

Career Counseling With African Immigrant College Students: Theoretical Approaches and Implications for Practice

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The purpose of this article is twofold: (a) to explore the career development needs and issues that are unique to Black sub-Saharan African immigrants, with an emphasis on college students, and (b) to discuss how career development professionals can implement strategies to better serve these students. The number of Black immigrants from sub-Saharan African countries has increased recently. Many immigrants are confronted with complex life decisions. Career counselors are in a unique position to assist. Theoretical approaches, with a focus on contextual factors, are discussed. Six strategies for career counseling practice, suggestions for their application, and implications for practice are highlighted.

Mulualem, a Black African woman, is a long way from her home in Ethiopia. She immigrated into the United States approximately 5 years ago to pursue a college degree. Her husband and two daughters, ages 9 and 10 years, remain in a refugee camp in Kenya. Mulualem is eager to earn a 4-year degree, but she is undecided about her plans. She tells you, "I don't know whether I will make it right now. But I hope to bring my daughters here and to give them a better education, if it works for me and my husband."

—Student Case 1

When asked about his plans after graduation, Andile, an East African immigrant student responds, "I do not know yet. There is an African proverb that states "You have to cross the first river successfully before you ask the second river if it's okay to cross it."

—Student Case 2

The faces of students in college career development centers and on campuses in the United States have changed dramatically in recent years (Livingston, 2006). Like Mulualem, the student referenced in the introductory section of this article, many of these new students are more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past. They are recent immigrants into the United States from a variety of places around the world, including Africa. Families journey to the United States—often enduring discrimination, war, disease, and other obstacles—to create better lives for themselves and their children. There are two main objectives of this article: (a) to explore the career development issues that are unique to Black sub-Saharan African immigrants, with an emphasis on the college student population, and (b) to discuss how career development professionals can implement strategies

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to better serve the needs of these African students. Several theoretical approaches are used to gain a better understanding of the needs and issues of these African immigrant clients. Implications for practice are highlighted, and a call for career counselors to take a more active role in serving the immigrant populations of the 21st century concludes this article.

Black sub-Saharan African immigrants are often confronted with complex decisions regarding work, family, and community. Many Africans are *border-crossers*—building new identities in the United States while maintaining family ties in their home countries—and are often faced with uncertainty about the future (Rendon, 1996, p. 20). It is highly likely these African immigrants' career development needs and experiences are unique compared with those of other immigrants and, therefore, have heuristic merit. It should be noted that Africa is a vastly diverse continent with more than 50 countries, 900 million people, and more than 2,000 languages spoken. There are varying histories of colonization, civil strife, and political instability in each country. Likewise, there are differences in culture, ethnicity, race, traditions, economic viability, and sociocultural factors that have a significant impact on the career needs of emigrants from each of these countries to the United States (Fanon, 1968). To honor these differences, the focus of this article is primarily on the career development issues of Black sub-Saharan African immigrants.

Exploring the Need to Study African Immigrant College Students

Further inquiry into the career development needs of immigrant groups, including African populations, should be initiated (Fouad, 2001). Although research on immigrant populations has appeared in education and social science literature (Alfred, 2003; Lacy, 2004), there has been a dearth of inquiry in the career development field regarding African immigrants and, in particular, African immigrant college students (Stebleton, 2004). This lack of research thus far may be explained by the fact that most recent African immigrants have journeyed to the United States within the last 5 to 15 years, since the early 1990s.

Despite legitimate concerns about a decrease in the number of student visas allocated in recent years (Florida, 2004, 2005), immigrants, including students from African countries, will continue to immigrate into the United States and pursue college degrees. In 2000, the number of African immigrants admitted to the United States was approximately 40,000; approximately 80,000 documented African immigrants were admitted in 2005 to the United States according to the Department of Homeland Security (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006, p. 11). During the 1990s, African immigrants were the fastest growing immigrant group at a rate of 620.7%, based on proportional growth; however, in terms of actual numbers, immigrants from Asia (55,121) and Latin America (53,319) were the fastest growing during this time period. According to 1990 and 2000 census data, the African immigrant population totaled 29,686 during the 1990s (Ronningen, 2003). More Africans have entered the United States voluntarily since 1990 than the total that disembarked as slaves prior to 1807, the year international slave trafficking was outlawed

(Roberts, 2005). According to census data (as cited in Roberts, 2005, p. A1), the proportion of Black people living in the United States who described themselves as African-born more than doubled in the 1990s, and approximately 2 million U.S. residents identify their ancestry as sub-Saharan African. On the basis of these trends, career development professionals in a variety of settings, including career development centers on college campuses, will be called on to help serve the diverse needs of African immigrants as the population continues to grow.

Unique Needs and Issues of African Immigrant College Students

It should be emphasized again that there is a great deal of heterogeneity among the various African populations in terms of religion, language, culture, and other factors; this is not a monolithic society. However, African immigrant students often have similar needs based on a shared history and philosophy that includes "fundamental values and beliefs that permeate the continent of Africa, regardless of the diversity" (C. Young, 2003, p. 166). Many African immigrant students have career counseling needs and issues that make them unique when compared with other immigrant groups. The following are three of these issues that are addressed in this article: (a) the impact of colonialism, slavery, and identity, including racism and discrimination; (b) the influence of contextual factors that promote an ongoing state of living in uncertainty; and (c) the experience of negotiating the conflicting messages between the African and Eurocentric, Western worldviews.

