my committee members and field-tested with two international students of African descent who are currently working, using Optional Practical Training (OPT) legal permission. The two students who examined the interview questions did not participate in the study. Their ineligibility was due to non-enrolment status in any university. However, they were chosen because they met the criteria of having experienced cross-cultural transition challenges while in school.

Creswell and Creswell (2017) described the research process as an emergent design, where an initial plan for the research might change or shift as the researcher enters the field for data collection process. Since the researcher’s intention concerning the study is to gain insight about the problem or issue from a participant’s perspective, and the researcher then structures the
research to obtain that information. I modified some of my research questions to gain further insights about my participants’ experiences, opinions, and feelings, as well as knowledge about the study.

**Initial coding**

In the process of initial coding, I separated the data and studied them closely for the purpose of data analysis. To help conceptualize what was happening with the data, I read and studied the transcribed data to remain open to all possible theoretical directions. Thereafter, I drew up labels of the categories for the data collected utilizing line-by-line coding as well as segment-by-segment coding. Key words/description and phrases were captured and converted from the transcript of participants’ interviews. The data stemmed from lines and words or incidents to define what the data is insinuating (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). I went ahead to construct codes into an initial set of categories to reflect the selected, sorted, and separated data. The codes thereafter show my understanding of the various aspects of the data and reflect interactions between the participants and the transcribed data.

The flexibility of initial coding provides grounds for closeness to the data and the preservation of the empirical underpinning of the study. The initial coding allows the data to speak for itself rather than drawing inferences from preconceived ideas through different analytic possibilities. Initial coding supports the emergence of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). The research accomplished line by line analysis of the transcript while developing the initial coding. During the process, I created tables with assigned labels. Following the guidelines for line-by-line analysis of the initial coding, I ensured that the codes captured words and actions of participants, rather than topics or themes.
Focused coding

This is the next major phase which is expressed by using the most significant and frequent codes developed from an initial coding phase to synthesize and explain larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2006). Emerging data builds on theoretical direction during data analysis. This is because data generate from focused coding stems from the selection of initial coding. The generated codes are thereby tested, by using them to analyze, sort, and synthesize larger volumes of data (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). In this stage, I decided to identify and focus on which code could be sifted, categorized and useful for my analysis, hence conceptualizing the fitness of the initial codes that were developed in a more focused manner.

Initial codes with more theoretical directions in shaping the research process are showcased with the aid of focused coding (Charmaz, 2014, p. 141). Data analysis is streamlined and more accurately accomplished in this manner (Charmaz, 2014). In my data analysis, I introduce the comparative method which aided in the generating theory of analytical ideas. I compared and examined the relationships between codes to data and also codes to codes. Focused coding is interactive, emergent, and flexible (Charmaz, 2014). I immersed myself in the data analysis by creating an interaction and applying my analytical skills in a right perspective of the study, keeping the generated codes active and close to the data. It helped to understand the data in the context of my participants. This process is visually represented in a diagram (Chapter 4) showing the links from initial coding to focused coding and the subsequent categories developed.

Theoretical coding

Theoretical coding follows the focused coding method in the generation of theoretical codes frame, which substantiates codes related in other forms that feeds into the emergent substantive theory (Charmaz 2014). According to Charmaz (2014), he asserted that theoretical
codes are integrative and help the researcher create a coherent analytic story that has theoretical potential. Theoretical codes replace axial codes because they bring the data back in their original form. Properly applied, “theoretical codes may hone your work with a sharp analytic edge. They can add precision and clarity – as long as they fit your data and substantive analysis” (Charmaz, 2014 p. 76). The process enabled a coherent analysis and comprehensible conceptualization of the story around which the analysis focused.

In facilitating the theoretical codes, theoretical coding families with specific analytical frames are subsumed in a conceptual variation related to the larger category. In order not to stifle the emergence of fresh ideas, I did not apply theoretical coding indiscriminately with view of forcing the data into old frameworks. Rather, it was used to clarify and sharpen my analysis. During this stage, I identified the core categories developed from the focused coding and specify the relationships between them to develop the theme.

**Memo writing**

I commenced the memo writing during the data collection process. This was to ensure that I did not lose critical analytical ideas when observing the interview. When achieving higher levels of theoretical abstraction, the elevation of my analytical ideas become the focal point of the data analysis process, and this is realized by the memo writing (Charmaz, 2014). Memo writing is critical because it is the connection between the data gathered, the data to be analyzed, and the report be written.

In grounded theory, memo writing is strategic, and it keeps the researcher involved in the research from inception to completion. Memos capture the analytical thoughts and codes of the researcher in an informal presentation, and as such provide a basis for clarification and development of categories for focused codes. Later in the data analysis process, I used the memo
for reporting what was happening to the data, by way of exploring and developing qualitative
codes for the purpose of analytic speculations (Charmaz, 2014)

Figure 2 gives a representation of how data will be collected and analyzed for the purpose
of this research study.

**Figure 2 : Diagram representing the Methodological Process**

![Diagram representing Methodological Process](image)

**Measures for Ensuring Trustworthiness**

All scientific inquiries are to be tested for trustworthiness, as to whether the researcher’s
claims are correct about the empirical world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is achieved by the
level of rigorous work done to ensure the quality of the study while conducting an investigation
on the study phenomenon. The quality of work conducted in qualitative research has been a
source of contention among scholars (Mays & Pope, 2006), due to the philosophical perception
that qualitative inquiry is inherently different from positivist assumptions and conventional
criteria (internal and external validity, reliability, neutrality) which are the basis for assessing quality in quantitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As qualitative method becomes popular in social science research applications, guidelines are emerging as alternative criteria to judge the rigor of qualitative designs (Ezzy, 2002; Mays & Pope, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although there is no definitive set of criteria to determine quality in qualitative research, some researchers have developed new sets of criteria that reflect the unique language of qualitative inquiry (Eisner, 1998; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Participant involvement in the qualitative research process thus generates the rigor and ethical consideration which are benchmarks for quality assessment. In this study, I followed the principle established by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Establishing rigor in a research study requires having truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality for it to be considered worthwhile. These criteria are entrenched in post-positivist roots of grounded theory, as well as the research method used in this study. Ensuring trustworthiness strengthens the value of this research study.

**Credibility**

The authenticity and the coherent nature of the research findings is based on (a) the participation of the respondents, (b) the meaning and interpretation of the outcome, which proves the credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As validity is to quantitative research, so is credibility to qualitative research. Credibility is concerned with whether the findings from the analysis carry plausible information derived from the data, which in turn stems originally from the participants and whether the interpretations of the participant’s views are correct (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the credibility of the theoretical constructs, I relied on
and adequately engaged in the data gathering process, asked for members’ assistance in checking and debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Adequate Data Gathering Process**

In a social world, the way the researcher engages in the process of data gathering when interfacing with the study participants depicts how the participants will make sense of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I simultaneously collected exhaustive data for the purpose of emergent theory saturation during data analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

- **Member checking**

  I engaged the study participants in the process of member checking as a way of validating the researcher’s analytic interpretations. During the online interview sessions, I requested feedback from my participants to verify their interpretations concerning the precision of all they shared with me. I was duly aware of the existing power differential between I and my participants, noting how it might influence consent to sharing and giving feedback. To avoid influencing the accuracy of the data, I explained the importance and restated the confidentiality piece to this study (Stahl & King, 2020). This was to ensure participants’ comments or add further information accordingly, as a way of corroboration between the researcher and the study participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- **Peer debriefing**

  I established an online forum where peers could review the research results as a way of ensuring the credibility of the research study. In interpreting the study data, I solicited feedbacks from peers who either have no interest or else have direct involvement in the research. This would be other doctoral students (counseling education and supervision) at The University of New Orleans (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). I also engaged in study checking from my
research committee members, as a form of institutional checking (such as permissions, procedures, and findings) on the research (Stahl & King, 2020). This was done to further establish trust in the research findings.

**Transferability**

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative analysis are transferred to other contexts, either with fresh participants or in other settings. It is the generalizability interpretative equivalence (Bitsch, 2005). Consistent with Bitsch (2005), the researcher generates the interchangeability judgment by a possible user through thick description and purposeful sampling (p. 85). In this study, to evaluate the extent to which conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. I provided “thick descriptions” of methods and time frames for the data collection as well, for the entire duration of the study. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 135).

- **Provision of thick description**

In consistency with the study by Li (2004), thick description allows judgments regarding how well the analysis context fits different contexts, thick descriptive information (i.e., a rich and intensive set of details regarding methodology and context) ought to be enclosed within the report of the analysis (p. 305). Thick description involves the researcher elucidating all the processes of the research analysis, from collection of data and context of the study to production of the finished report. Thick description helps different researchers to copy the study with similar conditions in other settings. To make interchangeability of qualitative inquiry, the researcher collects thick descriptive data that permits comparison of the context to different attainable contexts to which transfer may be contemplated, to turn out a thick description of the context to form a judgment regarding its fit with other possible contexts (Guba, 1981, p. 86). It is the role of
the qualitative inquirers to supply thick descriptions of the study to ensure it achieves interchangeability.

**Dependability**

According to Bitsch (2005), stability of finding overtime is referred to as dependability of the study (p.86). The findings, interpretation and recommendations of the study are dependability criteria that involves the participants’ full involvement in making sure the study is supported by the data received from the participants (Cohen et al., 2002; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Dependability is established using an audit trail, a code-recode strategy, stepwise replication, triangulation and peer examination or iterator comparisons (Razavieh et al., 2010; Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Krefting, 1991; Schwandt et al., 2007).

- **An audit trail**: An examination of the inquiry method and products to validate the information is known as audit trail. It is a process whereby the researcher accounts for all the decision making, and activities, and indicates how the information were collected, recorded, and analysed (Bowen, 2009; Li, 2004). In conducting a thorough audit trail by an auditor, an inquiry process must be followed by cross-checking the following valid documents: raw data, interview and observation notes, documents and records collected from the field, test scores and others. The confirmability of the study is also established by the audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). In consistency with the study by Wallendorf & Belk (1989), judging of the dependability of the study is associated with long term inquiry with the observation of the informants during the process, while learning if there are any changes provided that requires explanations, and findings must be compelled to be audited for sincerity.

- **Stepwise replication**: A process where two or more researchers analyze the same study data separately and make comparison to the result is known as “stepwise replication” (Chilisa
Any inconsistencies that arise from the separate analyses are compelled to be addressed in improving the dependability of the inquiry, and if the results of analyses are similar, then dependability of the inquiry is achieved.

- **Code-recode strategy:** The code-recode strategy involves the researcher coding the same data two times, giving a gestation period of one or two weeks between every coding. The results from the two coding are compared to examine whether the results are identical or different (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). The code-recode strategy can be called code agreement, whereby the analysis method permits multiple observations by the researcher, suggesting that the inter-rater or inter-observer code the information and compare it with the inter-rater. If the coding results agree, it improves qualitative inquiry dependability. The researcher gains a deep understanding of data patterns and improves the presentation of participants narrations.

- **Peer examination:** Peer examination in essence is not different from the member checks strategy used to improve the credibility of the inquiry (Bitsch, 2005; Krefting, 1991). Throughout peer examination the researcher discusses his/her analysis method and findings with colleagues that are not members of the study topic, such as PhD students who are conversant with qualitative analysis or have expertise of qualitative research but are not involved in the same study. Consistent with Bitsch (2005) and Krefting (1991), peer examination helps the researcher to be honest regarding his/her study and peers may contribute to his or her deeper reflexive analysis. Additionally, colleagues facilitate in spotting the areas not covered by the research questions to help in identifying negative cases.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is concerned with results which can be associated with the research study, or a study inquiry, which may be confirmed or supported by alternative researchers (Baxter &
Eyles, 1997). Study suggests that audit trail, reflexive journal, and triangulation are bases for which qualitative inquiry study may be confirmed (Bowen, 2009; Koch, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As asserted by Bowen (2009), an audit trail offers visible proof from process and product that the researcher did not merely notice in terms of findings (p. 307). Triangulation involves the use of several totally new strategies, investigators, sources, and theories to generate corroborating evidence (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 239). Triangulation aids the investigator in scale back bias and cross-examines the integrity of participants’ responses. In this study, I compared different data sources and or different perspectives from research participants to search for common themes.

**Positionality**

As asserted by Lincoln (1995), and Merriam & Tisdell (2016), positionality is concerned with both the researchers’ epistemological stance, as well as their worldview, theoretical orientation, and their relationship to the studied phenomenon. I affirm my position in addressing the criterion for investigating the phenomenon under study by making my positionality explicit. I will enhance the authenticity of the study (Lincoln, 1995, Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To clarify my biases, I made them known throughout the research process. I utilized bracketing and consultation with my dissertation team to check my biases (Morrow, 2005). Additionally, I engaged in self-reflection throughout the research process to ensure validation of my study.

On a personal level, I was born and raised in Nigeria, which is one of the countries in the sub-Saharan African region from whence these students come. Nigeria’s culture embodies the diverse influences that emanates from immediate families and communities. I do not have personal experiences of cultural shock and frustration, because I came into the United States to study with my spouse and my children; hence, I was not lonely, like some students that came
alone to study. Notwithstanding, I could easily come to terms with students who have experienced difficulties while studying in a United States university. I firmly believe that my research will give deeper insights into this category of students’ experiences, and possible interventions will be proffered as to how these can be helped.

