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Exploring the Impact of the Academic Interactions and Social Relations of Graduate Black African Students on Their Learning Experiences in China

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ABSTRACT

Current research on international students has not particularly examined Black African students' experiences in Chinese universities. This study explores the challenges encountered by African international students in China. I used semi-structured interviews of 12 Black African graduate students studying in three different universities in Beijing, China. Results indicate Chinese language, limited interaction with Chinese lecturers, and discriminatory treatment as the major challenges. Although some were ambivalent about their experiences, in general, these experiences did not produce a negative impact on their learning rather Black African students reported their overall academic experiences as being positive. The study concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for practice and recommends specific interventions to enhance Black African students' learning experiences in Chinese universities.

Keywords*:* African students, China, academic experiences, international students

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues and know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and the problems of individual life (Mills, 2004, p. 226).

Since the late 1990s, Chinese higher education has experienced rapid development and has become increasingly open in terms of international exchange and cooperation. Chinese universities are filled with international students from around the world, including Asia, the Americas, Europe, and Oceania. In 2018, the Chinese Ministry of Education indicated that there were over 81,562 African students in China, as compared to fewer than 2,000 in 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2018). Li (2018) noted that African students are the second largest group of African diaspora in China. Similarly, Study International (2020) reported that African students in China outnumber African students in any other study-abroad destinations like the United States or United Kingdom. China's readiness for educational cooperation and favorable conditions provided has promoted the explosion of African students coming to China (see Bodomo, 2014; Haugen, 2013; Jack, 2020; Leudi, 2018).

Toward the end of the 20th century, the general mobility patterns of African students changed substantially, taking a new direction toward Asian countries, especially China (Ferdjani, 2012). The dramatic increase in students from Africa can be explained in part by the Chinese government's targeted focus on making education a key pillar of its engagements with Africa by offering scholarships and making it easy for African students to secure study visas (Breeze & Moore, 2017). As the figures above show, it is an undeniable fact that the number of African students studying in China has increased. Therefore, their academic interactions and social experiences are worth exploring. In contemporary Chinese universities, international students come from a broad range of learning and teaching cultures (e.g., Wen et al., 2018). This diversity demands that we pay attention to the unintended negative effects and potential problems that might arise. Thus, in the face of a diverse population of international students, highlighting approaches to working with others in an international university context in creating a harmonious campus environment is paramount.

Research on Africans in China is focused mainly on African traders. This nascent body of research, however, has largely been limited to the examination of African students. In the few instances when African students have entered the conversation, they remain relegated as an incidental consideration in studies that are primarily devoted to the African presence in China. Some authors have included African students engaged in trade in Guangzhou and Wuhan in their sample (e.g., see Haugen, 2013 Ho, 2017, 2018; Mulvey, 2019). These studies described the lived experiences of the African student as precarity. Nevertheless, this does not give the full picture of the African students' experiences. Despite the growing ambivalence toward African students, the literature portrays them

under a wider category of "foreigner" or "migrant" without acknowledging the complexity of and nuances in their experiences. Beijing, where this study was conducted, is a major destination for international students in the Asia-Pacific region (Xinhua, 2020), yet there is no research dedicated solely to African students' presence in this region.

This highlights the importance of focusing on Black African students studying in Beijing. As a Black African student myself studying in Beijing, I "self-locate" and explore other Black African students' learning experiences to better understand my own academic and social experiences and those of other Black African students studying in China. To set the scene, the following anecdote presents a succinct summary of the issues that are interconnected with the larger issue that this study seeks to explore.