Impact of Colonialism, Slavery, and Identity

Of primary importance among the unique issues Africans face is that they have endured a long and complex history of colonialism and oppression, punctuated by the institution of enslavement by and a fight for freedom from Arab and European groups (Diop, 1974). This colonization period "led to Africa's loss of independence, loss of sovereignty, economic stagnation of the continent through colonialism, international humiliation, and the assumption of the inferiority of Africans and people of African descent" (Yansane, 1990, p. 64). Africans were brought to the United States without a choice; they came as property without human rights (Myers, 1981). There are psychological and sociopsychological aspects of the historical legacy of colonialism and slavery relating to Africans that cannot be ignored (Appiah, 1992; Fanon, 1967). Furthermore, the impact of slavery continues to influence the psyche and identity of many modern Africans and their families (Asante, 1990; Nobles, 1984, 1986). African immigrants may experience racism and discrimination as they negotiate their career and employment objectives in the United States. These social injustices have the potential to influence self-worth and self-esteem.

For example, Black, sub-Saharan African immigrants may struggle with the transition of coming from an African country where they were in the racial majority. Their search for work may be further complicated by additional obstacles faced by many U.S. racial and ethnic minorities, such as differential treatment for certain races in hiring practices (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Levitt & Dubner, 2005). These challenges are

often more pronounced within the Black African male population and are potentially demoralizing (Cheatham, 1990). Niles and Arthur (1991) outlined the case of Mr. Ebo in *The Career Development Quarterly*. Mr. Ebo is a 40-year-old Black immigrant from Ghana who struggles to find satisfactory employment in the United States. In response to this article, Cheatham (1991) contended that Mr. Ebo's struggles might be due to challenges related to his attempts to assimilate into his new culture. Issues of status, role identity, gender, and discrimination are likely to present significant obstacles for this client. Furthermore, Halstead (1991) surmised that Mr. Ebo might experience resentment and have "feelings of entitlement" based on cultural factors such as his former elevated status level in Ghana. As a result, Mr. Ebo might tend to have a negative self-concept. He is caught between two cultures—he is no longer Ghanaian, but he is not "American" either. Like many immigrants, Mr. Ebo struggles to find a sense of place and cultural identity in a new home. Finally, academic credentials that were earned in African countries may have little or no significance in immigrants' new home. Therefore, it may be necessary for African students like Mr. Ebo to return to school to start a different career or complete the equivalent training needed to continue their occupation.

Another issue that many African immigrants will face is the challenge of balancing multiple identities. Homi Bhabha (1994), a scholar on postcolonialism, called this concept "hybridity" (p. 4). The hybridity perspective can be described as a combination of identities that immigrants need to negotiate their new situation, including their new roles in the United States (e.g., student, worker, family member). From this perspective, it can be seen that many African immigrants, including African immigrant college students, will experience an intersection of multiple identities (Mellow, van Slyck, & Eynon, 2003), and this may be a source of psychosocial stress for these students. For example, Nwadiora (1996) wrote about the Nigerian immigrant experience. He contended that some immigrants experience adjustment issues because they assume a triple identity in the United States. First, African immigrants want to be identified as Africans. Second, because of racism and discrimination, American society does not clearly differentiate between the experiences of African immigrants and African Americans. Third, African immigrants must adjust to living and working in a predominately White culture as they simultaneously attempt to maintain their own cultural traditions and heritage. Last, African immigrants may struggle with the meaning of maintaining an African national identity versus adopting a Black American racial identity. The challenge of negotiating and balancing these multiple identities, while dealing with potential issues of discrimination and racism, can be especially stressful to African immigrant college students. Career development professionals are in a position to help these students better manage these transitions.

Role of Contextual Factors and Living in Uncertainty

Contextual factors can include any events or circumstances that have an impact on an individual's life-career. Examples include sociopolitical events and factors such as war, fleeing one's country of origin, political oppression, historical circumstances, labor laws, disease, natural disaster, violence, and poverty (Vondracek, 1990). These factors, or combina-

tion of factors, have the potential to significantly influence decisions about work. It can be argued that immigrants from African countries are profoundly shaped by these contextual factors, and it is important for career counselors to be aware of these dynamics.

Africa has the largest number of refugees (more than 15 million) compared with other world regions. Many Africans are forced to leave their homes and live in refugee camps because of ethnic conflicts, civil war, and ongoing violence such that more than 12 million Africans are internally displaced. It is estimated that between 1960 and 1990, 7 million people lost their lives in Africa specifically as a result of conflicts, civil war, and violence (El-Khawas, 2004). Massive migration, often referred to as the "second Diaspora," is creating a "brain drain" wherein educated professionals are leaving the country (Takyi, 2002, pp. 35–36). Currently, Africa has 39 out of the 49 least developed countries in the world, and the situation does not seem to be improving. Immigrant groups from countries in other continents have endured persecution, civil strife, and other traumatic events, but the severity and ongoing nature of these events in Africa makes the African experience unique and present career-related issues for African immigrant college students.