**Ethical Consideration**

When carrying out research that involves human subjects, ethics is an especially important aspect that will be taken seriously. As part of adhering to the ethics of conducting this research, several procedures were adequately followed. Participants were informed ahead as to the extent of their involvement and how their information will be used in shaping the study. A consent form was sent to participants to fill and complete. After they sent back the signed consent form, they engaged with the contents of the interview session. Participants had the right to decline signing the consent form if they chose not to participate. There will be no known risk in the engagement of the participants in the interview session and a copy of the consent form will be made available in the study as Appendix C. The data that emanated from the online semi-structured interview session would be protected according to HIPAA compliance (which is a safe and encrypted platform, both voice and text, meaning that information will always remain safe and confidential) can only be assessed by the researcher and will be kept for 5 years before it will be deleted permanently to protect the participants rights. The video recordings will be kept in a passworded flash drive locked in the department. The basic ethical principles of beneficence, respect, and justice would guide the research study.
Chapter Summary

This chapter illustrates the research methodology for the study. Some of the research processes discussed are research questions, research design, population, and sample size, data collection procedures, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations. The study was designed as a qualitative study with a grounded theory approach to explore the lived experiences of sub-Saharan African international students’ cross-cultural differences in the United States. The research explores the psychological distress experienced by these students and the help-seeking behaviors adopted to cope and/or manage the challenges. The methodology chosen ideally suited the research questions stated.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Promotion and enrollment of international students into American universities comes with the responsibility of initiating specialized services to manage the unique social, personal, and academic challenges that come with adjusting to a new environment. Navigating the complex and unfamiliar university system and American society can be challenging, thus host universities are ethically required to provide the necessary services to assist with smooth transitioning (Pederson, 1979; Gebhard, 2012; Park et al., 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the transitional challenges specifically faced by sub-Saharan African international students and to explore perceptions concerning the help-seeking behaviors adopted by this population in the United States. As stated earlier in previous chapters, insights into the lived experiences of these students will help provide counselors with culture-centered information relevant when providing counseling services to these students. Whereas ample literature addresses the collective challenges and coping strategies adopted by international students in the process of transitioning into the host country, having the viewpoint of sub-Saharan African international students provides a better understanding of their lived experiences.

Included in this chapter is a brief review of the data analysis procedures and the findings of the study. The findings of the study are presented in a detailed step-by-step account. The chapter closes with a description of how I integrated the constructs of Health Belief Model (conceptual framework) and summary.
Data Analysis Procedures

The study integrated a systematic framework for data collection during the interview process. The researcher established rapport building with each participant by identification first to enable a trustworthy environment, giving space and time to each participant to share experiences; integrating follow-up questions to explore meaning. The study interviewed eight sub-Saharan African international students, utilizing the interview protocol (see Appendix D), and assigned pseudonyms to the participants to protect their identities. Transcribing and analyzing all the interviews simultaneously followed the constructivist grounded theory approach to data collection. By developing codes, the author conceptualized what was happening with the data. The process developed categories and themes to further develop the initial codes. Each participant received an email expressing my appreciation for participating and contributing to the study (see Appendix E).

Participants

This section introduces the eight participants interviewed for this research study. The participants are currently enrolled in five different universities. Demographic information for all participants is represented in the table below. An illustration of each participant’s perspective and experiences regarding the study is presented through verbatim quotations of each participants’ interview transcripts.

Table 3

Participants Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Degree Program</th>
<th>Length of Time in U.S (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>M.B.A</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sola</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>M.B.A</td>
<td>1year 2months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The study interviewed participants between September and October of 2022. Prior to starting the semi-structured online interview, the author provided an explanation of the study in a discussion with each participant. Reading the informed consent allowed room for questions and clarifications, also the author discussed permission to videotape and addressed guideline peradventure the zoom link should disconnect. All the participants reconfirmed their willingness to participate by giving verbal consent.

**Sola** was expressive and spoke openly about his perceptions of mental health concerns and the help-seeking behaviors that he adopted. He explained that settling down was challenging for him, despite having a support system here in the United States. He argued that despite his work experience back in Nigeria, he is not legally permitted to work outside the school environment. “I was working in a commercial bank, but getting here, as an international student, you can only work 20 hours and it has to be within the school. I also found out that bills are paid monthly. It’s a whole lot of changes for me.” Sola seemed to believe in the value of family bond and support to manage challenges when they appear. He explained that although he has never been in counseling before, he might be open to it someday. He maintained a calm yet vocal mood throughout our one-hour interview session. Sola expressed his eagerness to receiving my findings once completed.
Edward spoke openly, using his hands to express himself at different intervals during the interview. He expressed his perceptions of mental health concerns and the help-seeking behaviors adopted. He explained coming from a collective culture and having to adjust to the individualistic culture in America. “When I came into America, I get thrown straight into this melting pot of diverse cultures and just immersed in underrepresentation. It was a very traumatizing time, and I was bullied”. Edward had some positive remarks about counseling, although he reported that his first impression and experience was not that good. He believed that having the right counselor can definitely help manage the stress that comes with adjusting to a new environment. The interview lasted approximately one hour during which Edward was responsive and cooperative.

David believes that everything around a person can affect their mental health if not managed properly. “Your family and financial condition, crisis in the neighborhood. You can dress well, look good, but having a lot of mental issues going-on”. He explained that having good friends as support has helped him during challenging moments. “I felt a sense of belonging and identity through friendship here in America. You cannot survive alone. You need people around you”. He shared his perspective on seeking help from a counselor, relating it to seeking medical help when needed. He indicated that although he is open to counseling, he is skeptical about sharing his personal issues with a stranger. “I come from a cultural background that supports and give advice during challenging times. I need a counselor that can connect with me rather than somebody who’s just pursuing a career and is disconnected. I will feel comfortable with a counselor that understands my cultural identity”. After about 50 minutes, the interview session ended. David expressed his eagerness to seeing my findings once completed. He was
responsive and outspoken throughout the interview session. He chose his words carefully and spoke extensively when responding to the interview questions.

Kwame throughout the interview, maintained a calm posture. He was open and shared freely his perspectives about mental health, his transitional challenges and help-seeking decision. Kwame explained his views about mental health as “someone going through issues that might not be physical, such as internal struggles. Back at home, people don’t really talk about it. I started hearing more about mental health here in America”. He shared his experience processing his application and eventually getting a visa to travel to the United States for educational purpose. He stated that scheduling a visa interview date with the U.S embassy was challenging due to post-pandemic backlog. However, the support from family members and friends helped him stay focused to manage during those periods. “I discuss with my mom a lot and she’s always encouraging me”. Kwame pointed out that moving to another country might be very difficult adjusting to the new environment and society if you don’t have a support system. He mentioned that it could be lonely and challenging to fit in. “Initially, when I first got here, when I speak English, I was told I had an accent. I found it to be very insulting”. The support from African friends who were already in the school environment, helped during those transitioning periods. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Kwame expressed how pleased he was to participate in the study.

Tope was outspoken and open to disclose her perception on mental health concerns and help-seeking behavior. Tope talked about her cultural background and how it impacted her views about someone struggling with mental health issues. She mentioned that intervention is mostly rendered by religious organizations. She also pointed out that adjusting into the university system and American society was not that easy for her. “The time difference was something I struggled
with initially. I missed talking with my family and friends. Making new friends was not easy, especially with domestic students. I have experienced discrimination because of my English pronunciations. It took me awhile to note the difference in British spellings and American spellings”. Tope explained that the educational system back in her home country followed the British system. She stated that connecting with the African international student organization in the campus has been of tremendous help to her, providing needed information (such as, the process of opening a bank account, transportation, class enrollment). The interview lasted approximately one hour, and Tope expressed her anticipation to read my findings.

Francis throughout the interview was expressive and disclosed freely. Francis shared his perspective concerning mental health issues, and his adjustment challenges to the host country and how he managed it. He explained that his cultural background relates to how he views mental health problems.

“…For a long time, mental health is not a common subject that is talked about. The mindset is when you are struggling with anything, you share it within your family. You know Africans have a collective view to life and we rally round each other when needed”.

He talked extensively about how he learned more about mental health when he arrived in America. Francis also mentioned that adjusting to the new environment was overwhelming for him. He disclosed being emotionally and physically exhausted because of the accommodation and transportation issues that he had. He also shared that he had issues with finances because there was a mistake with the graduate assistant stipends on his letter and the amount that was paid. “I don’t want to bore you with the lengthy details. It took a full semester before it was corrected”. He explained that having the right support at the right time might help cope with the
stress of settling down into a new environment. “I was unaware there’s a counseling center on
campus. I would have tried it out”. He is of the opinion that more information needs to be made
available to international students about the services or resources that could help them adjust into
the university system and American society. The interview session ended at exactly 50 minutes.

**Kevin** throughout the interview session, was very vocal and disclosed freely. He
expressed his keen interest in reading about my findings. Kevin shared his perspective on what
mental health concern was to him, his view linked to his background and specifics of help-
seeking behavior. He mentioned the issue of struggling with mental health problems is not
publicly addressed while growing up. “When a person is faced with challenges they can’t handle,
you share with your immediate family. Mental illness has this religious context to it”. Kevin
disclosed that he struggled with anxiety and because he had no family member here in the United
States, he felt homesick and lonely during his first semester. “When things pile up, I get fairly
anxious and stressed……”. He explained that during those periods, his only way of coping was
talking with his family members back home and getting advice from them. He also shared that
things got better when he made friends with African students who were able to help link him up
with some resources (such as, transportation, housing, African store). Kevin was unsure about
the choice of counseling, although, he maintained a good gesture towards trying it. The interview
lasted approximately one hour.

**Theo** maintained a calm posture, expressive and outspoken throughout the interview.
Theo spoke at length about his perceptions on what mental health concern was to him, and his
help-seeking decisions. He explained that his initial view concerning mental health relates to his
cultural background; however, with more information, he has a better understanding. “It’s not the
display of insanity……. I now understand that it can be anything that disrupts my day-to-day
lifestyle”. Theo reported that it was challenging for him to adjust to the university system and society when he first arrived in America. “I was awarded a scholarship for my program …… but had other issues, such as enrolling for classes, getting an accommodation within the school, as well as transportation. I can recall being told that I have an accent …… which still baffles me because I think everyone has an accent”. He mentioned that during that stressful period, his African friends were supportive, and he had lecturers that piqued an interest in him, providing information that were helpful towards his academic success. Theo stated that presently he’s unsure about going for counseling but could consider it if more information about the process is known. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

**Applicability of the Health Belief Model Constructs**

To facilitate this study, I applied the Health Belief Model (HBM) constructs when developing the interview questions (open-ended), and during the interview sessions. The HBM constructs provided a conceptual underpinning to explore the personal perceptions of sub-Saharan African international students, whether or not they will be influenced to engage in strategies available to help with the mental health concern. A representation of the concept is presented in table format (see Appendix F).

**Data Presentation, Analysis and Findings**

This section explains the data-driven account of emergent categories and themes developed after the methodological approach explained in Chapter 3. The author conducted an intensive online interview with 8 participants. The data analysis procedure progressed from simultaneous interview transcription to initial and focused coding, through theoretical coding and finally developing theory for the study. The structural representation demonstrating the connection and progression from raw data to the emerging categories and themes is presented in
Appendix G. An explanation of each category is suffused with participants quotes taken from the interview transcripts. Within the context of this study, saturation was reached by the 8th interview session. Participants shared their viewpoint using empathic and non-verbal responses to describe and explain the phenomenon. I ended data collection at this point of the research.

Theory Building

Interview Question 1: What can you tell me about yourself, background and beliefs?

The codes transcribed from the interview question 1 were grouped into six categories: Culture, Religion, Values, Mindset, Education and Community.

Culture comprises all codes that represent respondents’ opinions that culture plays an important role in the manner in which they view themselves and their personalities. The respondents’ opinions suggest that culture is huge when decisions are made concerning their identity. Sola pointed out that “having a helpful cultural background” shaped his childhood experiences. He expanded on how this concept played an important role in his life.

“…right from my childhood, I was surrounded with love and care. My parents mirrored hospitality, respect, hard work, and honesty to us all. These values shaped who I am today. The display of authentic social lifestyles and peoples’ attitudes towards each other shows the richness in African culture. I am a proud African any time, any day.”

Kwame and Edward both shared similar views about the “collective culture” of the African society. Kwame stated “I was born in the second largest city in Ghana and the same language is spoken by the people. This makes it easy to relate, work and support each other,” and Edward also expressed,

“…I come from a very collective culture, like most African countries, where society at large are making decisions based on the most amount of good for the most amount of
people, versus what you think is innately good for yourself. Moral reasoning and communal lifestyle are things I learned and experienced from my childhood.”

Culture is the bedrock of the respondents’ attitude towards perceptions of self and worldview. The participants responses affirmed that an individual from African descent cannot be separated from their cultural identity, despite leaving outside their homeland.

**Religion** category contains all codes that impacts the respondent’s attitude to Spirituality and its importance in the respondent’s family life and self. Three major modes of religion practiced in Africa are Christianity, Muslim, and Traditionalist. Most participants disclosed adopting Christianity as their choice of religion.

Tope explained “My parents are Christians. I grew up going to church and reading my Bible. I hold my faith very dear to my heart, although I have friends who are not Christians.” The pattern of worship and music showcase the difference in the religions. Kwame expressed, “I think in Ghana, close to like 70% are Christians, then maybe 20% to be Muslims. Others, maybe, are traditionalists. So, I fall into the number that are Christians.”

**Values** category explains all codes applying value-based factors represent the subjective views of the respondents and show the influence on personal identity. While addressing individual practices that inform behaviors and collective views, some participants placed emphasis on basic African values that shaped their personality. Edward mentioned “My parents always allowed me to have an open mind, so I grew up being inquisitive and curious. It has helped me throughout my career and making decisions.” David spoke of the experiences gathered over the years from close and intimate cultural interactions and unique social relationships, shaping lifetime memories and knowledge about African people. David stated,
“…I believe that our culture and values should not perish. The African lifestyle is not barbaric, and I don’t support European mindsets. Being respectful and acknowledging the presence of an elderly person is our way of life. Showing kindness and hospitality is an integral part of who we are as Africans.”

**Mindsets** category comprises all codes, explaining the cultural norm of resilience and its influence on self and decision making of the participants. Participants emphasize the importance of attitudes and thought patterns fostering an inherent tenacity to face challenges and achieve set goals.

“…I am very self-aware and smart. I watched my parents leave a legacy of hard work and productive lifestyle. This was imbibed in me and my siblings. I understand challenges come in life, but I was taught to face it and not give up.” (Francis)

“…I embody a philosophy called stoicism. It talks about temperance, justice, wisdom, and courage. My perspective of moral reasons, being transparent and accountable is influenced through this lens.” (Edward)

**Education** category are codes that represent importance of education in each participant life and family. This described the sub-Saharan African international student educational environment before the decision to travel to host country for educational purpose. According to the participants, instilling the value of education is a common practise in most families in Africa. It is believed that acquisition of knowledge brings about liberation, meaningful life style and an improved standard of living.