Anecdote

As a young man originating from West Africa of African ancestry studying in China, the challenges of lifestyle adjustments, cultural differences, skin color, and the acceptance of differences on many levels were not something one would consciously consider when pursuing education. Compared to the more or less smooth experience of internationalization at home (Beelen, 2011) where many international students from countries such as Nigeria, Zambia, Togo, and others, my arrival in China was jarring. The first change I encountered was the change of time zone and climate, both of which were quite different from my home country. I became disoriented and confused. I struggled with adjusting my body clock. As the days went by, I felt that I was living in the spotlight. Various identities were thrust upon me as I struggled to interact and communicate with the people. With time, the challenges mounted. I also became aware of the negative stereotypes some Chinese people hold of Africans, which I took to be somehow connected to our colonial history and our marginal position in the global economy.

My anecdotes represent a range of difficulties that I faced living and studying in China. Generally, I valued the educational experience in China; however, I felt isolated in the wider society. I acknowledge that my experiences are not fully reflective of all Black African students. Still, on a more general level, my experience has afforded me valuable insight into the possible challenges Black African students face living and studying in China.

Theoretical Justification

In connecting my personal experiences to those of other African students in China, I reason with Mills' (2000, p. 5) "sociological imagination." For Mills, sociological imagination "is the quality of mind" (p. 5) that enables an individual to understand how their troubles and inner life events are connected to the broader social context they inhabit. This suggests that the individual makes sense of their world, creates meaning, and relates this meaning to their personal experiences. Sociological imagination is a promising lens through which an individual views their experience by looking at what is going on and attributing such events to what has been established in the world around them.

In this study, I want to relate and contextualize my experiences as a Black African student in China to the experiences of other Black African students studying in Beijing. Accordingly, I "self-locate." Location as part of the research process validates and ensures that I am connected with and accountable to the entire Black African student population in China (Absolon & Willett, 2005). Location in this sense directs and guides my actions more responsibly, and it sets the grounds for knowledge transformation (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p.111). With that said, it is better to locate relevant and distinct aspects of oneself, rather than to make broad general statements. This research sits on the personal rationality of belief by offering insight into the background of the research and provides an understanding of my experiences and reasons for my actions. That way, knowing how this knowledge relates to the concepts and truth that has been justified in the anecdotes makes this research an epistemological problem that needs to be investigated (Steup, 2005).

The model or strategy I use to explore the academic interactions and social experiences of Black African graduate students in Beijing is guided by experiential knowledge. That is, the idea brought to this research emanates from my experiences. In doing so, I settle with Maxwell's (2005) notion that the researcher is the instrument of the research, and what makes them distinct is that their lives form part of their works (Maxwell, 2005). Thus, locating and detailing my personal experiences and identity through the lens of sociological imagination and exploring other students' experiences set the framework within which this study was designed and how the data was interpreted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African International Students and their Experiences
   In this section, I draw on studies undertaken in the United Kingdom, United States, and some international students' destinations. Integrating literature from these contexts provides a helpful overview of African student experiences, and establishes familiarity with and provides a holistic understanding on the topic. The experiences of international African students may of course not be unique in what is a highly diverse multicultural environment, as all students must adjust to and develop new ways of living and studying. Studies have shown that international African students easily adapt to their new learning environments, despite the adjustment challenges that the students may face in transitioning into a new environment (Jones et al., 2002). Aside from the feelings of alienation and isolation many international students are exposed to (Boafo-Arthur, 2014), it is also documented that the experiences of the international African student are coupled with discriminatory and prejudicial treatment that predisposes them to stress-related acculturation (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003). A qualitative study involving 21 postgraduate African students revealed that African students experience social exclusion and unwelcome attitudes from local students (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). These authors reported that isolation and feeling unwelcome impacted the ability of African students to work together with the local students, making the integration process more difficult (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014).
   African students face several unfamiliar situations in an unfamiliar social and institutional context. The degree of such a situation depends on the differences in individual personality, race/ethnicity, sex roles, and stigma or prejudice experienced (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Issues due to hostile relationships with host nationals as a result of culture shock (Bochner, 2013; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013), discrimination and racism (Brown & Jones, 2013), and unfamiliar academic standards and teaching approaches (Robertson et al., 2000) are not uncommon among African students' experiences. Concerning this, Evivie (2009) posited that all these challenges are a result of differences in educational systems, culture, and norms described as an educational shock (Eng & Manthei, 1984) between host countries and the students' countries of origin. Lastly, African students often lack knowledge of the language of their host countries, which inhibits their social interaction and eventually poses a challenge (Yang et al., 2006). Collectively, problems within the academic and social environment challenge students' well-being and their ability to adjust to