There are several specific issues that African immigrant college students may face. First, many African students are separated from families and loved ones. They may experience feelings related to grief and loss. Others may experience guilt for making the decision to leave family members in Africa while they opted to leave their home country (Espin, 1987). Many African immigrants remain in an ongoing state of mourning for their culture loss (Nwadiora, 1996). Similarly, some students question if they will ever see family members again because of ongoing violence and disease in many African countries. For example, of all people in the world with HIV/AIDS, over 26 million, or two thirds, live in sub-Saharan Africa. Over 8,500 individuals contract HIV daily, and approximately 6,300 Africans die of AIDS-related complications each day. Southern Africa has experienced the most significant impact—Botswana has the highest infection rate in the world at 22% (Mendel, 2005). African immigrant college students may experience depression, anxiety, and fear related to these issues of loss and ambiguity, while others are concerned about sending enough money back home to support members of their extended families. Like Muluaem in the introduction who hopes to reunite with her daughters, many African immigrant college students live in a state of uncertainty. These factors have the potential to influence their mental health as well as their career-related decisions.

Second, traditional decision-making models based on Western models that promote long-range career planning may not be useful for African immigrant college students because of the contextual factors that confront this population. Some students, like Andile, who was introduced at the beginning of this article, may intentionally avoid making long-range plans for the future because of external factors. Counsell (1999) conducted a study using Ethiopian careerists who were full-time employees based in their home country of Ethiopia. The primary objective of Counsell's study was to examine factors that might influence career decision-making and thought processes. The findings indicated that the participants had an external locus of control and believed that there were numerous external factors that influenced one's career and career decision making.

More specifically, the most cited external factors influencing Ethiopian participants' careers in the Counsell study were political and economic considerations, previous work experiences, and the influence of key individuals in participants' lives (i.e., contextual factors). In other words, these individuals tended not to take a *planful* decision-making approach (Dinklage, 1967) because of these external contextual factors that often dictated their future. Alternative career decision-making approaches that are more culturally appropriate are needed and are discussed later in this article.

Watson and Stead (2002) advocated for a framework that would be more inclusive and would incorporate environmental factors. In their work with Black South African students, Watson and Stead (2002) stated that "indeed South Africans are faced with unpredictable contextual factors that often negate the conceptualization of linear individual career development" (p. 28). Because of the instability in South Africa postapartheid, the majority of adolescents there have limited opportunities regarding work and occupational choice. Watson and Stead (2002) contended that Western career development theories that are based on individualism have limited applicability and also undermine contextual factors and African traditions such as family and community. Furthermore, Stead (1996) conducted research with Black South African adolescents. He advocated for a developmental-contextual perspective for working with this population because issues of family, community, and culture are paramount in most African societies (Kamya, 1997). It can be argued that career development professionals can learn more about African immigrants by using theoretical frameworks that have an emphasis on context and view career from a more holistic perspective (Bujold, 2004; Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Richardson, 2004).

Managing Conflicting Messages Between African and Eurocentric Worldviews

Many African immigrant students will experience conflicting messages from their African culture and the newly encountered Western, Eurocentric culture. There is a profound difference between the two worldviews in the emphasis and value placed on the collective good versus that of the individual. The meaning of personhood in African societies is centered within the family and community—not in the individual, as is true in most Western cultures. Therefore, in African societies, the concept of a career is relational and socially embedded, with the focus on the other. In most African societies, it is the community that helps to shape and define the person. Menkiti (1984) described this philosophical concept as the "processual nature of being" (p. 172). This concept is an ongoing process that is ideally a transformation of the individual that occurs over time and through immersion in the community. Moreover, the African worldview is grounded in community, and individuals move to the rhythm of a "communal dance" (Ogbonnaya, 1994, p. 78) with the other members of the community. The emphasis on family and kinship begins at an early age in most African societies. For example, in Cameroon, children are taught the customs and traditions of their parents and their community. This socialization focuses on becoming a valued member of the village, and the child learns the importance of the extended Gbaya family and the value of contributing to the community

(Mbaku, 2005). This education continues into adolescence and early adulthood. Therefore, the main source of identity for the African is the group, and the unit starts with the family rather than the individual.

Many African students who immigrate to the United States initially experience a psychological push-and-pull dynamic between traditional African values that promote harmony, cooperation, and community and a Eurocentric approach that favors conflict, competition, and individualism (C. Young, 2003). These contradictory worldview approaches are often evident in the classroom and the workplace. This ongoing tension can lead to emotional and psychological distress for students (Bell, 1990). C. Young expressed concern that some African immigrants may experience stress and subsequent dysfunctional behavior as a result of having to "pick and choose" the values that are convenient for certain situations (e.g., work), thus leaving them without a true philosophical grounding that reflects their traditional values, including emphasis on family and community.

In their work with Black South African students, Mkhize and Frizelle (2000) found that

Black students sometimes find themselves torn between two worlds—on the one hand, they live in the world that values connections and attachments to family and community whilst, on the other hand, they have to spend their educational (and later, work) lives in a world that values independence and competition against others in order to succeed. (p. 6)

The experience can be especially challenging to Africans who are recent immigrants and are assuming multiple roles and adjusting to a variety of changes in a new country. The social embeddedness of the constructs of work and career may present itself as career needs for these students in another way (Naicker, 1994). African immigrant students may be compelled to select social or altruistic occupations that allow them to contribute to their families and communities. Euvrard (1996) conducted a study on the career needs of 638 pupils in South Africa. He found that the majority of students wanted to give back to the community and to their country in hopes of improving the future lives of Blacks. Furthermore, Watson and Stead (1993) found that Black South African students were more motivated to choose careers that corresponded to Holland's (1966) Social vocational personality type, such as social worker, lawyer, and teacher. A potential conflict could exist when a student wants to pursue a nonsocial occupation yet is expected to give back to her or his community through a traditional socially oriented career choice (i.e., motivated by helping others) according to Holland typology theory. Career counselors may encourage African immigrant students to explore how various occupations (such as other careers corresponding to Holland's [1973] theory of types) could meet the societal expectations in terms of giving back to their respective extended families and communities in their home countries.