“…I had my first-degree back in Africa. My parents are educated, and they made sure that I and my siblings get the best education. We attended a private elementary and secondary school. They supported my decision to come to the United States for my
master’s degree. Although the academic learning styles are different here, the foundation that I had back home has helped me tremendously.” (Sola)

“…Right from a very young age, I enjoyed traveling and socializing because I viewed it as a form of learning and acquiring knowledge. This is one of the things I learned from my dad. I attended a public school throughout my educational process. My family members are educated, so there was no option of dropping out or choosing not to be educated. Education was a core value that you embrace as a child.” (Theo)

Community contains codes that described the society and environment of the participants in relation to their country of origin. Kevin described “community” from the concept of engagement and supportive environment. He stated,

“…In the estate where my parents live (which is referred to as neighbourhood here in America), everyone relates together like family. The children attend the same school, and our parents support each other as they possibly can. I can categorically say that we all looked after each other and still do.”

From Figure 3 below, it can be seen how culture intersects with sub-Saharan African international students’ perception of self and society. The participants placed a high value on their cultural identity, despite schooling in a foreign country. The religion, values, mindset, education, and community all links with the African culture.
**Interview Question 2:** What do you understand by the term mental health concern/psychological distress?

The codes transcribed from the interview question 2 were grouped into six categories: State of mind, Behavior, Tormented, Taboo, Stigmatization and Cultural Intervention.

The final codes are explained below:

**State of the mind** comprises all codes that represent respondents’ perspectives and understanding of what mental health concern/psychological distress means. The respondents’ opinions suggest that the state of mind is a big factor to consider when identifying whether an individual has mental illness or when the individual is undergoing psychological stress.
“…I can talk from a literary perspective, anything that affects you mentally. An example can be your financial condition. I mean everything around you affects you mentally. The crisis around the gunshots in your neighborhood, having a lot of work and not able to meet deadlines.” (David)

“…Mental issues or concern is actually when someone is troubled. In Africa, a mentally ill person is referred to as an insane person, because of the irrational behaviors and dressing.” (Francis)

**Behavior** comprises all codes that represent respondents’ school of thought in understanding their perception of mental illness and psychological distress from a behavioral point of view. The participants relate it to the behavioral attitudes displayed by persons’ struggling with mental health problems. David stated, “It is not only when an individual is displaying insanity. You can dress well, look good, but have a lot of mental issues. I have read books about psychological disturbance and how it affects a person’s life” and Kevin shared, “I grew up seeing that most people suffering from mental illness display inappropriate behaviors, like talking to self and looking untidy.”

**Tormented** category contains all codes that represent respondents’ viewpoints and perspectives on mental illness and psychological disorder. They relate it to history of mental illness in Africa and how persons with mental illness were termed as having been punished by the gods of the land. Theo explained that “The perception surrounding mental illness is such that the person is being possessed by evil spirits. This comes from the religious beliefs of Africans. I grew up hearing and knowing this. And I would say, it is still prevalent till now.”

**Taboo** category contains codes that represent how mental illness and psychological disorder in Africa are being viewed and not generally talked about. The participants stated the silence
disposition toward giving voice to discussing issues of mental health problems in the society. This made it difficult for anyone struggling to talk about their challenges and even seek help.

“…So, I think a lot of our sub-Saharan African culture views mental health illness as taboo. If you think about traditional African religions, anybody who has had a mental illness has always been deemed as possessed by demons or has some evil eye turned towards them. And so, mental illness in general is a taboo, especially in the rural parts of most sub-Saharan African countries.” (Edward)

“…It’s not really a big deal because people don’t usually talk about it. It’s here in the United States that emphasis is placed on a persons’ mental health. I started hearing about mental health because I grew up with the perception that a person cannot be depressed. You have family and friends that surround you and willing to help.” (Kwame)

**Stigmatization** contains codes that describe how people with mental illness and psychological distress are viewed. The category generally represents codes that impact individuals with mental and psychological distress. Edward explained that because he now understands what mental illness is all about, some of the symptoms displayed by his childhood schoolmate was actually signs of someone struggling with mental illness.

“…Because I have the benefit of hindsight and the exposure I have in America, I look back at my childhood just going to school and you know, I’ve thought about my classmate and I’m like, this person probably exhibited signs of schizophrenia. The lack of resources and understanding of mental illness has everything to do with the stigmatization we’ve placed on people that are struggling with their mental health.”

(Edward)
“...The fear and shame of being victimized by the society always stops people with mental illness from opening up. The belief surrounding mental illness also contributes to the silence. Nobody wants to be labeled as madman or madwoman.” (Kevin)

**Cultural Intervention** category are codes that describe how people with mental health illness and psychological distress receive treatment, as well as the type of treatment received to manage their situation. Participants voiced the traditional and religious importance when addressing the type of treatment or help giving to persons’ struggling with mental illness.

“...I will tell you that in Africa, mental illness is treated by religious organizations. The presence of counselors is not widely spread and they are mostly in the urban cities. Most people talk and seek help from their religious leaders. I mentioned earlier that religious context is automatically attached to issues of mental illness.” (Tope)

“...People with mental illness are being referred to traditional healers for traditional treatment. Even with civilization, people still patronize them for local treatments.” (Theo)

Figure 4 below captures the relationships after I grouped and compressed the data into categories and theme to ease the process of developing the theory.
**Interview Question 3**: What contributed to your adjusting well to your host country? *Follow up:* How would you describe your experience?

The codes transcribed from the interview sessions have been grouped into five categories: Ethnic Group Support, Social Interactions, Religious Setting, Academic Support, and Homebase Support.

The final codes are explained below:

**Ethnic Group Support** comprises all codes that represent participants’ opinions on their cross-cultural experience which has enabled their adjusting in the United States. The participants
expressed that they obtained more reception and assistance from Africans and African communities than other races. Francis explained how he was helped by two African international students to resolve the issue of accommodation and opening a bank account. He expressed,

“…I had no family here to support me and I needed help settling down, because I came in two weeks before the semester started. I was very fortunate that I met these students who looked out for me. They were already in their third semester and accustomed to the process.”

Theo also emphasized the assistance he got when he arrived in the United States. He stated,

“I think one thing that really helped me was when I came, I met some Ghanian folks here and they really helped me. When you get here, things are so different, but I had people who explained a lot of things. Like transportation, how to open bank account and get a credit card, especially what a credit card system means…..Having someone there for you at the beginning goes a long way.”

For the study participants, ethnic group support was a vital necessity to adjust into a new environment. This meant having the help of international students who had already gone through the initial process required for transitioning, such as, enrollment process, transportation, accommodation, and a banking system.

Social Interactions is a category that contains the codes that represent participants’ viewpoints that maintain positive attitudes, engaging in a form of social life helped them to adjust gradually in the host country when they arrived.

“…Back in Nigeria, a hobby I enjoyed doing is travelling to different tourist sites. I see it as a learning experience, fun, and rejuvenating… So, when I got here, I asked some
friends about places we could visit just to replicate the extracurricular activities that I like doing.” (Tope)

“…Friendship is important to me. Having good friends with whom I can associate and feel identified to, share my experience with, gives a sense of belonging.” (Edward)

The main context highlighted by participants in which social interaction contributed to transitioning into their new environment related to friendship and creating a social lifestyle similar to what they had in their home countries.

**Religious Setting** comprises of all codes that represent some participants’ impression concerning the positive influence made by the church group while trying to adjust to life in the host country. Sola expressed,

“…I mentioned earlier that I am a Christian, having a church community that were willing to help me with adjusting to the culture; here is something I cherish. They have a support group that provides internationals with information about the American culture.”

Similarly, Kevin added, “My first accommodation was provided by the church community that I was linked with. I was privileged to stay there for a month to enable me to find somewhere close to school.”

The different roles and intervention provided by the religious setting to some of the participants became significant to their experiences while adjusting to the American culture.

**Academic Support** relates to all the codes that represent some participants’ opinions on how being resilient towards their educational success and assistance from lecturers contributed to adjusting to the host country. Some participants compared academic process between Africa and America and highlighted the difference. The main context was the predominant learning and teaching styles.
“…Educational process, especially lecturers’ assistance, is more formal in Africa. This is different from what I have experienced here. Some of my lecturers helped me with my classes….They were responsive when I sent emails to them and took interest in providing guidance whenever I needed it.” (Sola)

“…My first point of call was the international student office when I resumed to the campus. The officers were friendly and provided information that helped me navigate the university environment….I was able to ask pressing questions such as on-campus employment opportunities, registration and payments of fees, and bus transportation within the city.” (Theo)

The opportunity of conversational interaction and support from lecturers and officers at the international student office paved the way for some of the participants to adjust gradually into the new environment.

**Homebase Support** refers to all the codes that represent participants’ belief on the vita impact made by family and friends in their home country towards settling down and adjusting to the new environment. David emphasized that before coming to the United States for studies, he had a very strong indigenous support system and communicating with them has helped in difficult situations. “When I had issues with my graduate assistant position….I don’t want to go into full details….encouragement and support that I received from family and friends kept me going” and Kwame also shared that, “Although I don’t have any family here, they have always supported me since I got to America. We communicate through WhatsApp….this is cost effective and my friends always send me messages.” All the participants expressed the importance of family and friend ties while adjusting to a new environment.
Figure 5 below shows the connection among the data, the emerging categories, and the theme that was developed.

**Figure 5**
*Graphical Representation of Data Structure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relating with African students, shared experience with African students</td>
<td>Ethnic group support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging through friendship, extracurricular activities &amp; socializing</td>
<td>Social interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church support, accommodated by church members</td>
<td>Religious support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisted by lecturers, international student office</td>
<td>Academic support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with family and friends</td>
<td>Homebase support</td>
<td>Ethnics group support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Question 4:** What was it like for you when you moved to the United States for studies?

The codes transcribed from the interview session have been grouped into six categories: Change in Weather, Financial Issues, Psychological Struggles, Homesick, Discrimination and Time Zone difference.

The final codes are explained below:

**Change in Weather** is comprised of all codes that represent participants’ opinions of how the condition of the weather has impacted their lifestyle and adjusting to the United States. The
participants’ expressed that change in the weather condition was a challenge after they arrived in the United States. They acknowledged that due to the weather difference, it took them some time to get accustomed to America’s weather pattern. David shared, “I come from an environment where the weather was perpetually warm. I struggle a lot whenever it gets cold here. I am not interested in taking the flu shot, so I have learnt not to expose myself.” For the participants, instead of the spring, summer, fall, and winter weather patterns experienced here in the United States, many African countries have dry and rainy seasons. This was the consistent weather pattern they were exposed to from childhood. Kevin pointed out that initially during his first few months, anytime the weather gets cold, his health condition was affected. He stated:

“…Because I did not understand the weather patterns, most of my clothing was not fit for American weather, especially during the cold….Fall was my first semester here and it was really rough because most of the time I was sick….what happened was that I got the flu and didn’t know….I have better understanding now and I take precautions to take care of myself.”

Financial Issues comprises all codes that represent the participants’ views on how financial challenges (meeting up with monthly bills) affected them after they arrived in the United States for studies. The participants’ opinions suggests that financial issues became one of the challenges they faced which affected their day-to-day functioning. They explained that in Africa, rent payment differs and it is mostly addressed in one-to-two-year intervals. Some expressed the shock they had when told it is monthly in America. Kevin echoed that without the accommodation support he got from his church community, he might have had some serious financial challenges. He stated,
“I am not sure I would have been able to meet up with other bills…. You know that there is no leeway if you don’t pay your bills here…. Even by the end of that semester, I still had some bills I needed to take care of.”

Similarly, Tope indicated,

“I understand the immigration policy restricting international students from working outside the campus environment…. The out-of-state fees are a lot and you have to enroll in 9 credit hours per semester, with the exception of your final semester…. Although, I pay my bills, it is stressful, especially with the exchange rate issues.”

For the participants, the context of financial issues relates to having to meet monthly financial obligations despite the exchange rates challenges. They pointed out that as an international student, it is obvious that with the 20 hours per week work rule, a financial restraint is inevitable without the impact of support system.

**Psychological Struggles** comprises all codes that represent the participants’ assessments of the different mental, emotional, and physical challenges they experienced while settling down into their new environment. The participants’ conception of their situation suggests the level of stress resulting in a lot of factors that affected their day-to-day functioning. Some participants’ responses included,

“…I struggle with anxiety, not at high levels, but when things start piling up, I get fairly anxious and experience shortness of breath…. I never had this before. It was because of accumulated stress and traumatizing times due to extreme isolation…. I had no family here to support me and my mind was mentally not in a good place… I had difficulty adjusting to life here in America.” (Edward)
“…I almost gave up at some point….I experienced emotional fatigue and sleepless nights because the course demand of a particular class was rigorous….I had assignments and deadlines to meet despite managing my time well. I finished the class with a ‘B’….It was not easy, but I pushed through, sacrificing some activities that I enjoyed doing.” (Sola)

“…Initially when I arrived in the U.S, I was overwhelmed with stress because, I didn’t get guidance from anyone. I was a lone ranger attending to things by myself….I experienced an emotional breakdown that affected my health. Not having support, no matter how small it is….is not a good thing.” (Theo)

Participants reflected on the different psychological struggles they experienced in the process of adjusting to their new environment.

**Homesick** refers to codes that represent participants’ perceptions of missing the familiar way of life and society. The loneliness experienced brought about yearning for interaction and communication with family and friends. David indicated, ”Sometimes I miss the familiar lifestyle, like hanging-out with friends on Friday evenings” and Edward expressed, “I have no family support here,” Tope also commented, “Not having your family around for so long can be lonely and you develop homesickness.” According to some participants, vacuum and feelings of emptiness were created during the periods when they didn’t have the support that they craved. The importance of having necessary support, especially during the initial stages of transition, was echoed by the participants.

**Discrimination** comprises all codes that represent participants’ impressions on how they were treated in the host country. The participants’ opinions suggest maltreatment, because of being new to the host country, and this to an extent affected their day-to-day functioning regarding making friends with domestic students and integrating into the American society.
“…An issue I had initially was being told ‘Oh you speak good English or You have an accent’…I find it to be insulting. I was taught in English throughout my educational learning experience…I understand that Africa has diverse languages, but our education is in English.” (Kwame)

In a similar vein, Francis stated, “In one of my classes, the English proficiency of international students’ expression was questioned. I did not consider it funny….I just don’t understand why having an accent is an issue.”