new academic settings resulting in negative consequences such as regrets, emotional conflicts, and self-devaluation (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Despite the handful of studies on this topic, there is a paucity of research critically reflecting on the impact academic interactions and social relations have on the learning experiences of Black African students.

African Students in China and Their Experiences

In spite of a large number of studies surrounding international student experiences abroad, relatively few have focused on the experiences of Black African students in China. To some extent, Black African students are included in studies of international students more generally where they are considered under a broader spectrum of "African students." It should be noted, however, that the racial identification of African students is not always homogenous as it seems to appear, but rather a mixture of races. Although the dominant racial group within the African student population is likely to be Black, the plethora of research available (see, for example, Dong & Chapman, 2008; Haugen, 2013) has failed to capture the diversity or emphasize the racial makeup of the African student population represented in China. Since race, identity, and physical differences in our everyday interaction influence social relations, the experiences of a Black African might differ from a White African or multiracial African or may depend on the different ethnic group the student identifies with. Various studies within the context of the United Kingdom and the United States have indicated that Black students compared with other racial groups, experience significant racism and alienation as part of their study abroad experiences (Brown & Jones, 2013; Karkouti, 2016; Torres, 2009). This evidence affords the exploration of the Black experience within the context of China.

Until recently, the earliest work was done by Hevi (1963) who had personal experience of studying in China. Other scholars (e.g., Dong & Chapman, 2008; Haugen, 2013; Tian & Lowe, 2018) have also focused on African students' cultural adaptation, China-Africa cooperation, educational experiences, and students' opinions toward the experiences in China. Studies on African students' experiences in China over the years have focused on matters of stress perceptions and cross-cultural adaptation (Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003) with little on their academic interactions and social experiences. Racial discrimination and stereotypes are among the many challenges that international students face, particularly with students from racially homogenous countries (Sandhul & Asrabadi, 1994, as cited in Evivie, 2009). African students in China generally report experiences of discrimination based on race in China (Mulvey, 2019). Ho (2017) noted that African students' experiences of living in China only reproduce racial

prejudice. Racial discrimination based on color and "neo-racism" form part of the stereotypes African students face in their host society, particularly stereotypes that are somehow connected to the larger structural issue of Africa's colonial history, and lower standards in the global economy (Lee & Rice, 2007). In examining the transnational connections of African student migrants and their experiences in Chinese cities, Ho (2017) argued that "the social differentiation and everyday sociality that the African student experiences in Chinese cities reinforce racial coding and development asymmetries" (p. 15). This implies that the everyday life challenges and problems African students encounter in Chinese cities are rooted in racial prejudice and cultural dominance. The overall consequences of social differentiation create the impression that racial discrimination is consciously practiced by Chinese people (Hevi as cited in Liu, 2013). Haugen (2013) argued that the conflicts between African students and Chinese students in Chinese university campuses are rooted in racial identification on both sides, yet there is a lacuna in the literature critically exploring the Black learning experience. Together, the extent of how these experiences impact the learning experience of the student has not been much explored. In this light, I explored how Black African students' academic interactions and social relations have an impact on their learning experiences in Beijing.

METHOD

The study was conducted in Beijing. At the time of undertaking this study, there was not a single identified published study dedicated to the experiences of Black African students living in Beijing (Bodomo, 2020). Beijing serves as the political capital of China and is an educational hub for several prestigious universities, ranking among the world's top 40 cities for international students and listed as the leading city with the highest number of international students in China (Shuo, 2019).