Two additional factors that influence many African immigrants and their decision-making processes are the African worldview concept of time and the belief in fate, or destiny. In African culture, time tends to focus on the past and present, not the future (Pennington, 1990). On the contrary, the concept of time in Western cultures is linear, finite, and future-oriented. According to Mbiti (1969), "the future is virtually

absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized, and cannot, therefore, constitute time" (p. 19). Time is related to significant events. For instance, among the Ankore of Uganda, the cattle are central to the daily lives of the people. Therefore, the day is planned according to the various activities that pertain to the cattle (e.g., milking time). Furthermore, destiny and the role of fate is a concept that is embraced by many Africans peoples. For instance, among certain groups in Rwanda, God determines the destiny of the individual. The belief in fate and predestination is also present in East and South African Bantu religions as well as eastern and southern religions in such groups as the Tswana (Botswana), Yao (Mozambique), Barundi (Barundi), and others (Gyekye, 1995; Mbiti, 1969). Some groups, such as the Akan peoples of Ghana, rely on paranormal cognition or extrasensory perception (ESP) as a mode of knowing, including the acknowledgement of witchcraft, traditional healers, shamans, and spirit mediums (Constantine, Myers, Kindaichi, & Moore, 2004; Gyekye, 1995). The traditional, long-range approach to career planning will likely be an ineffectual model for most African immigrant students, and thus new career development approaches that allow both counselor and client to address contextual factors are more appropriate.

Theoretical Frameworks:

Exploring the Role of Context

In recent years, there has been a growing discussion in the literature about the limitations of traditional quantitative approaches to career development research (Campbell & Ungar, 2004a, 2004b) and an increasing acceptance of qualitative approaches and postmodern perspectives—specifically regarding the way in which these approaches relate to diverse populations (Guindon & Richmond, 2005). Three main criticisms of the quantitative approach are (a) the marginalization of contextual factors in career development research, including family, community, and environment (Collin & Young, 1988; Pryor & Bright, 2003); (b) the overreliance on positivism as an epistemological foundation for inquiry (Subich, 2001; Walsh, 2001); and (c) the lack of career development research that is inclusive, holistic, and multicultural (Pope, 2003; Savickas, 2003). Future interpretive research on immigrant populations that uses discovery-based methods, such as narratives, artifacts, observations, and hermeneutic phenomenology (Blustein, 2001b), must take the role of contextual factors into consideration. For the purposes of the current article, the career development issues and needs of African immigrant college students as outlined can be interpreted through the lenses of three related theoretical frameworks: (a) a developmental-contextual approach, (b) systems-based approaches, and (c) an ecological perspective.

Most career development research and practice in the past has focused on the individual as the primary unit of analysis. This narrow focus of inquiry on the individual has undermined the importance of other factors that contribute to an understanding of the career development experience, especially the role of family, community, history, and sociocultural and political events in influencing one's career over the life span (Vondracek, 2001). Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg (1983) called for a developmental-contextual approach to career development, wherein

they focused on a life-span conception of vocational development. Furthermore, Vondracek et al. examined the impact of contextual factors that are related to career development. A feature of this framework is the dynamic interactive and relational perspectives contributed by these contextual variables, across the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and counseling, that influence career development. Examples include such factors as the role of family, economic conditions, ethnic background, and community structure and size. In a study of the career choices of Nigerian students, Osuji (1976) found that these students made decisions about occupations much earlier than did students in more Westernized countries. He contended that these differences were due to contextual factors such as limited career guidance, the Nigerian family and socio-cultural context, and other variables related to the economic situation in Nigeria at the time of his study. It is highly likely that contextual factors comparable to the factors mentioned by Osuji also have an impact on individuals from other African countries.

Contextual factors can include historical events, such as war and peace, economic depression, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and global markets; these factors have a significant impact on one's career (R. A. Young & Collin, 1988). Individuals make sense of their career and assign meaning to their lives based on contextual factors and social interactions. Considered from this contextual perspective, a career is a cultural phenomenon and is dynamic, active, and intentional. Given the wide range of contextual factors that many African immigrant college students encounter, the developmental-contextual framework for career development has direct relevance to this population.

Second, a systems approach to career development considered from a constructivist perspective has provided a more holistic understanding of the idea of career (McMahon, 2005; Patton & McMahon, 1999). The systems approach also acknowledges the impact of contextual factors on career development, and there is overlap of this approach with the developmental-contextual approach. From a systems perspective, career is culturally based, and individuals make sense of their own careers through interpersonal and social relations. An example of the systems approach to career development is the systems theory framework (STF; N. Arthur & McMahon, 2005), and it includes content and process influences that interact with the individual and the system components that make up an individual's immediate world. Features of this model include both individualistic and collective worldviews, and its potential application for use in multicultural career counseling settings. Like the ecological approach (described next), the STF approach uses Bronfenbrenner's (1977) concept of the microsystem. A systems approach to career development is appropriate for many Africans because their primary source of identity is the group, or the collective *we*.