For the participants, discrimination was highlighted in the context of language, accent, race, and difference in word spellings. They reflected on their experiences and mentioned not allowing it to interrupt their educational process.

**Time Zone difference** relates to the codes that represent participants’ views on how change in time initially affected their sleeping habits, as well as communication with family and friends in the home country. David shared,

“The time zone is an issue. Between Africa and America, the time difference is 6 hours. Sometimes I want to place a phone call to my people at home…But when it is afternoon here, they are getting ready for bed and vice-versa. I sacrifice my sleep whenever I have to speak with them on the phone.”

Figure 6 below shows a reflection of the connection among the data, the emerging categories, and the theme that was developed.
**Interview Question 5:** How would you describe seeking help from a counselor?

The codes transcribed from the interview session five have been grouped into four categories: On-the fence attitude, Thoughts about Services, Family and friends preferred, Receptive Attitude.

The final codes are explained below:

**On-the fence attitude** comprises all codes that represent participants’ impressions concerning their perceptions on seeking help from a counselor if they experience mental health problems. The participants’ notions suggest that they are not certain whether they will seek a counselor’s help when they encounter mental health issues. The participants expressed their thoughts
concerning an approach to counseling services available within the university. David remarked, “Back at home, you hardly need the help of a counselor, because you have people around you ready and willing to help...So I can’t imagine myself consulting one, not sure I would.” The same view was highlighted by Kevin who asserted that “in Africa, counseling services are not comparable to what you have here...I don’t have a direct experience and everyone around me can’t relate with such. So, I just can’t decide yet if it’s something I would try in the future.”

According to the participants, apart from the cultural influence, the absence of having someone who has had a direct experience with counseling also influence their decision and attitudes.

**Thoughts about Services** relate to the codes that represent participants’ reaction and understanding of the counseling process if peradventure they decide to seek help from a counselor upon experiencing mental health problems. The participants’ opinions suggests an informative gap about the type of services and the process.

“...The first impression for me was a concern. It was not good...A friend suggested counseling, and my experience with three previous counselors was not pleasant. It took me time to find the right counselor that would help with my case....He sees me and treats me as an individual...One thing I can say about him is that he understands that I am a foreign student, listens, and validates me.” (Edward)

“...For me, I don’t even know there is a counseling center within the university....So, such service exist. My concern would be accessibility and sharing my personal life with someone I don’t know. Someone I don’t have any connection with....That would be difficult and I don’t think I can do it.” (Tope)
Additionally, some participants noted that thoughts about service refer to early sensitization and dissemination of appropriate information about the counseling process. The adaptation of service to accommodate cultural considerations and beliefs was also highlighted.

**Family and friends preferred** comprises all codes that represent participants’ opinions implying that they would prefer to be counseled by family and friends, rather than seeking help from an outsider (counselor) when experiencing any type of challenge. David and Kwame believed that being surrounded with family and friends for encouragement and consultation during challenging situations is more preferred than sharing their concerns with a counselor.

“…I need somebody more intimate, more connected to me. Right from childhood, I have always been surrounded by families and neighbors who took care of me, supported me every step of the way….Through the ups and downs. Everything about my life is open to them….So, I am more comfortable talking with them than someone I don’t know.”

(David)

“…In Ghana, some households have their grandparents, cousins, aunties….extended families living together. Whenever you are facing any issue, you speak out and get some good advice on how to manage it.” (Kwame)

A reflection of the communal lifestyle was noted from participants’ responses.

**Receptive Attitude** relates to the codes that represent some participants’ perspectives to trying counseling whenever the need arises. The participants’ expressed a positive and open view to talking with a counselor, although they’ve never been to counseling. Francis indicated, “I am open to try counseling service, but I will need more information concerning what it entails” and Kevin added, “I have talked about my family’s disposition to counseling, but I would like to try it someday. If the experience is good, I might be the one to change my family’s mind.”
Some of the participants commented on the possibility to engage in counseling services if they had more information concerning the process.

Figure 7 below shows a reflection of the process of grouping the categories and the theme that finally developed.

**Figure 7**

*Graphical Representation of Data Structure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not sure about sharing personal life, cultural background, can’t decide yet</td>
<td>On-the-fence attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about outcome, first impression not good, getting right counselor, privacy issue, safety &amp; accessibility, no direct experience</td>
<td>Thoughts about services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends as advisor, encouragement from friends, cultural influence</td>
<td>Family and friends preferred</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to counseling, seen improvement, better mental space</td>
<td>Receptive attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Question 5a:** What would be the benefit(s), if you decide to seek counseling?

The codes transcribed from the interview session have been grouped into three categories: Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility, Availability of Resource and Information, and Cost Implication.

The final codes are explained below:

**Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility** represents all codes that participants expressed as to what would motivate them to seek help from a counselor, whether the counselor
cares and culturally understands working with international students from different countries.

The participants’ opinions suggest that counselor cultural competence and cultural awareness is vital to their decision to seek counseling. Edward explained,

“…So, my initial perspective on counseling was kind of skewed because my previous counselors were incompetent….I felt this stereotypical view during our session together. I need a counselor that shows interest in me as an individual ready to learn….to research about my culture to better understand how to help me….because these westernized ways of thinking perspective might not work for Africans.”

In much the same way, Tope stated,

“…I think if I decide to go for counseling, I will prefer a right counselor that cares…someone that understands working with international students, but also does not generalize…I mean our cultural context, how we view things and life…Is it safe to share my personal issues with you and privacy of the room…”

“…I worry about counselor’s ability to help…What I mean by that is, will the counselor be able to provide the right guidance concerning issues such as academic and financial stressors…I can’t really go into details but there was a time the university delayed paying my graduate assistant stipends and it was a whole lot of back and forth with emails…I will prefer a counselor that understands navigating the university system…that can help me with advocacy.” (Kevin)

The importance of counselor cultural humility was echoed from the participants responses. Having a counselor that works from a cultural reference point might be an ideal place to learn and truly understand the rich diversity of cultures among the international student’s population.
Availability of Resource and Information relates to codes that represent participants’ viewpoint by referring to another reason that could move them to seek help when there is available support, resources and information about the counseling process. The participants’ opinions suggest that awareness and psychoeducation about the counseling process would play an important role in decision making to seek help during stressful periods while adjusting to the new environment. Theo expressed,

“…Thinking of what would be my takeaway or benefit if I eventually seek counseling….Well, that will be access to resources that would help me maintain my finances and academic goals….Also help with community resources, that as an international student, I can access without having immigration issues.”

According to Sola, “Before you even talk about benefit of counseling, information about the process comes first….I’m just curious about the pattern and treatment. I want an explanation about what is required of me and also what the counselor is expected to do.” And Francis also echoed, “Seeing the value it brings starts with early information.”

Seven of the eight participants (Sola, David, Kwame, Tope, Francis, Kevin, and Theo), who have had no direct experience with counseling emphasized availability of information and resources would result in effective counseling outcome.

Cost Implication comprises all codes that represent some participants’ opinions, referring to the motive to seek help would be considered if the cost did not affect their pockets. The participants’ opinions suggest a gap in information concerning the free counseling service available to them while enrolled in the university. Sola stated, “Having additional expenses to all I have right now would not be ideal, so if there is no additional cost would be good.” Francis agreed, “I think as long as I don’t have to incur additional cost. I do my budget at the beginning of each semester, so
there is no room to take on extra expenses.” Theo stated, “I don’t know if it’s added to the university fees I pay every semester, I wonder if it is cost effective…if I don’t have to pay will be good.”

Placing heightened sensitivity around financial stressors and considering ways to avoid incurring additional expense would be an important factor to encourage counseling.

Figure 8 below presents a reflection of the process of grouping the categories and the theme that finally developed. This was done while carefully checking for similarities and differences.

**Figure 8**
*Graphical Representation of Data Structure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselors’ ability to help, understands working with international students, right counselor that cares, cultural understanding, understands and validates</td>
<td>Counselor cultural responsiveness and humility</td>
<td>Counselor cultural responsiveness &amp; humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed about the process, safe &amp; private environment, available resources, early information</td>
<td>Availability of resource and information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No additional cost, cost effective</td>
<td>Cost implication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Question 6:** What are some of the reasons you wouldn’t seek help from a counselor?

The codes transcribed from the interview session have been grouped into five categories: Counseling Process Mistrust, Financial concerns, Time and Privacy, Counselor Cultural Awareness, and Personal Identity.

The final codes are explained below:
**Counseling Process Mistrust** comprises all codes that represent participants’ rationales for choosing not to access the help of a counselor when faced with challenges adjusting to the new environment. The participants provided a wide range of reasons to express their viewpoint.

Edward described the initial experiences he had when he sought counseling and expressed that it could have hindered him from the successes he is having with his present counselor.

“…Like I mentioned earlier, my first experience in counseling was not pleasant. I changed counselors three times before I found someone…. right for me……I asked a lot of questions that made my previous counselors uncomfortable, because I believe if you are competent and good at what you do, you should be able to handle these questions…."

Kwame expressed he might not be willing to start counseling now, since “It is an unfamiliar space, trusting the counselor could be an issue….I also wonder if I might be misunderstood.”

Tope shared a similar concern when she said, “I am always reminded to keep my family’s reputation, the fear of being labeled is something I worry about.”

**Financial concerns** relates to all codes that represent participants’ opinions on the cost of counseling would be another barrier to accessing help from a counselor. The participants’ opinions suggest that any additional expenses that would affect their budget would be a setback.

Sola indicated that “I’m not sure if I have to pay for the counseling service, but my current financial status would not permit me to opt for it. The country’s exchange rate to dollar is so high.” Tope also felt that bringing upon herself an additional cost would affect any decision to seek counseling. She stated, “I think the cost of service would be an issue. Don’t forget I am an international student with restriction to only work within the university environment….My family supports me but I don’t want to burden them with additional expenses.” Francis, Kevin, and Theo also echoed financial concerns might be a limitation to seeking counseling services.
**Time and Privacy** comprises all codes that represent participants’ position concerning having the time to make an appointment and thoughts about confidentiality as another barrier to accessing treatment from a counselor. The participants’ opinions suggest that their perspectives concerning the issue of time and desire for privacy would be another barrier to seeking help from a counselor. Six of the eight participants, Sola, Kwame, Tope, Francis, Kevin, and Theo, reflected about time and privacy. Sola indicated that,

“…My routine every day is hectic. Morning hours, I have to go to work….I work with a professor as a graduate assistant, and I do research work. Afternoons, I prepare for classes in the evening. The days I don’t have class, I work on my assignments, do some housekeeping or try to relax….I can tell you I try not to add any more things to my plate…. I’m curious about the location of the counseling office and hours of service….I don’t know where it is and not sure about timing, just thinking about it now.”

In a similar vein, Kwame stated, “I think finding the time to attend because of my schedule” and Francis shared, “What if I run into someone that I know…I don’t want to get that feeling of he can’t handle his issues himself…. I don’t have information about the time of day the service is offered, but I worry about that.”

**Counselor Cultural Awareness** relates to all the codes that represent participants’ opinions about counselor cultural competence and self-awareness as a barrier to seeking counseling. Most of the participants expressed their views about the person of the counselor influencing the effectiveness of counseling and its outcome.

“…I asked questions about their perspective and cultural reference point in working with international students….With my current counselor, a conversation came up and he was curious…My childhood experiences and the disciplines. We were able to tackle the root
causes at the surface level. And it was so easy to label and track the present effects….He did not misjudge my cultural upbringing. He was authentic and the experience strengthened our relationship.” (Edward)

“…It is so glaring, seeing the level of racism and treatment of minority groups here in the U.S, and I wonder about the counselor’s mindset about Africans….The cultural difference is played-out each day and the skills of the counselor working with a different population is something I’m curious about.” (David)

The participants highlighted difference in cultural identity and values as a concern. The participants also wondered about the skillset and level of bias that might show up if eventually they decided to seek counseling.

**Personal Identity** comprises all codes that represent some participants’ opinions on vulnerability and having to talk to an outsider as an issue in accessing the help of a counselor. Some of the participants’ noted that their personalities and family relationships would influence their decision to seek help. Sola shared, “I described early the commitment and support I get from my family… I grew up in a society that honors such values of self-reliance and toughness, especially being male….It will be tough to put that aside.” Tope stated, “I could guess my family’s view towards going for counseling would be laughable. I also don’t want to be labelled as the one that shares family secrets with strangers.”

For some of the participants who shared this same perspective about their personal identity being an issue toward considering counseling, unfamiliarity and knowledge about the process still showed in their responses.

Figure 9 below presents a reflection of the process of grouping the categories and the theme that finally developed. This was done while carefully checking for similarities and differences.
During the on-line interviews, the term “mental health concern” was described by each participant based on their perspective, as well as examples of signs and/or symptoms that trigger and relate to mental health problems. Each participant’s (Sola, Edward, David, Kwame, Tope, Francis, Kevin, and Theo) description was synthesized to develop the theme “State of Mind”. They expressed that whatever affects a person’s state of mind, body and action negatively, to the extent that the individual cannot function properly (such as affecting their attitudes, behaviors, decisions) can be referred to as mental health issues. Sola stated, “It’s when an individual is not thinking right because of stress about a situation they are going through.” and Kwame similarly shared, “I think of it as an individual going through mental struggles that might not be physical,”
but the person is actually suffering inside because of an uncontrollable situation. Like trying to fit into an environment different from yours, and you are stressed out.” From the participants’ responses, it was also understood that mental health has not gained extensive awareness and people don’t usually talk about it.

**Ethnic group support**

Ethnic group support described participants’ views concerning the importance of having and fostering a supportive environment. Moving and adjusting to the lifestyle in a new environment comes with different challenges for different individuals. David mentioned, “I have good friends that I associate with and with whom I feel identified, to share my experience with. You cannot survive alone.” Kevin also stated, “Having friends that are willing to go out of their way to assist you made a difference for me. It made me have a sense of belonging and identity.” Other participants expressed a similar perspective, sharing that relationships with other sub-Saharan African international students helped to balance their lifestyle in a new environment. From the participants’ standpoint, ethnic group support was essentially connected to culture and geographical location. Since these participants were physically far away from home, having a sense of belonging and support became essential to coping with transitional challenges.