Participants

Twelve African graduate students identified as Black (seven females, five males), enrolled in English-taught programs, studying in Chinese universities in Beijing for at least a year, were recruited for participation. Participants profiles are presented in Table 1. I advertised the study on various African students' social media platforms of which I was a member, inviting students to participate in the study. Participants gladly agreed to partake. I employed a purposive sampling method in recruiting students from three universities located in Beijing. My positionality as a Black

African student, enrolled in an English-taught program at the time informed the sample selection. I purposively recruited and engaged participants who identified as Black Africans. This sampling approach was necessary to ensure that the interviews explored participants' experiences consistent with the research aim, and more so to contextualize participants' experiences in line with my anecdotes outlined above.

Data Collection

I used semistructured interviews for data collection as they allowed the exploration of participants' experiences on specific issues and further assisted me to access realistic experiences that were hidden (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2008). This approach also enabled me to capture the meaning and structure of these experiences that are not easily quantified (Lin, 2013). I conducted interviews at places of convenience chosen by participants. This allowed each interview to progress well in a comfortable setting. Interview sessions ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants read and signed an informed consent document before the interviews. I engaged my respondents in chat to collect some background information on my participants. The first set of questions captured students' perceptions on the academic and learning practices in China, perceived benefits of studying in Chinese universities, and how students engaged and coped in their learning environment. I also explored problems and challenges students perceived and encountered in their academic environment. During the interviews, other questions emerged. In addition, I asked participants to provide critical, constructive feedback for improving practices, programs, and services for Black Africans and other international students at their universities. None of the students alerted me to any distress they may have experienced during the interviews, nor did any of them express a desire to discontinue participation in the study. All the interviews were audiorecorded for precision and notes were taken for easier transcription with participants' permission.

Analytic Strategy

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for line-by-line analysis. To obtain a general sense of the data, I did a preliminary exploratory analysis by reading through all the transcriptions for insights into specific comments. First, I read the transcripts without attempts at coding. In the second reading, I did an open-coding process and noted individual words, phrases, and sentences relevant to the research objectives. As I read each transcript, I examined and compared similarities

and differences. I then developed themes from the transcriptions before analyzing the data inductively, beginning with the raw data consisting of multiple sources of information and then broadening to several specific themes (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). I closely examined frequent and outstanding words, phrases, and sentences that emerged from the transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

As a Black African graduate student studying in China, I had several concerns about conducting this study and presenting the data collected. During the interviews, I avoided imposing my values on the students. I had to deal with matters of subjectivity by ensuring that the interview protocol was unbiased and subjective. The interview protocol was face validated by non-African experts interested in identity-related research and went through an ethical review for approval. These concerns were continually acknowledged. The advantages of having a shared African origin with the student participants allowed for a greater rapport, which in turn resulted in a high level of comfort and honesty in the interviews. It should be noted that the findings might not be generalizable and may not resonate with other universities in China. Meanwhile, my values and understanding as a Black African student at the time might be unconsciously imposed upon the study findings; however, I tried not to impose my interpretation on the problems shared by the participants. Further, after transcribing all the audio recorded interviews, I did a member check by providing each participant with their recording and coded transcripts containing highlighted words, phrases, and sentences intended for the analysis. Triangulation took the form of cross-checking the data with the literature that I had and reflecting on my own experiences and observations as a Black African student to validate the congruency of the data. Member checking and triangulation helped to deal with inaccurate transcription, my own biases, and errors. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants' names and other recognizable data, the recordings and transcripts from the interviews were not made available to anyone not directly involved in the study. During the member checks, no other participant had access to the data of other participants. Participants were assigned numbers (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) to protect their identities.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant ID	Nationality	Gender	Major	Years in China
1	Liberia	F	Education	1 y 5 mo
2	Malawi	M	Education	1 y 5 mo
3	Ghana	M	Communication	3 y 5 mo
4	Cameroon	F	International trade	1 y 5 mo
5	Uganda	F	Social policy	1 y 5 mo
6	Rwanda	M	Natural science	1 y 5 mo
7	Zimbabwe	F	Master's, business admin	1 y 5 mo
8	Malawi	M	Social policy	1 y 5 mo
9	Tanzania	M	Finance	1 y 5 mo
10	Liberia	F	Economics	1 y 5 mo
11	Tanzania	F	Higher education	1 y 5 mo
12	Zambia	F	Education	3 y 5 mo