More recently, Bright and Pryor (2005) proposed an extension of a systems-based approach to career development—the chaos theory of careers. According to these authors, “a prerequisite to adopting a chaos theory approach is to accept that career development is subject to a wide range of different influences, many if not all of which are continually changing at different paces and in different degrees” (Bright & Pryor, 2005, p. 293). The chaos theory of careers embraces the complexity of career development, including the

role of unplanned events and unfortunate circumstances (Pryor & Bright, 2005). The chaos theory of careers has potential application for African immigrant college students given the uncertainty of many African immigrants' future plans. For example, an African immigrant student from Ethiopia informed his career counselor that he had been interested in journalism at a young age. But he related that during a civil war in his home country, he had witnessed the murder of several journalists for expressing their views, which understandably gave him second thoughts about this career. This student is uncertain about a career choice but has an interest in the arts. The career counselor might opt to use a systems approach to help this student explore the interaction of his interests with the interconnected system influences, acknowledging chance events and the past history of this client, and including historical factors and political issues.

Third, an ecological perspective can serve as a useful model to understand the issues of African immigrants. Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002) outlined an approach applied to the career development of women of color and White women, highlighting dynamic interactions between the person and the environment. They emphasized the complexity of the interplay between individuals and their environments. Follow-up studies have used this ecological perspective with diverse underserved populations (Barrio & Shoffner, 2005; Perrone, 2005). Like the developmental-contextual approach, the Ecological approach validates the impact of contextual factors on career. There is overlap between the two approaches. However, in the ecological approach, the context within which a person lives and interacts is an integral component that is added to the understanding of human behavior and not something that is viewed as an external force. This aspect of the ecological approach is what makes it unique in comparison with the developmental-contextual approach. Advantages of this approach include the potential it offers for innovative approaches to career interventions and career practice applicability (Cook et al., 2002; Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2005).

Another reason that the ecological approach to career development (R. A. Young, 1984) can be useful when working with the African immigrant college student population is because environmental factors inevitably influence individuals and their decision making within various systems, including the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The ecological approach examines the interaction of these systems and the impact of this interaction on behavior. For instance, an African immigrant college student from Liberia needs to adjust to the expectations of both her academic setting and her family (microsystem), while at the same time she attempts to maintain her clan's traditions and values that emphasize communal good (macrosystem). This interaction will likely affect decisions she makes about her academic major and career choice. A career counselor working with this student from an ecological perspective of career development might attempt to help her manage the time demands of her multiple roles as well as assist her in exploring options that would contribute to her extended family.

In summary, a wider range of contextual factors that influence career development are relevant to immigrants, including African immigrant college students. Many of the recent immigrants to the United States are faced with numerous struggles and barriers. It is beneficial to ex-

amine the study of work through a holistic and contextual lens across various work roles (paid and unpaid) and social locations, or contexts as described by Richardson (1993, 2002), including both occupational and nonoccupational roles and different types of work (Handy, 1990). The various theoretical frameworks can serve as a foundation that would assist counselors to generate and implement strategies to address the outlined needs of this student population.

Career Counseling Strategies and Their Implications for Practice

The following are six strategies that career development professionals can use with Black sub-Saharan African immigrant clients as well as training-related suggestions for counselors who want to become more proficient in their work with this population. The strategies are based on the issues that are unique to African immigrant college students and the main concepts that were highlighted under the section on theoretical frameworks.

Address Issues of Discrimination, Injustice, and the Rules of the Employment Game

Many African immigrant college students will experience injustices that are due to racism, discrimination, and oppression. They may experience many kinds of discrimination resulting from the intersection of race, ethnicity, heterosexism, language, ableism, gender, and other factors. These dynamics often play out in the classroom, the job search process, and the workplace. Pope et al. (2004) argued that although discrimination is a fact of life in U.S. society, career development professionals have a moral and ethical responsibility to address these issues with their clients. The authors noted, "even if clients are not the first to broach the subject, the issues ought to be discussed so that the client is aware of the career counselor's sensitivity and knowledge of this area" (Pope et al., 2004, p. 165).

Additionally, career development professionals can help new African immigrant college students (and immigrants in general) prepare for the transition to the workplace by clarifying expectations about dress, the importance of punctuality, and other issues as they relate to employment in the United States. Depending on the services provided to clients, these valuable skills can be taught to new immigrants through a variety of services, including group workshops and individual counseling. Many immigrants need social support regarding life-career decision making, and career development professionals can take the lead in these efforts. As Halstead (1991) noted in the case of Mr. Ebo, some immigrants need assistance with specific job-search strategies. Counselors need to assess clients' level of interviewing skills. A specific strategy suggested for Mr. Ebo was the mock interview, with subsequent feedback on his performance. Similarly, African immigrant college students may need assistance with writing résumés and cover letters, preparing for interviews, and performing job search tasks such as accessing occupational data and using Web-based resources.

