Negotiating American Racial Constructs: First-Generation African Caribbean Immigrants’ Experience with Race

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NEGOTIATING AMERICAN RACIAL CONSTRUCTS: FIRST-GENERATION AFRICAN CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANTS’ EXPERIENCE WITH RACE

by

Rommel Johnson

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Rommel Johnson
The purpose of this study is to describe and understand what race means to first-generation African Caribbean immigrants. Specifically, the study seeks to understand these immigrants’ experience of being Black in America. African Caribbean immigrants migrate to America with a concept of race that is very different from that of the United States. However, upon arriving in America, they encounter the American construct of race that not only diverges significantly from that with which they are familiar, but find that they are being racialized in the American sense. In professional counseling, we have yet to understand the way these immigrants make sense of this experience with race in America and the effect it might have on them.

Ten self-identified, first-generation African Caribbean immigrants completed one-on-one, in-depth interviews in which they describe their experiences with race in America. Four major themes in the participants’ statements emerge in the data analysis. These include: “Back Home,” “I try to not let it be what it is,” “I became aware,” and “Racism is real, and you got to deal with it.” The analysis suggests that African Caribbean immigrants emigrate from predominantly Black majority states in the Caribbean with an understanding of, and experience with, race that is very different from that which they encounter in the United States. While they do make distinctions based on shades of skin color, other sociopolitical identities, such as education, family of origin, and wealth, also are important determinants of social status or class.
When they arrive in America, they immediately have negative experiences with race that challenge their pre-migratory experiences and beliefs.

The analysis also shows that when they first arrive and have these encounters with race, they are unsure of how to make sense of their experiences and often resort to avoidance to cope with them until they experience a moment of epiphany about their experiences with race in America, which they describe as “becoming aware.” This epiphany is a recognition that they are being racialized, that as individuals with black skin in America, they are socialized as a racially oppressed minority group and experience racism and discrimination that is part of the Black experience in America. This awareness is also an acknowledgment that race in America cannot be overcome despite achieving other sociopolitical identities, as in the Caribbean. Once they develop this cognizance of being racialized, they tend to push back against it actively using several strategies. First, they come to accept the reality of race in America, and then begin to address incidents of racism when they occur. They also choose to cling intentionally to their pre-emigratory beliefs and symbols of their culture, such as maintaining their accents and interactions with other people from the Caribbean, which helps them maintain the sense of humanity and dignity they had before they came to America.

*Keywords*: African-Caribbean immigrants, racial awakening, epiphany, racialization, colorism, somebodiness
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ........................................................................................................... ii

**LIST OF TABLES** .................................................................................................................. vii

**CHAPTER**

I. **INTRODUCTION** ................................................................................................................. 1
   - Background and Overview ............................................................................................... 3
   - Caribbean Geography ...................................................................................................... 4
   - Caribbean Demography .................................................................................................. 6
   - Race in the Caribbean ..................................................................................................... 7
   - Race in America ............................................................................................................ 9
   - Problem Statement ....................................................................................................... 14
   - Purpose Statement and Research Question .................................................................. 16
   - Rationale and Significance of the Study ...................................................................... 16

II. **LITERATURE REVIEW** .................................................................................................... 18
   - Migration ...................................................................................................................... 18
     - Global Migration ...................................................................................................... 19
     - American Migration ................................................................................................. 20
     - Caribbean Migration ............................................................................................... 21
   - Assimilation, Racialization, and Migration .................................................................. 22
   - Race and Assimilation in the Counseling Research Literature .................................. 24
   - Assimilation and Race in the Social Science Research Literature ............................. 28
     - Voluntary Immigrant Theory .................................................................................. 28
     - Transnational Identity ............................................................................................. 29
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

Myth of Return.........................................................31
Summary of Existing Research and Gap.............................32

III. METHODOLOGY .......................................................33
Design ........................................................................33
Participants.................................................................33
Participants’ Descriptive Characteristics .........................34
Procedures..................................................................36
Data Analysis ................................................................40
Trustworthiness..........................................................43
Researcher Reflexivity ...............................................45

IV. RESULTS......................................................................53
Emergent Themes ..........................................................53
Theme One ......................................................................54
Theme Two ......................................................................62
Theme Three ....................................................................67
Theme Four ......................................................................71
Summary .........................................................................76

V. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS........78
Connecting Themes to the Literature.................................78
Back Home......................................................................78
I Try Not to Let it Be What it Is........................................85
Table of Contents—Continued

CHAPTER

I Became Aware.................................................................................................88
Racism Exists and You Got to Deal with It.........................................................90
Implications ........................................................................................................93
Limitations .........................................................................................................95
Future Research ...............................................................................................95
Summary...........................................................................................................96