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several issues emerged from the qualitative analyses, which were categorized into two broad themes: rewarding experiences and exclusion, discrimination, and the language barrier.

Rewarding Experiences

The majority of students described their experiences with and within their university with stories worth noting. Participants touched on the academic requirements of their various programs, emphasizing research work, the feeling of studying in a diverse classroom, and a better system of education. Students noted how well-resourced Chinese universities are and how this positively impacted their learning experiences. Participants 10 outlined that "the education system in China is outstanding and equipped with resources for best learning." Similarly, the diverse nature of the staff and student body enhanced their learning experiences, helped their career growth, and knowledge expansion. Participants reported:

> I think China is a very good country to study economically because most of its universities are well equipped with resources, facilities, and staff. Compared to my country I am positively impressed with

the quality of education provided by this university. I had never been to any foreign country apart from China so I can say I like overseas experience. (Participant 10)

I have had a nice experience so far and I enjoyed my studies…I have been getting all the resources and materials to study and also communication between students and teachers is much better. Studying in a class with a diversity of students and professors all over the world has enriched my experience and knowledge… I am well equipped to go home and make an impact. (Participant 12)

Students seemed pleased with the education they were receiving in China, compared to their home universities. Moreover, participants were impressed with the internationalization of their various universities and appreciated the international visiting professors they got to interact with occasionally. Educational infrastructure as mentioned by participants did play a huge role in their learning. This observation is not entirely surprising considering that participants had come from geographical regions mostly in the global south that still have developmental issues to deal with. Essentially, concerning educational infrastructure, China (one of the largest economies in the world) certainly has high-quality infrastructure as compared to their home countries. Indeed, high-quality educational infrastructure improves international students' learning. To a large extent, all participants concurred that the knowledge acquired will put them in a better position when they get back home.

On the whole, teaching and learning ran more efficiently than they had ever experienced before. For example, Participant 7 mentioned that the "stress of being a student was manageable." Participants also detailed the experiences of being able to participate in class discussion, giving presentations and interacting with their classmates. To participants, the various teaching strategies they have been exposed to were more student-centered, which optimized their learning experiences.

Methods of teaching are all on point. So, I think it is a great opportunity to study here. The stress is manageable. We're allowed to make presentations, talk, and discuss issues among ourselves in class. Even the course outline will state clearly that you should participate in class. So, I think all of them encourage you to be expressive enough in class and you are also allowed to teach to your peers in terms of presentation and stuff. (Participant 7)

To a certain extent, excerpts like the above point to the discrepancies related to participants' home learning experiences in comparison to their experiences in Chinese universities. It is quite fascinating that the differences in the educational system did not result in educational shock as previously described (Eng & Manthei, 1984; Evivie, 2009). Even though the study did not seek to dichotomize between participants' home learning experiences and that of China, it appears that participants reflected on their previous (home university) learning experiences in drawing inferences from their learning experiences in China.