**Psychological Struggles**

For the participants, psychological struggles described the stress experienced while adjusting to the host country. They recognized the responsibility of adjusting to the academic environment and society at large; however, retention of cultural identity within a culture different from theirs is challenging. According to Edward, “I come from a collective culture and trying to adjust to America’s melting pot of diverse cultures, felt like being immersed in underrepresentation. I experienced bullying and was mentally not in a good place.”
Additionally, participants expressed how the weather and difference in time zones had an effect on their wellbeing. Tope reported, “I come from an environment where the weather is totally different from the one here. I have never experienced a tornado or hurricane, but it’s something that happens here.” Overall, stress due to change contributed to the adjustment difficulties experienced by sub-Saharan African international students. From participants’ responses, psychological struggles addressed the significant relationship seen between perceived susceptibility and perceived severity. Sub-Saharan international students somewhat perceive themselves as being susceptible, due to insufficient knowledge concerning the impact that acculturative stress has on their mental health.

**Thoughts about services**

Most participants expressed an on-the-fence attitude towards seeking counseling services to cope with psychological struggles. They emphasized inadequate information about the counseling process (such as thoughts regarding the availability and quality of mental health services). Participants’ responses included Sola, “I have not really experienced counseling before. I’m used to talking with my family and getting advice and motivation from them. I don’t even know if there’s such a service on campus.” and Theo, “If you really want and need to talk to someone, a professional, you should go for it. I’m not sure I would because I have my concerns.” and Kevin, “I come from a cultural background that’s not open to counseling. So, it’s not something I have a lot of information about. We keep and deal with issues within the family. I’m concerned about the safety and accessibility to service.” Overall, psychoeducation about what counseling entails and the outcome would help inform as well as normalize seeking help from a counselor. Increasing and expanding the knowledge base of the targeted participant would
help maintain an open mind and thereafter, a lowering of pre-conceived opinions about counseling.

Ultimately, the perceived influence of participants’ desire to take action to seek counseling services is uncertain. It was noted that participants had no positive influence by family and friends who can disclose positive information and normalize their experience with counseling. Thus, the concept of cues to action could not trigger participants’ readiness to take actions to seek counseling services. An individual’s social network plays a major influence to actively facilitate and discourage help-seeking decisions.

**Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility**

For the participants, Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility holds a significant space in their decision to seek counseling. In providing the most effective care, consideration should be given to individual differences and no one-size-fits-all treatment. Utilization and outcome of counseling services should be based on equity. The participants noted that counselor cultural awareness about the heterogeneity of the international students’ population becomes crucial to the success of counseling services. Kwame stated, “If I decide to talk to someone outside my family concerning my challenges, I want someone that would support me through the process. I don’t want to be viewed as weak or judged because of my situation.” and Tope shared, “We are internationals, and we are minorities. And I want a counselor who understands working with international students.” Edward also expressed, “My initial perspective about counseling was skewed, but I would like a counselor that understands and validates me as an international student from Africa. Having the right counselor to work with you can be the reason to keep going for sessions.” Thus, having counselors attuned to the transitional needs of sub-Saharan African international students during counseling can impact the outcome and utilization.
Adapting a culture-centered framework while working with the population can also help the counselor and result in effective services.

Overall, participants’ responses show that perceived benefit of adopting the option of counseling services during stressful adjusting situations can be influenced by counselor cultural responsiveness and humility. The participants believe this approach could make a positive difference in their lives by providing specific information tailored to helping them navigate their new environment.

**Counseling Process Mistrust**

Counseling Process Mistrust describes participants’ views concerning possible hindrances that might result in under-utilization of the counseling service. Although the cross-cultural difference between sub-Saharan African international students’ homeland and host environment cannot be overemphasized, the possibility of seeking counseling services may be affected because of their perception and trust in the counseling process. According to David, “Trust in the process would be an issue because I’m not sure of finding a counselor who will respect my experiences and empathize with me. I’m an international student from Africa, hope you understand what I mean by that.” Francis stated, “I am a private person and I feel more comfortable talking with someone that I know. What I am saying is, I don’t know if talking with a counselor is safe, and that the person would understand me.” Some of the participants mentioned cost of services had been an hinderance, because they are not ready to take on additional costs to their living expenses. Overall, having an understanding of the counseling process can foster a good therapeutic relationship between the counselor and sub-Saharan African international student, resulting in increased therapeutic efficacy.
Additionally, participants’ responses, perceived counseling process mistrust as a perceived barrier that might influence their decision to seek counseling services. The concept of perceived barrier might be formal (such as transportation, cost of service, inadequate resources) and/or informal (such as, stigma or negative perception, unawareness about availability of service). As described by the participants the reduced likelihood of seeking help was associated with lack of confidence in the counseling process.

**Table 4: Result Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Research Objective</th>
<th>Findings from Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>To explain the lived experiences of sub-Saharan African international student in United States universities.</td>
<td>Importance of having necessary support (<strong>Ethnic group support</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>To explore the mental health concerns of sub-Saharan African international students and their help-seeking intentions.</td>
<td>Stress resulting from adjustment (<strong>Psychological Struggles</strong>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>To enhance the implementation and delivery of cultural relevant and appropriate counseling services.</td>
<td>Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility Thoughts about services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>To promote the benefits of seeking mental health services for psychological distress.</td>
<td>Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility Counseling Process Mistrust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>To increase university counselors’ cultural understanding of sub-Saharan African international students.</td>
<td>Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After analyzing the data generated from the online semi-structured interviews, the study reached a saturation point with the 8th participant; thereby finalizing inquiry of the exploratory research questions. Table 4 above shows a connection of the generated themes that aligned with the research objectives. Analyzing the relationships between the themes, developed a theory relating to the phenomenon under study. The theory reveals that study populations are aware of the stress-related problems experienced while transitioning into a host country and therefore can
imagine the depth of knowledge and understanding of counseling process necessary for an effective outcome. Participants believed that a counselor’s knowledge about the population coupled with a cultural approach to counseling might foster their decisions to seek counseling, which would result also in an effective outcome.

In addition, training and supervision of counselors usually focuses on a Western perspective and Western social norms. Embracing and integrating a non-western approach (culture-centered approach), thus valuing the heterogeneity of international students would facilitate utilization of counseling services by sub-Saharan African international students. This would also guide against and reduce the dropout rate among this population. Further, the international student offices and the counseling centers of institutions of higher learning can collaborate to develop programs to sensitize this population in regard to counseling services.

**Interconnection of Health Belief Model Constructs and Themes**

The study provides an understanding to why international students from sub-Saharan Africa do not consider going for counseling during transitional challenges amidst adjustments to the new environment. To better address the identified factors in reducing the barriers and in turn, encourage counseling, counselors and international student officers are encumbered with the responsibilities of informing this population of relevant and beneficial counseling services. The Health Belief Model represents a conceptual framework to predict participants’ motivations to seek counseling. Many interconnected parts are involved when exploring human behaviors; the HBM identifies the factors that impact an individual’s help-seeking behavior.

This study explored each of the five constructs of the HBM (perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, perceived barriers, and cues to action) to determine an individual’s motivation to seek counseling. According to Rosenstock (2005), the constructs are
adopted to predict an individual’s likelihood to act on a potential solution to their problem or to explain their health care decisions. Owing to the influence of key demographic characteristics and contextualizing factors, the participants’ responses indicated a perceived vulnerability to psychological distress due to the cross-cultural challenges that these faced while adjusting into their new environment. However, the perceived severity of these challenges are sometimes managed with the help provided through support from ethnic groups to reduce the cultural shocks effect minimally. Susceptibility and its seriousness both indicate the impact counseling would have if introduced. Participants may not realize that psychological distress is actually a mental health concern until it impedes their daily functioning and academic goals.

According to participants’ responses, opting for counseling service faces a perceived barrier of counseling process mistrust. This was the ultimate reason as to whether or not participants were motivated to choose counseling as an alternative, help-seeking behavior. Conversely, the participants perceived benefits as associated with counselor cultural responsiveness and humility, which is necessary for effective counseling outcome and retention. Participants acknowledged and believed that there was no personal connection to counseling experiences. However, their awareness of actual benefits from counseling is linked to the person of the counselor. Lastly, thoughts about counseling services impacted participants’ cues to act, because these believed the influence of family and friends, as well as the media, played a unique role in motivation to seek counseling.

As previously stated, an early awareness of the presence of counseling centers within the university environment can be facilitated through adequate psychoeducation and information about counseling and its processes.
Chapter Summary

The findings of this study were presented in this chapter, providing a brief introduction and description of the study participant interview. The data analysis findings started with line-by-line coding to generate an initial set of categories, followed by focused coding, which was regrouped for similarities, to develop relevant codes/categories. The final stage developed a theoretical coding process to develop the themes and thereby generate the theory that explains the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African international students.

The final chapter of this dissertation discusses the findings of the study in relation to the current literature and the implications of the study. A revisit of the purpose for the study, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research are also provided.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This chapter entails the discussion of the research findings. The chapter consists of the purpose of the study and a summary of the research methods adopted for the study. A discussion of the results of study in relation to prevailing literature is followed by strengths and limitations of the conceptual framework, and implications, discussion of the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with my personal reflections about the research process of the study.

Purpose

The purpose of my qualitative grounded theory research is to investigate and explore the perceptions of sub-Saharan African International Students in the United States, in regard to their mental health concerns and help-seeking behavior. The reality of culture shock that the international student experiences could eventually spiral into mental health problems. As a result, the exploration of the transitioning process and the challenges faced specifically by sub-Saharan African international students determines the approaches culturally relevant to an underlying theoretical basis (Pruitt, 1978). The focus considered the lived experiences of this population while studying in the United States.

Philosophic Foundations

The research philosophy is concerned with the nature, source, and knowledge development i.e., how the data is collected, analyzed, and used in the phenomenon of the research, forms an integral part of the philosophy of the research. In creating new knowledge within the qualitative paradigm, (a) a secondary data collection, (b) a primary data collection, and (c) engaging in analysis to answer the research question is at the vector of completing a research work (Dudovskiy, 2016). In essence, formulating beliefs and assumptions become the
critical aspects of addressing research philosophy in this research study. This would be the first aspect to be clarified. Research philosophy addresses the assumption, awareness, and the formulation of beliefs in shaping the research study.

The processes of research are shaped by the sources and nature of knowledge generated, while the importance of the researcher’s assumptions serve as basis for the strategy adopted, hinged on the philosophy of the research. Generally, research philosophy consists of many branches that are related to several disciplines. Four main research philosophies have been identified as follows: Pragmatism, Positivism, Realism, and Interpretivism (Interpretivist). The choice of the philosophy of the research is impacted by the implication of the research. Research studies these days adopt pragmatism and realism philosophies. The data collection method of each research philosophy is distinct.

This research study is qualitative in nature, rather than quantitative. The rationale is to allow effective communication on the topic with the participants, while documenting their subjective opinions. The flexibility of asking questions that resonate with the research topic during interview sessions will provide grounds for the interpretivist philosophy. In creating new knowledge, traversing beyond the known and entering the unknown world is supported by qualitative research approach, hence making new contributions to the body of knowledge (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Qualitative research is rooted in an interpretivist world view and aims to develop understanding that stems from research interest (Goldkuhl, 2012).

In essence, a qualitative research approach would be used to explore factors that support and mitigate the help-seeking behavior of sub-Saharan Africa international students based on the opinion of participants. It would also be used to explain the views of the interviewees, to collate
and categorize the key words that emanate from themes developed through interview sessions, and to inductively propose recommendations, based on the analysis of data and findings.

Ontology is one of the many paths of research philosophies. It is referred to as the science of ‘being’ and deals with ‘natural phenomenon’ reality (Snyder, 2019). Ontology is also referred to as the constituents of facts in a system and reflections of interpretations by individuals as they relate to the objectiveness and subjective stance of the perception of social entities. The major aspects of ontology are objectivism (or positivism) and subjectivism. In determining whether human understanding and interpretation exist independently of social reality, whilst knowing “how things really are” and “how things really work,” are the ontological consideration views entrenched in a social world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Objectivism as a position of ontology states that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence independent of social actors (Beker et al, 2012). Subjectivism, also known as constructionism or interpretivism, is concerned with a perception that social phenomena are the consequences of the existence of social actors. Social actors continually influence social phenomenon as well as their meanings, as an ontological position of constructionism (Beker et al, 2012).

Before starting a research study, it is important to identify the ontological position due to its influence on the research design. The choice of method of the research has a consequence on the ontological position via epistemology, research approach, and research strategy adopted and the data collection method, or data analysis.

Sources of knowledge in research are rooted in a branch of philosophy known as epistemology. Epistemology deals with sources, possibilities, nature, and limitations of knowledge. Epistemology is concerned with what does and does not constitute knowledge from
the perspective of a researcher’s study classification. Epistemology focuses on what is known to be true (Hallebone & Priest, 2009). Branches of epistemology include (a) essentialism, (b) historical perspective, (c) perennialism, (d) progressivism, (e) empiricism, (f) idealism, (g) rationalism, and (h) constructivism. Two major debatable constructions in line with epistemological study are empiricism and rationalism.

Axiology is a branch of philosophy that studies the judgment research value (Saunders et al., 2012). On all stages of a researcher’s engagement process, the axiology assesses the role of the researcher and his or her value. Axiology is primarily referred as the research aim. In research, this aspect of philosophy of research tends to bring clarification as to whether the researcher attempts to explain or give a prediction of the world, or merely seeks to understand the world (Lee & Lings, 2008). The core value of the study to the researcher is the focus of axiology. Axiology is of high importance, because what the researcher values in the study tends to influence the findings of the research.

Qualitative research is exploratory in nature and the results apply only to the small groups studied, such that generalizability of the results to other populations is not expected. Qualitative approaches are used when the potential answer to a question requires an explanation, not a straightforward yes/no; hence it is helpful to understand the “why and how” of a phenomenon (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011).

The ontological position of researching the help-seeking behavior of sub-Saharan Africa international students is considered “subjectivism”, which is also referred to as “interpretivism”. It perceives research of help-seeking behavior as a social phenomenon, where the researcher considers the subjective opinions of social actors who participates in the interview to form the outcome and result of the research findings. The help-seeking behavior of sub-Saharan Africa
international students’ qualitative study as an epistemological position is called “constructivism”. This is because the method uses open-ended interview questions to determine the help-seeking behavior as a social phenomenon within the United States University of Higher Learning context, using text and/or image data-gathering for eventual analysis. Since the research hinged on interpretivist philosophy, the axiological position of the researcher’s role determines the value that the research adds to the United States University environment. Researching the phenomenon can unbundle the benefits that Universities can leverage in terms of caring for international students from sub-Saharan Africa.