Help African Students to Explore the Meaning of Multiple Work Roles and Identities

One of the issues for African immigrant college students is the potential conflict generated by the need to integrate competing cultural messages regarding work-life roles. Career practitioners will be more effective with African immigrants if they view the concept of a career holistically, exploring both occupational and nonoccupational roles. The idea of a career is a Western-created construct that has minimal relevance for many African immigrants, and adhering solely to this perspective may be counterproductive for career counseling clients. In other words, the majority of people worldwide tend to be excluded by the traditional concept of career because the career construct tends to have a middle-class, White, Western bias. [Richardson \(2001\)](#) contended that it is more useful to explore the meaning of work, both paid and unpaid, and not tie the notion of work to an occupational structure. This argument may be applicable because, for many African immigrants, paid work tends to be one part of the everyday flow of life.

According to [Pringle and Mallon \(2003\)](#), the flow of multiple work roles, rather than a traditional focus on occupation, tends to be the norm in collective cultures around the globe, not solely in African countries. They argued that theories of career development focused primarily on the individual would continue to have limited applicability to other cultures that are outside of this Western, middle-class focus. In turn, they critiqued the concept of boundaryless careers ([M. B. Arthur, 1994](#)) and other current theories that stress the idea of a self-managed career ([Bridges, 1994](#)). Similarly, [Savickas \(2000\)](#) urged career counselors to consider the role of work in relation to other life roles, including a focus on work-family interactions as they might relate to occupational roles. Career development professionals can learn to use the language of work rather than of career. [Sunny \(L. S.\) Hansen's \(1997\)](#) Integrative Life Planning model is a useful tool that counselors can integrate into their efforts with clients who are African immigrant college students. Career development professionals can assist students to recognize the patterns of life themes, how sociocultural factors shape work-related decisions, and how to balance multiple life roles ([Severy, 2002](#)). Career counselors should also be prepared to address some of the issues related to immigration, including clients' feelings of loss and grief about leaving loved ones in their home countries.

Given the rich oral tradition of many African histories and a cultural emphasis on the past, Black African immigrant college students may be receptive to a constructivist, narrative-based career counseling approach that focuses on life roles ([Brott, 2005](#); [R. A. Young & Collin, 2004](#)). Clients can be encouraged to explore the variety of life tasks and roles assumed both in their country of origin and in their new home. For example, female clients may need acknowledgement and validation of their nonpaid work roles, such as childbearing and household responsibilities. As [Cheatham \(1991\)](#) discussed in his response to the case of Mr. Ebo, it would be helpful for counselors to allow African immigrant clients to reveal their stories rather than to overemphasize with them objectives assessments such as interest inventories ([Emmett & Harkins, 1997](#)). Moreover, it is important for counselors to maintain a semistructured,

directive counseling approach that allows for mutual collaboration and negotiation between client and counselor throughout the counseling process. According to Idowu (1985), the counselor should validate and honor the feelings of the client as well as integrate the opinions of relevant family and community members. On the basis of her work with Nigerian students, Idowu recommended that "The counselor's role should be that of an arbitrator and a mentor" (p. 509).

Explore and Use Innovative Assessment Techniques Relevant to African Immigrants

Nontraditional, holistic strategies are likely to be more useful to African immigrant college students because such strategies afford opportunities to incorporate contextual factors and various life roles into a meaningful framework. These assessment tools can encompass the impact of important historical influences, oppression, and other contextual variables. It is time to respond to the call for assessment options in career counseling that help to address both the collective or communal factors and the meaning of work that are relevant for immigrants from non-Western nations (Blustein, 2001a). Career development professionals who work with African immigrants can help them by inquiring about the various aspects of their clients' life, including family, community, and sociocontextual factors. For instance, skilled career counselors can use a variety of assessment tools that tend to be more holistic, inclusive, and qualitative. Examples include career narratives (Cochran, 1997), career stories (Savickas, 1993), portfolios, autobiographical work, and word sculpturing (Peavy, 1996), a visual mapping process that allows clients to create unexpressed ideas. Mignot (2000) used visual methods grounded in hermeneutic inquiry and visual texts in career education and guidance. Additionally, Brott (2001) advocated for the use of life stories that help individuals re-author new stories "that emphasize preferred ways of relating to one's self and to the larger culture" (p. 306). Other career counseling techniques that are embedded in constructivist or postmodern thought include life role circles, lifelines, goal maps, and life space maps (Brott, 2005). Thorngren and Feit (2001) suggested the career-o-gram approach (a chart used to explore family and historical influences), and Gibson (2005) used genograms in career counseling with younger students. These strategies would allow students to talk about their own stories, including issues related to negotiating multiple identities and assuming new roles in a new culture.

Recall the quote from the East African student Andile that was provided at the beginning of this article. When asked about his future plans, Andile explained that "You have to cross the first river successfully before you ask the second river if it's okay to cross it." Andile was uncertain about his next steps after graduation. Traditional, objective career development assessments would most likely have limited success with this client. A more effective approach would involve encouraging Andile to explore his understanding of the African river proverb he used. The counselor might rely first on a narrative approach. Second, the counselor could explore how this approach may assist Andile in his current and future career decision making.

It should be noted that any career assessments used with culturally diverse clients should ideally be selected on the basis of the principles, beliefs, and values of the clients' culture (Watson, Duarte, & Glavin, 2005). These in-

struments should be based on cultural specificity rather than cultural validity, using models and concepts that are unique to a given ethnic or racial group. Watson (2004) contended that there are policy initiatives in South Africa that aim to prevent the misuse of career instruments that would be biased against any specific population of clients. South Africa is heterogeneous because of the many ethnic groups represented, and the challenge is to select career instruments that will not show bias toward any group. Counselors will want to be aware of these issues when selecting appropriate career assessment tools for their own clients.