Probing further, participants explained that the atmosphere within a Chinese classroom was relaxed and friendlier against that of the formal-authoritative classroom in their home universities. Participant 8 described: "It's like here, students are made not to be afraid of teachers at all, the aura around here gives room for students to approach professors and ask for assistance, materials, and they deliver easily." Likewise, Participant 12 reported that "communication between students and teachers was much better." Along with this evidence, with my 4-year experience in Ghana as an undergraduate student, I couldn't recall a moment when teachers disclosed their contact details in a class. As a researcher listening to participants' stories, I understood their experiences relating to their professors in Chinese universities. All of the students interviewed mentioned the competencies they had acquired through research, teaching, and professional development opportunities and were optimistic. Equally, studying in China, I attained international experience and developed competencies through conducting research. These findings given here enable the study to draw a firm linkage with Zha's (2015) assertion that Chinese education is perceived as excellent, strives for uniformity and standardization, and follows consistent practices. Thus, Chinese universities are highly regarded by Black African students, and I should point out that participants were appreciative of Chinese education despite some challenges in the learning process. To wrap up on this theme, it is important to emphasize that participants being appreciative of their learning in China, in terms of the well-resourced education infrastructure and quality content of learning, were not hesitant in pointing out the challenges of being a student, particularly being a Black African student. I will discuss further these challenges students outlined in the next section.

Exclusion and Discrimination in Classroom Spaces

Against the rewarding experiences participants outlined above, they further reported experiences of discrimination and exclusion based on their skin color within classroom spaces and other spaces on campus. This observation appears to contradict the earlier findings related to the

rewarding experience detailed above. However, it stands to reason that the experiences of Black African students evidenced from this research are double-edged. Thus, both positives and negatives form part of the academic interactions and social experiences of the Black African students' experiences in Beijing. Moreover, reporting these opposing views provides a more nuanced understanding of the Black African student experiences in China. That being said, what made the learning process frustrating was the discriminatory practices from Chinese professors and instructional materials that depicted negative stereotypes about Black people. Some excerpts are below:

> The people I come into contact with in this university make me feel some way. Chinese people are good and very helpful but sometimes they shy away when you want to talk to them, giving excuses that they do not understand, or do not know. (Participant 3)

> Life has not been bad neither is it rosy… We had issues; I have talked about issues of attitude… from the books that we have been reading; there is this label given to people. They have categorized that White man is more intelligent seconded by Asian then they say Black people are dull to some extent. I will be frank with you that, I have seen that attitude from some professors basically from China. The way they treat us Africans …. You could see that they always direct every question to students from western countries. (Participant 2)

Clearly, stereotypes about Africans discussed in the literature were acted out and these form part of the Black African students' experience. The broader historical narratives about Black Africans that perpetuate stereotypes about them lend support to this evidence. Along this line of reasoning, it is important to recognize how the individual experiences are a consequence of both the historical context in which they sit and the everyday immediate environment in which the individual exists (Mills, 2000/1959). On top of this, the preferential treatment given to White students was mostly reported by respondents. Students were more inclined to attribute discriminatory practices meted against them due to their black skin color. Likewise, in my case, I noticed how discrimination and feeling of alienation influenced my lived experiences and identity as a Black African student. Respondents narrated:

> There is this particular professor whom I won't mention his name, anytime he asked a question straight away he points to the student

from the UK... like hey, you, what happens in the UK or how it is like in the UK. An incident happens when he asks for a meaning of a word and an African student wanted to answer, but this man said no I want this particular guy to answer. Everybody was like why? We are in the same class and everyone has the same opportunity to participate… There is a kind of segregation, preference of students I do not know whether it is based on skin color, on country or continent I don't know. (Participant 5)

My only problem is with attitude in the context of some Chinese lecturers. How they look at people whom they think looks different from them. The entire thing, I have said deals with attitude… it's about perception. My experience in China tells me that there is a mindset about African students. I see that the first choice is always for western students. Personally, sometimes when a teacher says something and I want to contribute, I withdraw because I know that my contribution is far less and not needed. Discrimination is there, it is coming but that's how they were brought up. Chinese do not trust Africans. (Participant 8)

As evidenced in the above quotes, discriminatory treatment was most often mentioned as challenging. Black African students reported being treated unfairly as compared with international students from western countries. Incidences of discrimination reported by students were as a result of some classroom practices and attitudinal dispositions students received from faculty members, local students, and other people they came into contact with within their daily scholastic activities. To participants, "Chinese people have a mindset about Africa, and that has resulted in exclusionary practices with white preference over black" and they do not know the origin of such attitudes (Participants 4). Similar experiences were reported outside the classroom also:

I think there is some form of discrimination against Blacks. Say like in the dormitory if you are having a program or having a meeting, the porters will come and say you can't hold a meeting here and all that. But you won't see that when White people or other people are having such. (Participant 4)

Stories from participants resonate with some of the issues I found problematic within classroom spaces. In one of my classes in which the majority of students were Africans, we were trying to compare educational systems across different countries, but only the handful of students

originating from outside the continent of Africa were asked to share their opinions. This was particularly surprising. The repetition of such incidents in which identifiable groups of students were consistently given opportunities to share their ideas in the name of "familiarity with the material" and, what's more, whatever they said and delivered was positively evaluated, created the impression of differential treatment and explicit exclusion. These findings and my observations converge to indirectly support the notion that racial inequalities and discrimination form part of the international Black student experiences (Brown & Jones, 2013). Students mostly attributed these events to their race. They asserted that "it could be because they are from Africa." Then again, it reflects the stereotypical challenges African students face as a result of racial discrimination based on color and neo-racism as described by Lee and Rice (2007). Essentially, the issue of preferential treatment given to Whites and color discrimination against Blacks is not surprising as this evidence provides a nuanced understanding of the positive prejudice toward White skin in all areas of Asia as well as China (Saito, 1996). However, on a slight contrast, findings and my own observations did not document any issue of extreme racism as the literature has it (Liu, 2013). Nevertheless, this substantiates the claim that racial identity generation and social differentiation generates conflicts, thus affecting the relationship between the Africans and Chinese students on university campuses (Dikötter, 1994).

Language Barrier

Another challenge that was very often mentioned was difficulties with the language. Although participants were all enrolled in programs taught in English, Chinese language was their biggest challenge. Concerns on how zero knowledge in Mandarin affects daily activities on campus were common. From the dormitory where it is hard to communicate with the porters, orientation sessions and international students' activities conducted in Mandarin without any translations, electronic kiosks and other machines that lack dual-language functions, were considered challenging. As a Participant 11 put it, "My first challenge was the Chinese language… I struggle with the language and service providers. For instance, when I go to the library it becomes difficult to talk to the librarian for assistance."

Participants' experiences with language difficulty are consistent with several findings from the literature (Hashim & Zhiliang, 2003; Haugen, 2013), implying that the difficulty in understanding the Chinese language

poses a challenge to the Black African student, and eventually inhibits their social interaction among host countries as revealed by Yang et al. (2006). Indeed, language difficulty is part of the dilemma most international students faced. Particularly, international students who lack knowledge of the language of their host country experience challenges (Yang et al., 2006). On a more serious note, the issue of language barrier frequently appearing in the literature is more convoluted than it seems. On the one hand, host institutions need to ensure that they have the necessary infrastructure in place to host a diverse body of students. On the other hand, the international students must equally endeavor to acquire some basic language skills before embarking on the international journey and continue to perfect their language skills on arrival. All the same, institutions responsible for recruiting and hosting Black African students are highly recommended to implement strategies to negotiate this language conundrum.

Largely, participants talked about the difficulty of having to adapt to the new culture, weather, climate, food, etc., which is a common challenge for international students (Hendrickson et al., 2011; O'Reilly et al., 2010). Despite the challenges identified by almost all the participants, one participant stated unequivocally that "there are no challenges largely because he sees nothing that is out of place" (Participant 7). This finding appeared as a counternarrative and tended to downplay the challenges identified by 99% of the sample. It should be noted, however, that out of the 12 Black African students, it was just a single participant who expressed such sentiments. Essentially, concerning the fraction of the sample, the challenges identified still hold. Nevertheless, this incongruence points to the fact that regardless of the situation, participants' experiences might not be homogenous, more so this incongruence opens an avenue for future research.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined the academic interactions and social relations of 12 Black African students in Beijing through the lens of "sociological imagination" and "self-location." I established a normative position and drew on my personal experiences to explore salient features and events that were similar to other Black African students. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the Black African student experiences that surpasses my limited subjective experiences. It was necessary to focus on the Black African students' experiences, in particular, to bring to light the nuances in racial perspectives that have been ignored in the literature. I sought to provide evidence to make connections between the social process and my biography. My experiences were not different from those