As previously stated, the research study approach will be qualitative due to the key data collection instrument, unlike the quantitative research study that the researcher uses in self-administered surveys. In qualitative research, the researcher devotes time in designing the interview protocol, transcribing the sessions into MS Word, coding and categorizing the data for thematic development until data saturation is reached. After the data collection process, the researcher will transcribe the interview session into Microsoft Word, code the key words against each participant’s response, put them in different categories, and then develop themes. The researcher will be objective in the data collection and interview question designed and will not be biased, but rather allow the participants to freely give their views and rephrase some of the questions for clarity purpose.

**Discussion of Results**

This section discusses the study results in connection to the research question. The researcher used a central research question and research sub-question to explore and gain insights about the lived experiences of study participants.
The central research question was: What theory explains the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African international students?

Research Sub-question:

- What are the perceived factors contributing to the transitional challenges that led to the help-seeking behavior(s) adopted in the new environment?

I developed an interview guide and used open-ended questions to allow for flexibility during the interview process. The findings presented five themes derived from emergent and super-ordinate themes. Sub-Saharan African international students’ mental health concern and help-seeking behavior could be attributed to these factors or five main themes: (a) Ethnic group support, (b) Psychological struggles, (c) Thoughts about services, (d) Counselor cultural responsiveness and humility, and (e) Counseling process mistrust. I discuss below each theme within the context of prior literature.

**Ethnic group support**

International students find themselves in a position where they must navigate the new social network in their new study environment. This fresh environment creates both cultural and language barriers that American students often do not have to face. Many research studies have emphasized the importance of social support for international students’ adjustment in the U.S. Researchers have attributed higher perceived social support to fewer depressive and anxiety-related symptoms. These symptoms stem from better sociocultural adjustment, and lower levels of acculturative and academic stress (Dao et al., 2007; Misra et al., 2003; Sümer et al., 2008). Further, research conducted by Bektaş and colleagues (2009) stipulated that maintaining a connection to the home community becomes essential for psychological adjustment in the new
environment. In international students’ mental health outcomes and adjustment, social support plays a significant role in this clime.

Many contributing variables and outcomes on the adjustment of international students in the United States are being examined extensively; however, research showed two areas have not yet examined are optimism and hope. These two variables are found in positive psychology literature which has contributed to increased psychological adjustment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A better understanding of sociocultural adjustment from a nonclinical sample of international college students is paramount in offering a framework for the development and implementation of resource programs for international students before and after their arrival in the host country.

**Psychological Struggles**

International students encounter psychological struggles while studying in the United States. Although there is limited literature on the coping styles of sub-Saharan international students in the United States, my study shows that this population has found ways of utilizing a wide variety of coping techniques, such as psychological coping skills of meditation and rest, physical coping skills of exercising, and enjoying home cuisine, problem solving (e.g., behavioral, and cognitive efforts to make changes), social support, (e.g., emailing friends from home), and entertainment (e.g., watching a movie). Further research literature supports the idea that coping as a factor of psychological struggle should be considered more closely when looking at adjustments in international students (Wang et al., 2012).

Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological change that involves learning to live in new social and cultural contexts after one has become socialized into an earlier one (Berry, 2008). Stress that arises due to acculturation process is defined as the psychological
impact of adapting to a new culture (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). In the study of international students’ literature, acculturation is stresses shape the outcome through the contributing factors and the difficulties that result from entering a new cultural environment. Some of the acculturation psychological factors include region of origin, English fluency and social support (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Sub-Saharan African students who socialized primarily with home-based students had greater acculturative stress. English fluency, and social support that assume interactive and important roles in the experience of acculturative stress among sub-Saharan students.

**Thoughts about services**

International students of Sub-Saharan Africa have been found to use mental health services at much lower rates. Research across international student groups estimates that anywhere from 1.91-3.93% of international student use mental health services, with some indication that only 34% with probable mental health diagnoses sought treatment in past years (Abe-Kim et al., 2007). Studies show that attitudinal barriers towards the mental health service due to inadequate information about the counseling process causes misinterpretations about the effects of mental health and how treatment works, (i.e., lack of knowledge), and stigma about seeking mental health treatment (Andrade, et al., 2014; Leong & Kalibatseva, 2011).

Lack of knowledge about mental health is a commonly cited barrier that assumes many forms. These include (a) lack of perceived need for treatment, (b) knowledge about how mental disorders are treated, (c) the nature and effectiveness of mental health treatment, (d) low perceived need for treatment, (e) low mental health literacy, and (f) lack of understanding about explanatory models of mental health treatment (Motjabai, et al., 2011; Bonabi, et al., 2016). Research carried out by Ruiz et al (2013) reported that lack of knowledge about mental health
and treatment for mental health problems by international students estimated about 25-35%, meaning that a significant percentage of international students either do not know that they have a diagnosable mental health problem, or else do not know where to go to get mental service (Ruiz et al., 2013; Wong, et al., 2006; Bauer et al., 1999). This research finding is consistent with many different ethnic and cultural groups in the U.S., as several groups in the U.S. consistently report not knowing where to access mental health service (Abe-Kim, et al., 2002; Ruiz et al., 2013). The thought of not knowing where to get mental health service or knowledge about what the treatment can offer negatively impacts treatment engagement. In one study, participants identified fear about the effects of medication, or not knowing how the mental health services could be helpful, as barriers to treatment (Ghafoori et al., 2015).

Counselor Cultural Responsiveness and Humility

As the population of diverse students increase, so should be the number of counselors who are in close contact with the students (Proctor et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2004). Research generally stresses the importance of counselors being aware of multicultural competence. It is critical for counselors to embody cultural responsiveness within the counseling sessions. According to research studies, Counselor’s Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCCs) encourage responsiveness and humility as a ubiquitous model in counseling which addresses three main domains:

- Counselor **knowledge** about different cultures and cultural perspectives
- Counselor **skills** to utilize culturally appropriate approaches.
- Counselor **awareness** of their own and their clients’ cultural heritage and the influence of culture on attitudes, beliefs and experiences (Sue et al., 1992; Sue et al., 1998; Hays et al., 2010).
For a counselor to be deemed culturally responsive and humble, counselors must be examined for multicultural competence from both the counselor’s and the client’s perspective. Past studies have found that counselors typically view their own multicultural counseling competence in much higher esteem than clients view the counselor’s competences in multicultural counseling. In other words, counselors often have an inflated view of their own multicultural competence in comparison to the client’s view. This is because when counselors are not humble, in the assumption that they are high in multicultural counseling competence, they are far less likely to put effort toward growing in this domain (Webster, 2019).

**Counseling Process Mistrust**

Due to lack of knowledge of counseling, the research participants did not show interest in counseling. A number of factors have been associated with the decision of participants to either seek or not seek mental health service due to mistrust in the counseling process. Most of the participants sought help outside of professional counseling services. Although they recognize and acknowledge adjustment challenges, these are faced with the barrier of not being conversant with the counseling process.

This mistrust is viewed as treatment fearfulness. According to Kushner and Sher (1991), “treatment fearfulness is described as apprehension that arises from aversive expectations about the seeking and consumption of mental health services” (p. 197). The decision to seek help is partly motivated by conflict that arises due to the following causes: mental distress, lifestyle disruptions, pressures from others) and avoidance tendencies (e.g., treatment fears, cost, time commitment). In seeking help from this perspective, an individual treatment is influenced by competing motivational and inhibitory influences of varying strengths that constitute a classic approach-avoidance conflict (Miller, 1944).
Barriers to service use can be impeded by clients’ perceptions, attitudes and beliefs toward mental health problems and treatment. Research shows that anticipated utility of and risks associated with seeking treatment have been suggested as two of the most important influences on the decision to engage in therapy and attend first appointments (Vogel et al., 2007) therefore the anticipated utility refers to the perceived usefulness, or lack thereof, in seeking services from a psychotherapist (Vogel et al., 2007). According to Bayer and Peay (1997), individuals who have negative attitudes towards therapy and hold lower expectations concerning help sources such that they are regarded as incompetent or unable to help are less likely to keep first appointments and rather attempt to solve their problems independent of professional care. The potential dangers of opening up to another individual is referred to as “the anticipated risk” (Vogel et al., 2007). As asserted by Menary (2009), those who are anxious toward expressing or divulging their feelings, due to a concern that counseling would exasperate their problems risked losing control (Amato & Bradshaw, 1985), being misunderstood, or being ignored (Harris et al., 1999). In such situations, the participants are more inclined to conceal their personal distress and to avoid first appointments.

**Strengths and Limitations of Health Belief Model**

To explain change and predict preventative health behavior based on an individual’s beliefs and/or perceptions, an established model utilized is the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1966; Henshaw et. al., 2009; Rosenstock, 2005; Smith, 2009). This model has received considerable research attention as one of the most widely used conceptual frameworks in health behavior research. The HBM has also been applied as a guiding framework to inform health behavior interventions (Champion & Skinner, 2008; Hayden, 2017; Glanz et al., 2015). Across a wide range of current areas of study (discussed in Chapter two), the relationships between and
among the constructs of the HBM are not defined, although these constructs lead to outcome behaviors. According to Champion and Skinner (2008), the simplicity of the model serves as one of its major limitations; a limited explanation has been provided for the variance in findings. Ultimately, interventions developed after the HBM framework tends to be effective if they address an individual’s specific perceptions about susceptibility, severity, benefits, barriers, cue-to-action, and self-efficacy. Everything considered in relation to this study, successful and/or effective interventions in addressing sub-Saharan African international students’ communication and knowledge gap about counseling services would be necessary components of encouraging international students to seeking counseling during adjustment challenges.

**Implications**

This section discusses the implications of the study. It is vital to learn and be trained as counselors knowing that increasingly the United States is welcoming international students from different countries around the world. Applying preconceived notions, overgeneralizing or stereotypical views while working with this population will not result in effective counseling and outcome. Counselors serving this population must be aware of the varying concepts of what constitutes mental illness and help-seeking decisions.

**Implications for Counselors**

Based on the study findings whilst working with a diverse population, counselors’ multicultural competence stood out during the interview with the participants. Competence in multicultural counseling refers to counselors’ attitudes/beliefs, knowledge, and skills in working with individuals from different cultural (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, social class, and sexual orientation) groups (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue et al., 1992; Sue et al., 1982; Sue et al., 1998; Kim et al., 2019). There is an increase in ethnic and racial diversity of U.S. university systems.
The universities mandate that counselors in colleges of higher learning possess appropriate levels of knowledge and skills to work with culturally diverse students, most especially international students (Durodoye, 1998; Hobson & Kanitz, 1996; Johnson, 1995). Counselors who do not have sufficient training in cross-cultural counseling may lack the requisite skills to work with culturally diverse clients (D’Andrea & Daniels, 1996).

The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) Code of Ethics references several standards related to the implications of this research study:

**A.2.c. Developmental and Cultural Sensitivity:** Counselors communicate information in ways that are both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Counselors use clear and understandable language when discussing issues related to informed consent.

**A.4.b. Personal Values** Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor’s values are inconsistent with the client’s goals or are discriminatory in nature.

**B.1.a. Multicultural/Diversity Considerations** Counselors maintain awareness and sensitivity regarding cultural meanings of confidentiality and privacy. Counselors respect differing views toward disclosure of information. Counselors hold ongoing discussions with clients as to how, when, and with whom information is to be shared.

**E.8. Multicultural Issues/ Diversity in Assessment** Counselors select and use with caution assessment techniques normed on populations other than that of the client. Counselors recognize the effects of age, color, culture, disability, ethnic group, gender, race, language preference, religion, spirituality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.
on test administration and interpretation, and they place test results in proper perspective with other relevant factors.

In essence, culturally competent counselors and/or professionals display three main attributes; (a) awareness towards own values, biases, assumptions concerning human behavior, preconceived notions, and personal limitations; (b) makes efforts towards understanding the worldview of culturally diverse clients and the sociohistorical context birthing such worldview; and (c) engages in developing and practicing appropriate, relevant and sensitive implementation of intervention strategies and skills while working with culturally diverse clients (Sue et. al., 2022). Possible counseling session approaches resulting in client engagement, therapeutic relationship, and treatment retention and effective outcomes can be as follows: (a) exploring beliefs about wellness; (b) exploring beliefs about mental problem and mental health treatment; (c) family (s) views about presenting problem/concerns; (d) friends views about presenting problems/concerns; and (e) personal thoughts about seeking counseling, and family support and consent to seeking help (TIP 59: Improving Cultural Competence [SAMHSA], 2014).

**Implications for Counselor Advocacy**

The range of issues that require advocacy continues to evolve as counseling evolves to ensure that the profession stays on a positive trajectory. Advocacy leads to action and action leads to progress. I will recommend that counselors and the counseling profession pay close attention to the plight of international students who must adjust to their new environment. The diverse needs of this population must be addressed in providing high-quality care to assist with cross-cultural challenges. Engaging in multicultural training sessions for professional development opportunities would center on international students and identified issues, thus providing an inclusive, safe space is conducive to a desirable outcome. These benefits are all
vital for effective counseling service and retention. Counselors working at the university counseling centers can collaborate with counselor education programs to organize workshops and seminars, as well as share timely articles, tips, and ideas to promote and encourage counseling services.

**Implications for Counselor Education Program**

According to Hobson & Kanitz (1996), a lack of multicultural counseling training in many universities counseling programs, as well as documented roles of prior multicultural training toward predicting self-reported multicultural counseling competence in turn has given rise for research to examine previous multicultural counseling training in institutions of higher learning, where counselors perceived multicultural counseling competence. Previous studies (e.g., Pope-Davis et al., 1995; Pope-Davis et al., 1994; Sodowsky et al., 1998), asserted that certain training variables (e.g., taking academic coursework, attending workshops, receiving multicultural supervision) were significantly related to counselors' perceived competence in working with diverse populations. This study buttresses the need for counselor in-training to be grounded in multicultural counseling, in tandem with the need for university counselors' self-reported multicultural counseling competence. Ability to work with culturally diverse populations should be emphasized in the counseling education and supervision program, from an academic standpoint. In particular, this will promote an awareness of the heterogeneity of International Students.