Consider Alternate Decision-Making Models

Many African immigrant students will not adhere to traditional decision-making models largely because of their concept of time (i.e., focus on past and present rather than future) and the uncertainty of life. Therefore, a counselor should first consider that alternate decision-making models might have greater potential for success with and relevance for these students. There are limitations to rational, trait-and-factor decision-making models used in the career development field (Du Toit & De Bruin, 2002). The planful approach may not be appropriate for some African students given the multiple factors and uncertainty related to important work-life decisions. Many African immigrants live in a state of uncertainty; as a result, they have learned to be pessimistic about their future career plans. Andile indicated that his plan, "God willing," was to graduate the following December. He quoted the African river proverb, which reflected his personal approach to life-career planning and decision making. Andile was taking one step at a time and intentionally not making any concrete plans. This philosophy was very likely influenced by the instability of his life in Ethiopia where ongoing turmoil remains prevalent. Some African immigrant clients will decide to remain undecided, and career counselors should attempt to understand and respect where individuals are in their decision-making processes.

Second, counselors should take into account that there may be wisdom in indecision (Callanan & Greenhaus, 1992; Krumboltz, 1992). In most Western cultures, there is a negative connotation for the term *undecided*. Some career counselors may mistakenly assume that their clients' indecision is an ailment, and the task is to find a cure for the problem. This solution-oriented approach may not work for all clients, including African immigrant populations. From a philosophical perspective, there may be advantages to keeping one's options open. According to Krumboltz (1992), open-mindedness can be viewed as an asset, not a liability. As noted in the introductory vignette, the Ethiopian immigrant student Mulualem was uncertain of her future plans, but she was intent on reuniting with her daughters and husband. Mulualem's counselor would want to provide her with a great deal of support and encouragement to help her succeed. In addition, this client may need to access resources in the community, including employment options, affordable housing information, and legal advice regarding immigration and naturalization.

Third, counselors should be aware that some African students may rely on a variety of ways of knowing, including spirits, witchcraft, and ESP, to help explain life events. Additionally, many African immigrant students, as well as African American students, will hold strong religious and spiritual beliefs that will likely influence aspects of their lives, including their career

development (Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, & Lewis-Coles, 2006; Myers, 1993). Career counselors should acknowledge these modes of knowing and encourage students to incorporate their traditional beliefs into a meaningful, holistic framework that best serves them.

Help African Immigrants to Turn Negative Events Into Positive Outcomes and Experiences

African immigrant clients can learn to recognize negative, unplanned events and turn them into positive work opportunities (Stead, 1996). Clients need to be taught how to create these opportunities, recognize them, and take advantage of these circumstances by turning them into positive outcomes (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996; Guindon & Hanna, 2002; Krumboltz, 1998). Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999) created the Planned Happenstance Model. Counselors can specifically teach clients to implement planned happenstance principles into their own lives and produce desirable outcomes (Krumboltz & Levin, 2004; Mitchell, 2003). Because of the high levels of uncertainty with which many African immigrants live, this approach may be appropriate and viewed as a positive approach in an ever-changing, unpredictable world (Gelatt, 1991).

However, it should be mentioned that career counselors should exercise caution when discussing the meaning of chance. For many Africans, the influence of spirits on daily events can be especially powerful. According to Mbiti (1995), "there are no accidents: every event has both a physical cause and a spiritual cause, and each must be identified for a full understanding of any event" (p. 87). That noted, a career counselor working with an African immigrant client may begin the process by asking, "When in your life did something occur that was unplanned?" As Mitchell et al. (1999) outlined, clients can be taught to normalize planned happenstance, transform curiosity into opportunity, produce desirable events, and overcome obstacles. The client could explore possible positive outcomes that may have resulted from an unplanned event; the case of Andile can serve as a helpful illustration. I counseled this student. Before entering the human services profession, Andile had worked as a welder. One day, a small shred of metal became lodged in his left eye. Andile endured so much pain from this injury that he decided to leave the field of precision machining. He accepted a job at Head Start and later took advantage of an on-site training program. Through this program, he learned about the human services major at a local university. It was at this university that Andile earned his bachelor's degree. As he explained, "I used to shape metal into different forms, but now I think I am trying to shape human minds instead of metal."

Know Your Client: Learn More About African History, Culture, and the Immigrant Experience

Counselors are encouraged to learn more about African history, culture, and the immigrant experience so that they are better prepared to deal with immigrant students' issues. Moreover, counselors can create environments that welcome African immigrant students. For example, counselors may opt to attend cultural events on campus

sponsored by African student groups and to explore African events in the community, if available. L. S. Hansen (2001) advised career professionals to examine their own biases and attitudes, both positive and negative, about specific groups. These perceptions may include at least three myths that many counselors have regarding African immigrant clients. First, a common myth is that life for Africans must be easier in the United States compared with life in Africa; this is not necessarily true. Second, there is often a misperception that Africans want to fully assimilate into the culture of their new home and break away from their past traditions and community systems. The reality is that most African students find life to be extremely difficult in the United States, and they miss the familiar and tight-knit communities back home ("American Dreams," 2004). A third myth focuses on the concept of the American dream. Some career counselors may assume that African immigrants want to pursue the American dream as it has been defined historically. The reality is that most Africans have their own dreams, and they want these dreams to be acknowledged and fostered. Career counselors should be cautious about making assumptions about their clients' needs, issues, and aspirations.