of the stories told by participants. Participants' stories substantiated my claims. Sociological imagination was central to this study as my experiences as a Black African student afforded me the methodological perspective in pulling away from my situation as a Black African student to reconcile two different and abstract concepts ("I and other Black African students") of my social reality in China. As a researcher, listening to participants' stories helped to better situate my understanding of the Black African student experience.

Generally, participants appreciated the educational benefits they received in China. The diverse classroom environment, student-centered learning, and the emphasis on cooperative learning within the Chinese educational system were considered rewarding. However, this does not preclude the issues of subtle discriminatory treatments with and within the universities, alongside the language barrier and other frustrations in the educational process. Discrimination was the code of practice among some professors in classroom dynamics. My experiences and those of the respondents chronicled are somewhat homogenous. From a historical perspective, the effects of colonization and subsequent degeneration of the African continent is fundamental to understanding the adverse attitudes and behavioral disposition meted against Black Africans today. Beginning my inquiry from my lived experiences provided me with the methodological lens to reflect on the broader social issue, question the situated issue, and explore this issue with participants. Thus, reflecting on my individual experiences concerning differential treatments and explicit exclusion during classroom interactions, it is evident that these weren't isolated incidences, as reports from participants support and validate my observations. For example, what I experienced as "personal trouble" like being ignored as a Black African student in classroom interactions were issues affecting my fellow Black African students too. Overall participants' experiences are a toss-up between rewards and challenges; however, the dichotomy between rewarding experiences and the experiences of discrimination did not mar the learning experiences of the Black African student. However, my impressions and frustrations in China did not deter me from enjoying the positives and the advantages of studying in China on the prestigious Chinese government scholarship. Indeed, African students easily adapt to their learning environment despite the challenges with adjustment (Jones et al., 2002).

Implications

Findings from the study may have significant practical implications. First, the study recommends that universities provide intercultural competence training and training on antiracism, color consciousness, and critical race theory to help staff identify their implicit biases. This will better help staff to work with Black African students and any diverse student population. Instructors are also encouraged to be more inclusive of diverse perspectives and to develop strategies to counter stereotypes and biases particularly about Blacks and Africans present in teaching materials. Moreover, universities are recommended to provide language training for nonacademic staff who deal with Black African students as well as international students on a regular basis. Likewise, there should be avenues for Black African students as well as international students, in general, to acquire basic Mandarin skills as part of their learning. Collectively, this will help alleviate students' challenges and improve the overall experiences of Black African students in China.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is of course not without limitations. First, given that all the study participants were largely from English-taught programs with zero knowledge in Mandarin, language barrier might have strongly influenced the academic interaction and social relations of the Black African student. Future research is suggested to explore the experiences of this population utilizing a sample with proficiency in Mandarin. Second, the sample drew exclusively on the experiences of Black African students in three Universities in Beijing. Hence, this is an incomplete description of the Black African student experience in China. Future research should apply a more robust methodology by studying students from a wide range of disciplines and locations across China to optimize our understanding of the African student experience more effectively.

Despite these limitations, this study provides empirical evidence of a range of difficulties faced in my life as a Black African student and fellow Black African students living and studying in China. Largely, I valued the educational experiences, as did the participants; however, I felt isolated in the wider society. I acknowledge that my experience is not fully reflective of all Black African students. Still, on a more general level, connecting my experiences with fellow Black African students has afforded me valuable insight into the experiences of Black African students living and studying in China.

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