The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) Code of Ethics referencing the implication of the research study to counselor education program are thus:
F.7.c. Infusing Multicultural Issues/Diversity Counselor educators infuse material related to multiculturalism/diversity into all courses and workshops for the development of professional counselors.

F.11.c. Multicultural/Diversity Competence Counselor educators actively infuse multicultural/diversity competency in their training and supervision practices. They actively train students to gain awareness, knowledge, and skills in the competencies of multicultural practice.

Overall, in educating and training of counselors, I recommend that counselors strive to see beyond dominant-culture assumptions. Empathetic counseling will enable effective and appropriate service to this population. Furthermore, increasing the self-awareness of counselors in-training, by (a) imparting knowledge of the culture, (b) heterogeneity and life experiences of various minority groups, and (c) encouraging culturally appropriate and adaptive interpersonal skills facilitates an effective counseling service (Sue et al., 2022). It is further recommended that counselor education curriculum, such as multicultural, techniques, and theory classes, should not be Eurocentric focused only, but rather have an integration of Afrocentric counseling perspectives.

Implications from Sub-Saharan African International Students

The implication of these research findings for sub-Saharan African international students is to promote mental health counseling among this population. The study can help this population with effective counseling through education on what counseling entails, inclusive of the retention and outcome of the counseling service. This knowledge can help this population confront adjustment challenges when they arrive in the United States university for their studies.
Implications for International Student Offices

Experiencing excessive stress while trying to adjust into a new environment can induce various forms of physical, emotional, and psychological challenge. Oftentimes, these feelings of stress are pushed aside by most international students, who tend to avoid seeking counseling services to cope with their mental health issues. Closing the information gap about the presence of counseling services can start from the international student offices at the universities. During the student orientation, normalizing and advising could be accomplished as part of nurturing support for international students. The officers can develop and coordinate programs with the counselors at the university counseling centers in order to establish campus wide holistic learning, development, and success for international students.

Furthermore, the international student officers can initiate working relationships between faculty and international students. This assistance can help international students to understanding both social and academic transitions into the host country and also aid faculty with a better understanding of the challenges, and needs, as well as cultural values of this population. A final recommendation for the International Student Office, would be to create a position within the department for a counselor who will engage and educate these population about possible adjustment challenges, in the process of adjusting to the host country. Apart from the role of interfacing with the United States Custom and Immigration Services, adopting this recommendation could bridge the information gap about available counseling services and also provide support to the international student. In turn, this could later be done in tandem with the university counseling center to develop vital information pamphlets that better meet the needs of this population. This approach can significantly reduce the impact of culture shock, as well as the stress faced due to unknown expectations.
Recommendations for Future Research

Although this research has been conducted using the qualitative research approach, future research may be carried out from a quantitative study approach. The purpose would be to reach a wider audience and include more participants, in order to gain a deeper perspective from a quantitative perspective. Examining a larger number of participants from across the United States would allow for wider representation of sub-Saharan African international students. As a follow-up, a mixed-method approach would also increase the generalizability and perspective concerning the targeted audience.

In broadening further knowledge and perspectives on the study area, a final recommendation is to explore the perspectives of counselors who have worked with targeted audiences and who presently work in the university counseling center. A qualitative study could be conducted to understand and gain insights into the workings of counselors with this population.

Limitations

In a study, possible weaknesses are referred to as limitations (Creswell (2003). Although every attempt was made to ensure this research study was conducted in a rigorous and comprehensive manner, the first limitation of this study was based on the research site as one state within the country, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized to other parts of the United States. My research site was five different universities within Louisiana, where sub-Saharan African international students were enrolled in different graduate programs. Considering that experiences may differ from state to state, the results cannot be generalized beyond the participants that volunteered for this study. The second and final limitation was time constraints on the part of participants. During the recruitment process and scheduling of online interview
sessions, participants had to be reminded of time constraints through emails before finally choosing a date. The participants mentioned busy schedules with classes, some had responsibilities as graduate assistants as the reason. Utilizing weekends as possible options resolved the issue of time constraints.

**Personal Reflections**

Conducting and writing this research study has been a journey of passion, hard work, and commitment to giving voice to the lived experiences of sub-Saharan African international students as they adjust to their new environment. The question that flashed through my mind when selecting my topic was “Can you imagine how difficult it is to move to a new country and not have necessary support to help while transitioning?” I recall having been supported by my social network (family, friends, and professors) and wondered how it would have been without it. As a counselor educator in-training, I have had the opportunity to engage different people in discussions, as well as read scholarly articles for research. In all honesty, I sometimes wondered how some international students, irrespective of the country of origin, cope with the cultural adjustment challenges experienced, and without necessary support.

This process has been rewarding and enlightening. From the participants’ selection and the interview sessions, I appreciate each of my participants for their openness and willingness to participate as well as contribute to my study. They shared their lived experiences and knowledge with me, and ultimately with others who will read this study. What surprised me the most, was that the participants’ responses focused more on counselor cultural awareness and competences to inspire the participants’ personal decisions to seek counseling service. This made me reflect on my multicultural classes and the impact that counselor empathy, listening skills, collaborative attitudes, and personalized care reflects in counseling effectiveness and outcome.
Overall, my experience has fostered an advocacy path to help people through counseling and teaching. I remain hopeful that my results, together with the findings of other future research, will guide counselor training and counselors working at universities in a direction that meets the unique needs of the international students’ population. Additionally, I believe normalizing mental health issues and counseling service within the university environment is worth an effort to help with cross-cultural transitional challenges.

**Conclusion**

Exploring the help seeking behavior of Sub-Saharan African students in the United States has offered new ideas on how counseling can be administered to this population. As the number of international students from sub-Saharan Africa rises due to the increased desire for cross-border higher education, the need for an inclusive counseling paradigm becomes necessary from a multi-cultural perspective. The cultural diversity that international students bring to the United State study environment cannot be overemphasized. Amidst their contribution to the growth and diversity of the classroom, this population faces the daunting task of adjusting in their new environment amid daunting unprecedented challenges. These challenges range from academic to sociocultural and psychological. In studying these challenges, this study conducted a qualitative interview applying the grounded theory method. The data and result gathered from the research was instrumental in unfolding a series of issues and reasons as to why many sub-Saharan students have not been open to mental health counseling during their transitioning process. The research study generated themes to proffer recommendations on how to serve this population, whilst respecting their culture and being cognizant of their gradual integration process into the American society. This study is significant for counseling centers of universities in the United States. Many university counseling centers are not being used by this population,
proper communication on campus is scant in regard to the existence of counseling, the availability of counseling, the cost/no cost of counseling, the benefits of counseling, and how stressed students can overcome their emotional challenges, i.e., how and where this population of students can seek help whenever they are in need. Another importance of this study is that the possible outcomes can translate into helping this population by providing insights into diverse ways the university counseling center can facilitate early services. Although this research used a qualitative research approach, further research may be accomplished in regard to this population from a quantitative research standpoint.
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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL LETTER
THE UNIVERSITY of NEW ORLEANS
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Memorandum

Principal Investigator: Christopher Todd Belser
Co-Principal Investigator: Adekemi Ekanoye
Date: September 8, 2022
Protocol Title: Perceptions of sub-Saharan African International Students in the United States: Mental Health Concerns and Help-Seeking Behavior
IRB Number: 02Sep22

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has deemed that the research and procedures of the above-named protocol are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines and meet the standard for expedited IRB review according to:

A. Research activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the following categories, may be reviewed by the IRB through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. [...] 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Review of the submitted protocol indicated that all procedures are in compliance with 45 CFR 46. Any changes to the procedures must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approvals are valid for one year and can be renewed upon request.

I wish you much success with your research project. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 280-7481.

Sincerely,

Roberto Refinetti,
PhD IRB Chair
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT/INVITATION LETTER

[Date]

Dear [Prospective Participant],

My name is Adekemi Ekanoye, a Ph.D. candidate in the counselor education and supervision program at the University of New Orleans in New Orleans, Louisiana. I am conducting a qualitative study on transitional challenges experienced by sub-Saharan African students in the United States for my dissertation project under the direction of Dr. Christopher Belser. The project is entitled “Perceptions of sub-Saharan African International Students in United States: Mental Health Concerns and Help-Seeking Behavior” and it has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of New Orleans (IRB # 02Sep22). The purpose of this study is to examine the transitional challenges faced specifically by sub-Saharan African international students and to explore approaches that are culturally relevant in line with underlying theoretical basis.

I am reaching out to invite you to participate in the study. If you are a first or second year in your program of study, an international graduate student from sub-Saharan Africa and have experience challenges adjusting to your new environment, you are eligible to participate in the study.

Participation in the study would involve taking part in one face-to-face online interview that will be conducted via HIPAA Zoom, which is a safe and encrypted platform, both voice and text, meaning that your information will remain safe and confidential during the interview process. The interview will require 45–60 minutes of your time. Interviews will be audio-recorded for data analysis purposes.
Participation is voluntary and there are no foreseeable risks associated with your involvement in the research. If you decide to take part in the study, you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without giving a reason. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study, there will be no penalty.

The study results will be reported in the dissertation manuscript. They may also be published in academic journals and/or presented at professional conferences. Participation is anonymous and your identity will always be protected. Your name and any identifying information will not be included in any publications proceeding from the study.

Although your involvement in the study may not yield any direct benefits to you, your participation will contribute toward a better understanding of the different cultural and adjustment challenges that international graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa face and the resulting help-seeking behaviors adopted. This will further help provide insights into culturally appropriate methods that the university counseling center can integrate to facilitate early services. You will also be making a valuable contribution to a field that needs more empirical research working with this population.

If you decide to participate in this research study, please send me an email at alekanoy@uno.edu to confirm your participation. Please include your name and your preferred email account, as well as your availability for the individual interviews during the months of September and October 2022. Additionally, once your confirmation email is received, an Informed Consent Letter will be sent to you, please read carefully, sign and send it to me in an email.

Thank you for your time, attention and for considering my invitation.

Sincerely,

Adekemi Ekanoye, M.A
Ph.D. Candidate, Counselor Education and Supervision
Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations
University of New Orleans
2000 Lakeshore Drive
New Orleans LA 70148
Dear Participant,

Thank you for consenting to participate in the study. As a University of New Orleans doctoral student in the Counselor Education program, under direct supervision of Dr. Christopher Belser. I am Adekemi Ekanoye, a Ph.D. candidate and I am conducting a qualitative study on transitional challenges experienced by sub-Saharan African students in the United States for my dissertation project. The project is entitled “Perceptions of sub-Saharan African International Students in United States: Mental Health Concerns and Help-Seeking Behavior”, and it has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Orleans (IRB # 02Sep22). The purpose of this study is to examine the transitional challenges faced specifically by sub-Saharan African international students and to explore approaches that are culturally relevant in line with underlying theoretical basis.

Participation in the study would involve taking part in one face-to-face online semi-structure interview that will be conducted via HIPAA Zoom, which is a safe and encrypted platform, both voice and text, meaning that your information will always remain safe and confidential during the interview process. The interview will require 45–60 minutes of your time. During the interview process, you would be asked to answer some questions about your experiences adjusting to your new environment and decisions to seek help for stressors faced.
Interviews will be audio-recorded for data analysis purposes. Because the interviews will be conducted online, access to internet, personal computer and Zoom account is necessary.

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts related to this research. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. I hope that you will decide to participate in this study. However, if you feel uncomfortable with any part of the interview process, at any time, you have the right to terminate participation without consequence. You are also free to request a 5-minute break (as needed) or decline to respond to any question you feel uncomfortable with.

You may find participation in this study enjoyable, as it is a chance to give voice to your adjustment challenges while studying in the United States. By participating in this research, you may also benefit others by helping professional counselors to better understand how to work specifically with sub-Saharan African international graduate students. This information will also add to the body of literature.

Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and identity. Your data (name and personal information) will be treated with strict confidentiality. All data will be stored securely in a password-protected device and interview recordings will be encrypted. I will be the only person that will have access to your data. Upon completion of this study, interview recordings will be destroyed immediately, however the transcripts will be destroyed after 1 year. Data will be used solely for the purposes of this research study.

The results from this study will be reported in the dissertation manuscript. They may also be published in academic journals read by counselors and mental health professionals, to help them better understand the experiences of sub-Saharan African international graduate students. At no time, however, will your name be used, or any identifying information revealed. Participation is anonymous. Your data and its interpretation will be presented in anonymized format. Your name and any identifying or potentially identifying information will not be included in any publications proceeding from the study.

If you have any question or require any clarifications about the study, please contact me via email alekanoy@uno.edu or phone, +1 (225) 424 4023 or the principal investigator, Dr. Christopher Belser via email ctbelser@uno.edu. If you have any other question regarding your rights as a participant in the research or feel that you have been put at risk, you can contact Dr. Ann O’Hanlon, Institutional Review Board, at the University of New Orleans at +1 (504) 280 3990 or unoirb@uno.edu.
Thank you for your time and attention to this request.

Sincerely,

Adekemi Ekanoye, M.A
Ph.D. Candidate, Counselor Education and Supervision
Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations
University of New Orleans
2000 Lakeshore Drive
New Orleans LA 70148

By indicating below, you are confirming that you have read and understood the contents of the Informed Consent Letter, and you are giving consent to participate in the study.

——— I consent to participate in the study.

——— I do not consent to participate in the study.
Dear Participant,

Thank you for your acceptance to participate in this study. Completion of a brief demographic questionnaire is one of the requirements for participation. For confidentiality purpose, some of your responses to these questions will only be reported in aggregate format. I would like to mention again that your information will always be presented in an anonymous format. Thank you once again for your willingness to contribute to the research.

Gender: Male   Female   Other

Age: Select an item

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old

African Country of Origin:

How long have you lived in the U.S?

Program of Study:
INTERVIEW GUIDE

TOPIC - Perceptions of sub-Saharan African International Students in United States: Mental Health Concerns and Help-Seeking Behavior

Central Research Question: What theory explains the mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors of sub-Saharan African international students?

Research Sub-question:

- What are the perceived factors contributing to the transitional challenges that led to the help-seeking behavior (s) adopted in the new environment?