Furthermore, career development professionals are encouraged to remain current in their cultural awareness and knowledge by learning more about the African immigrant experience through media sources. Two useful films are a documentary produced and directed by Steve James (2004) titled *The New Americans* and a documentary titled *The Lost Boys of Sudan* produced by Mylan and Shenk (2003). In particular, *The New Americans* follows two Nigerian immigrants, Isreal and Ngozi, through the trials and tribulations of their immigration experience, including outright racism and bigotry (Martinez, 2004). As mentioned previously, some immigrants—like the ones depicted in the James film—will experience intense feelings of the loss of and grief for their families and culture. Career counselors can assist clients with these needs by becoming more educated about the immigrant experience and the emotional and psychological process of leaving one's country. Similarly, counselors are encouraged to learn more about current events in Africa through additional media outlets. [Http://AllAfrica.com](http://AllAfrica.com) is a multimedia content service provider that compiles material and information from 125 African news organizations daily and includes links to other African organizations, such as nonprofits, that are of benefit to Africans. Other African news sources include magazines published by IC publications such as *New African*, *African Business*, and *The Middle East*. These resources provide ongoing opportunities for professional development and training for career counselors.

Follow the Call for Career Counselors to Become Agents of Social Change

The career development profession was founded on social justice causes, including helping the new immigrants of the early 1900s make the transition to life in the United States (Spokane & Glickman, 1994). Career development professionals can continue to serve

as agents of social change and social activism (Borow, 1997). However, many counselors and career professionals do not perceive their work as contributing to furthering social justice issues and change (Herr & Niles, 1998). Frank Parsons focused much of his work on helping immigrants in the early 1900s find relevant work (Parsons, 1909; Zytowski, 2001). He was committed to social change, and the career development profession was essentially founded on these principles of serving disenfranchised individuals who were new arrivals. O'Brien (2001) urged career professionals and educators to continue Parsons's example by actively engaging in the work of social change through research, publication, and practice in the career development profession.

Finally, parallels have been drawn between the efforts to serve immigrants of the early 1900s and the need to be advocates for underserved populations of the 21st century (Hartung & Blustein, 2002). Given these historical implications, it is important that career counselors continue to help the immigrants of this century—many of whom emigrate from a variety of countries, including but not limited to Nigeria, Somalia, Rwanda, and Ethiopia (S. S. Hansen, 2003). The next section focuses on the application of the previously discussed theoretical concepts at a 2-year community college setting where I am a counseling faculty member. The ideas discussed are examples of reaching out to immigrant college students, including recent African immigrant students.

Best Practices: Outreach Activities on a College Campus

Inver Hills Community College, located in the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area, is home to more than 5,000 students and includes a growing number of African immigrants. The counseling faculty decided to implement initiatives to help address the needs of all students, but with a focus on underserved students. First, counselors sponsored and organized a *Got Direction?* marketing campaign (complete with milk and cookies at the kickoff event) to (a) intentionally educate students about the importance of career planning and to (b) demystify the misperceptions that some students have about the counseling center. Second, a *learning community* comprising 20 immigrant students was established for fall 2005. Students took three courses in common: English writing and reading, public speaking, and a life-career planning course. Faculty coordinated learning objectives for the linked courses, and students completed the semester with a better understanding of the career decision-making process. A narrative, holistic approach to career development was a feature of the life-career planning course (Stebbleton, Henle, & Harris, 2006). Other learning communities that incorporate life-career planning classes will be initiated in the future at Inver Hills Community College. Third, the faculty counselors intend to implement a new program that will infuse career development modules into academic courses. There is currently a proposal to infuse career development modules into Composition College Writing and possibly other writing courses in the English department. Finally, there is a student ambassador mentoring program on campus. In this successful program,

more experienced African immigrant students work directly with new, incoming immigrant students. An objective of this initiative is to help 1st-year students feel like they “matter”—are relevant and significant—in their new surroundings (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey, & Niles, 2005; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). The student ambassadors also provide a valuable orientation service, helping 1st-year students with academic registration and course planning. Overall, these efforts are an attempt to reach out to a growing population of diverse students that comprises a significant number of new immigrants, including Black sub-Saharan African immigrant students.

Conclusion

Black sub-Saharan African immigrants are confronted with unique and challenging decisions regarding the roles of work, family, and community in their lives. Racism and discrimination often are potential barriers to their career pursuits. Frequently, these individuals are leading dual lives—developing a new life in the United States as well as balancing ongoing life responsibilities in their home country. Recent immigration statistics indicate that the number of African immigrants in the United States will likely continue to grow (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2006, p. 11). Career development practitioners are in an ideal position to help these immigrants, much like Frank Parsons did with immigrants of the previous century. Like most students, African immigrants have unique gifts and potential that they bring to the marketplace. Today’s career counselors can be called on to take an activist stance regarding this situation by directly meeting the needs of new immigrant groups. Moreover, further research using discovery-based career development approaches should be conducted with immigrant groups to learn more about their experiences related to work-life roles and decision making. Contextual factors inevitably influence the work-related decisions of most African immigrants. This article reviewed several theoretical approaches, with a focus on the role of these contextual factors, and outlined six strategies and related implications for the career counseling practice.

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