Interview Questions:

- What can you tell me about yourself, background, and beliefs?
- What do you understand by the term mental health concern/psychological distress? 
  Follow up:
  - Could you describe any sign/symptoms that you are aware off?
  - What do you understand by the term “pre-transition trauma”?
- What contributed to you adjusting well to host country? Follow up: How would you describe your experience?
  - Who has been most helpful to you during that period?
- What was it like for you when you moved to the United States for studies? Follow up: In hindsight, did it affect your day-to-day functioning?
  - What were the roadblocks and how did you manage the situation/s?
  - Have you (at any time) diminished or set aside emotional response to the stressors you experienced while trying to adjust to U.S culture?
  - Do you recall experiencing specific negative emotions all the time or often?
- How would you describe seeking help from a counselor? Follow up: What would influence your action?
o How has your perception influence your sense of self and readiness to act?

• What would be the benefit if you decide to seek counseling? *Follow up:*
  o Do you see any importance in seeking help from counselors at the university counseling center?

• What are some of the reasons you wouldn’t seek help from a counselor? *Follow up:*
  o What prevents you from seeking counseling?
  o Do you feel comfortable talking about your mental health?

• Is there anything else you think you would like to share with me?

• Do you have any question for me?

Adekemi Ekanoye, M.A
Ph.D. Candidate, Counselor Education and Supervision
School of Educational
University of New Orleans
2000 Lakeshore Drive, New Orleans
Louisiana. USA 70148
APPENDIX E

APPRECIATION EMAIL CONTENT

Dear Participant,

I would like to thank you again for participating in my study. It was a pleasure speaking to you and hearing you share about your experiences.

Sincerely,

Adekemi Ekanoye, M.A
Ph.D. Candidate, Counselor Education and Supervision
School of Educational
University of New Orleans
2000 Lakeshore Drive, New Orleans
Louisiana. USA 70148


**APPENDIX F**

**APPLICABILITY OF HBM CONSTRUCTS**

*Health Belief Model constructs and application to mental health concerns plus help-seeking behavior.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HBM Constructs</th>
<th>Application</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived susceptibility</td>
<td>Have you experience a mental health problem while adjusting to new environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived severity</td>
<td>How serious was the mental health issues to your daily functioning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived benefits</td>
<td>How likely are you to seek help to manage the mental health issues?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived costs/ barriers</td>
<td>What stands in the way of seeking help and utilizing counseling services?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cues to action</td>
<td>What would influence/promt you to seek help regarding the mental health issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived self-efficacy</td>
<td>What steps are you capable of taking to manage and/or seek help?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# APPENDIX G

## INITIAL AND FOCUSED CODING FOR EACH INTERVIEW QUESTION

**Initial Coding:** Interview Question One Description and Narration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Description/Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[...] religious person, values respect, parents value education, helpful cultural background, first-degree in-home country, taught not to give up, banking work experience,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>[...] very collective culture, collectivism, not religious, philosophy called stoicism, respect our elders, open mind and inquisitive and curious, grew up in religious family,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>[...] values cultural identity, African lifestyle not barbaric, doesn’t support European mindsets,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>[...] practice Christianity, respectful, collective culture, first-degree-in-home country, employed before traveling, hospitable culture,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>[...] parents value education, taught never to give-up, loves traveling and socializing, practice Christianity,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>[...] loves making new friends, religious background, values respect and honesty, educated, taught to face challenges, socializes with friends, has working experience,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>[...] lived in a friendly neighborhood, employed before traveling, religious family background, parents place value in education, be the best,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>[...] community that relates together, respectful and honest, educated family members, values hard work and resilience, experience working,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Focused Coding Process for Interview Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Q1</th>
<th>Codes /Description/narratives</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] helpful cultural background, very collective culture, collectivism, respect elders, value cultural identity, respectful, collective culture, hospitable culture, values respect, and honesty.</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] religious person, practice Christianity, religious background, religious family background.</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] Open mind, inquisitive and curious, don’t support European mindset.</td>
<td>Values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Philosophy called stoicism, taught never to give up, taught to face challenges, be the best. First-degree in-home country, parents value education, traveling and socializing, educated family members. Lived in a friendly neighborhood, community that relates together.

**Initial Coding:** Interview Question Two Description and Narration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Description/Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[...] mentally derailed, emotionally unstable, irrational behaviors, act of talking to self, displaying insanity, mentally deranged person, hearing more about it here,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>[...] cultural taboo towards mental health, mentally unstable, stigmatization placed on people, mindset changed in America,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>[...] anything that affects you mentally, not until displaying insanity, having a lot of mental issues, display of distress,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>[...] mentally ill, not talked about, emphasized more in America,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>[...] tormented, sick person, more informed hearing about it here, religious organization involved in treatment,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>[...] culturally not talked about, suffering from lack of care, views changed in America, someone troubled, insane person,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>[...] culturally misunderstood, talked about here in America, not addressed publicly, displace inappropriate behaviors, victimized,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>[...] possessed by evil spirits, taboo, treated traditionally, more informed in America, display of insanity,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Focused Coding Process for Interview Question 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Q2</th>
<th>Codes /Description/narratives</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] mentally derailed, emotionally unstable, act of talking to self, mentally ill, display distress, mental internal struggle, sick person, irrational behavior, display inappropriate behavior, display insanity, suffering for lack of care,</td>
<td>State of Mind, Behavior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initial Coding: Interview Question Three Description and Narration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Description/Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[…] move with Africans, friendly banking experience, church support, academic support (professors), communicating with family and friends, studying and attending classes, access to African store, African student organization,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>[…] friends looking out for me, relates well with Africans, focused on academic, managing time, family and friends back home,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>[…] having good friends, shared experience with African students, sense of belonging through friendship, sense of identity through friendship,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>[…] relating with Africans, support from African friends, meeting academic goals, kept connection with family and friends,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>[…] relates with African students, taken to store to shop, extracurricular activities (visit museums, parks), plan finances, African student organization,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>[…] accommodated by African students, friends helpful to settle down, focused on academics, able to get African food,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>[…] social support (church members), made friends with Africans, socializing, constant communication with family,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>[…] some Africans helped with settling down, assisted by lecturers, maintain positive attitude, working within budget, informative support (international student office),</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focused Coding Process for Interview Question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Q3</th>
<th>Codes /Description/narratives</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[…] move with Africans, shared experience with African students, relating with African students, support from African friends, access to African store, accommodated by African students, some Africans helped</td>
<td>Ethnic group support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with settling down, made friends with Africans, African students’ organization,

 […], friendly banking experience, friends looking out for me, having good friends, sense of belonging through friendship, extracurricular activities, socializing,

 […] church support, was accommodated by church members,

 […] assisted by lecturers, academic goals (studying, attending classes, managing time, budgeting), international student organization,

 […] communicating with family and friends, family and friends back home, constant communication with family,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Coding: Interview Question 4 Description and Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
overwhelmed with stress, stereotyped, harassed because of accent, emotional breakdown, concern about family issues, experienced depression, social pressure,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Q4</th>
<th>Codes /Description/narratives</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>not used to the weather,</td>
<td>Change in Weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weather condition, cold</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weather, health condition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>due to weather.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>financial issue back home,</td>
<td>Financial Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>financial challenges,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>overwhelmed with financial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>responsibilities, economic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>challenges, difficulty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>paying bills, difficulty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>moving around, financial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>experienced sleepless nights,</td>
<td>Psychological Struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>overwhelmed with stress,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>emotional fatigue,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>was once suicidal,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>thought about killing myself,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>developed anxiety, stress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accumulated, emotional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>distress, anxiety trying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to adjust, anxious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from feeling lonely, feels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lonely sometimes,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>emotional breakdown,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>concern about family issues,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>experienced depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>missed familiar lifestyle,</td>
<td>Homesick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no family support.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>was bullied, shamed for</td>
<td>Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accent, extremely bullied,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>extremely isolated,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>felt isolated,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>racially discriminated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>against, shamed being black,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>discrimination due to color</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and race, stereotyped,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>harassed because of accent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>time zone difference,</td>
<td>Time Zone difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>difference in time zone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Initial Coding: Interview Question Five Description and Narration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Description/Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[...] not sure about that, family always serve as advisor, religious person, no experience with counseling, practice self-talk most time, can’t share feelings with outsider, trained to be strong, derive support from pastor,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>[...] initial experience was bad, took time to get right counselor, first impression not good, friends encouraged me, seen improvement, better mental space,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>[...] can’t imagine it, not sure I would, preferred family and friends, concern about service, concern about person of counselor, preferred someone connected to personally, preferred intimate person, cultural background won’t permit, always had indigenous support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>[...] open to counseling, family and friends helps, don’t mind trying it, no experience,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>[...] don’t think so, not sure about sharing personal life, concern about the outcome, is it safe, not sure if secrets would be kept, cultural influence,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>[...] open to counseling, would need information,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>[...] would like to try it, can’t decide yet, safety concern and accessibility,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>[...] not sure, safety would be an issue, concern about reputation, privacy issue,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Focused Coding Downsizing Process for Interview Question 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Q5</th>
<th>Codes /Description/narratives</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[…] Not sure about that, Practice Self talk, Cultural background hinderance, Don’t think so, Not sure about sharing personal life, Not sure if secrets would be kept, Can’t decide yet, Religious person, […] Can’t Share feeling with outsiders, bad initial experience, Concern about outcome, Would need information, Concern about reputation, Safety and accessibility, Privacy issue, No experience, Concern about service, Concern about the counselor, Getting right counselor, First impression not good,</td>
<td>On-the fence attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thoughts about services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family as advisor,
Encouraged by friends, Family and friend as advisor, Preferred someone personally known, Preferred intimate person, Indigenous support, Family and Friends Help, Cultural influence

[...]

 […] Seen improvement, Better mental space, Open to Counseling, Open to trying it, Open to counseling

**Initial Coding:** Interview Question 5a Description and Narration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Description/Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[…] getting someone that cares, keeps my personal issues, gives advice, religious person or counselor, informed about the process, no additional cost, university support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>[…] good working relationship, shows interest in me as an individual, the right counselor of color, understand and validate, understanding of who I am culturally, interested in my wellness, friends’ recommendation, university support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>[…] university support, connected to needed resources, made comfortable to talk, counselor understands and communicates it, validate and empathize, interested in wellbeing, has cultural understanding, sees me as person not number, support with the process,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>[…] early information about counseling, available resources, right fit, not judge for presenting condition, supported with process, not viewed as weak,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>[…] right counselor that cares, understands working with international students, can keep my personal issues, have information on how it works, safe room and private, right support from school,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>[…] right counselor of color, willingness to help and listen, safe and private environment, don’t have to incur additional cost, see value it brings, early information,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>[…] counselor’s ability to help, good environment, right guidance concerning issues, proper understanding of the process, provided resources to help, university support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>[…] understands the process, more information about counseling, not viewed as weak or vulnerable, cost effective and don’t have to pay, counselor open cultural difference, access to resources, early information,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Q5a</td>
<td>Codes /Description/narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[…] Keeps my personal issues, Gives advice, religious person or counselor, good working relationship, shows interest in me as an individual, the right counselor of color, understand and validate, understanding of who I am culturally, interested in my wellness, made comfortable to talk, counselor understands and communicates it, validate and empathize, has cultural understanding, sees me as a person not a number, interested in wellbeing, right fit, not judged for presenting condition, right counselor that care, understands working with international students, counselors ability to help, understands the process, not viewed as weak or vulnerable, counselor open cultural difference. […] informed about the process, university support, friends’ recommendation, connected to needed resources, support with the process, early information about counseling, available resource, have information on how it works, save room and private, willingness to help and listen, safe and private environment, right guidance concerning issues, proper understanding of the process, good environment, more information about counseling, access to resources, […] cost effective and don’t have to pay, no additional cost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Initial Coding:** Interview Question 6 Description and Narration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Description/Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[...] no experience with counseling, financial status, worries about location, cultural difference, time constraints, being male,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>[...] those first impressions, stereotypical views, misjudged cultural upbringing, mindset of an overnight fix, immediate solution to the issues, not understand the workings of international students, generalizations and stereotypes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>[...] cultural mindset towards counseling, stereotypical view, right counselor to help, counselor mindset about Africans, counselor viewed as stranger, cultural difference, trusting the process, level of trust,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>[...] misunderstanding of process, cultural perspective of counselor, worries about been misunderstood, trust, discrimination, finding time to attend,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>[...] safety and privacy, cost of service, concern about family’s view, fear of being labelled, uncooperative environment, time constraints,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>[...] shame talking to outsider, additional cost to livelihood, running into someone I know, finding someone that understands, misjudged cultural upbringing, finding time attending, being yourself,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>[...] would it be helpful, location would be an issue, privacy, can I afford it, would the counselor understand, time issue, being a male,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>[...] fear of been seen, cultural difference, financial charges, fear of name calling, availability of time, expecting to manage stress,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 24: Focused Coding Downsizing Process for Research Question 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Q6</th>
<th>Codes/Description/narratives</th>
<th>Core Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] no experience with counseling, quick fix mindset, cultural mindset towards counseling, trusting the process, level of trust, discrimination, stereotypical views, worries about been misunderstood, fear of being labelled, would it be helpful, expecting to manage stress, those first impressions,</td>
<td>Counseling Process Mistrust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] financial status, cost of service, additional cost to livelihood, can I afford it, financial charges,</td>
<td>Financial Concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[...] worries about location, time constraints, safety and privacy, uncooperative environment,</td>
<td>Time and Privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running into someone I know, availability of time, cultural difference, misjudged cultural upbringing, generalizations and stereotypes, cultural misunderstanding, cultural perspective of counselor, being male, concern about family’s view, shame talking to outsider, being yourself,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor Cultural Awareness</td>
<td>Personal Identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

The author was born and raised in Oyo State, Nigeria. She spent most of her life in the western part of Nigeria. She received her bachelor’s degree in Economics from Olabisi Onabanjo University in 2006. She moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 2015 to pursue her master’s degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at Southern University and A&M, College. Her experience working at a non-profit organization while in Nigeria ignited the passion for a career change to pursue a degree in counseling. After her master’s degree, she decided to further her education and enroll for her doctoral studies at the University of New Orleans in 2018. This decision has further shaped her career path and professional development. Her research interests are international students and mental health, social justice and advocacy, counselor cultural responsiveness, migrants and trauma, and cultural identity.