REFERENCES ....................................................................................................98

APPENDICES

A. Human Subject Institutional Review Board Approval ........................................127
B. Invitation to Participate in Study ......................................................................128
C. Informed Consent ..........................................................................................129
D. Demographic Questionnaire ...........................................................................132
E. Interview Guide..............................................................................................133
LIST OF TABLES

1. Descriptive Characteristics of Research Participants ......................................................... 36
2. Emergent Themes and Sub-themes ................................................................................. 54
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Although prominent over the past several years, the social and political discourse on immigration in America was brought to the forefront of everyday life in America earlier this year as it became the underlying factor leading to the longest federal government shutdown in America’s history (Denning, 2019). This discourse has focused primarily on matters including individuals and families who come to the country without documentation; building a wall on the U.S.- Mexico border; the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy’s protection for immigrants, or banning people who emigrate from predominantly Muslim countries. While an abundance of issues and groups within the broad topic of immigration need to be discussed, certain immigrant groups and their issues are heard about often less, and not brought to the forefront as glaringly.

For example, last year, Black, documented immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean entered the spotlight of the immigration discourse briefly. On January 11, 2018, during a meeting with lawmakers about immigration policy, President Donald Trump asked a very derisive question about immigrants emigrating from countries in Africa and Haiti, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” (Dawsey, 2018). According to the Washington Post, during that same meeting, the president went on to compare both Haitian and African immigrants to White immigrants from Norway as well as from countries in Asia, suggesting that the latter groups would help the United States advance economically, while the immigrants of color from countries in Africa and Haiti would be a drain on the American economy (Dawsey, 2018).
Not only has President Trump made such derogatory statements about Black immigrants, he also has called for an end to the immigration policy that he and others have referred to pejoratively as “chain migration” (Dawsey, 2018; Ramakrishnan, 2018), which has benefitted many immigrants of color, particularly from the Caribbean and other countries. Chain migration is a derogatory term for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Ramakrishnan, 2018). This law created a preference visa category that focused on immigrants’ skills and family relationships with U.S. citizens or permanent residents (H.R. 2580, 1965). Because of this law, many immigrants from predominantly non-European countries, such as those in the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa, were able to emigrate to the United States. Hence, President Trump’s derogatory statements and his desire to end family-based immigration reflects an ideology about immigration that goes to the core of an issue that is very central to the challenges immigrants of color, specifically Black immigrants from the Caribbean face—their experience of assimilating in America as individuals with black skin.

As a group of professionals that is concerned about all people’s wellbeing and fair treatment, the counseling profession joined this discourse on immigration officially by urging professional counselors to engage in it, as well as support and advocate for immigrants’ wellbeing, as they do for all people regardless of their residency status. To that end, the American Counseling Association’s (ACA) 2017 Liberty and Justice for All Position Statement affirmed that professional counselors should, “…stand in solidarity with immigrants, refugees, and communities of all religious faiths…in order to end oppression and injustice affecting these clients” (ACA, 2017). The statement emphasizes counselors’ need to become multiculturally competent.
Despite this call to action and the proliferation of multiculturalism in counseling, there has been acknowledgment that the profession still has work to do to increase professional counselors’ competence to meet the needs of the diverse client populations they serve (West-Olatunji & Wolfgang, 2017). West-Olatunji and Wolfgang (2017) commented that there remains limited knowledge about various issues diverse clients face, among which they included, “the intersectionality of identity” and systemic oppression’s psychological effects. Despite their historical presence in the United States, immigrants of color, specifically Black immigrants from the Caribbean (or African Caribbean immigrants), are a population unknown to professional counselors, particularly with respect to issues surrounding their intersecting identities as immigrants and people of color.

**Background and Overview**

The African Caribbean immigrant population in America has grown significantly, and McCabe (2011) observed that there were approximately 194,000 Caribbean immigrants in the United States in 1960, which reached 3.7 million in 2010 (Zong & Batalova, 2016). However, recent statistics suggest that nearly 4.4 million immigrants from the Caribbean reside in the United States currently, which constitutes approximately 10% of the nation’s 44.5 million immigrants (Zong & Batalova, 2019). Further, according to the 2017 American Community Survey (ACS), the Caribbean diaspora in the United States is comprised of nearly 8 million people, including those who either were born on/in a Caribbean island or nation or those who reported ancestry of a given country in the Caribbean, i.e., they were second or third generation descendants of Caribbean immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Moreover, African Caribbean immigrants account for a considerable number of the Black immigrant population in the United States, and thus, increase its heterogeneity significantly (McCabe, 2011; Thomas,
Although few live in various geographic regions of the United States, African Caribbean immigrants account for 25% of the Black resident population in such metropolitan areas as Miami, New York City, and Boston (Grieco, Acosta, de la Cruz, Gambino, Gryn, Larsen, & Walters, 2012). Zong and Batalova (2019) indicated further that between 2013-2017, 63% of Caribbean immigrants lived in the greater New York and Miami metropolitan areas.

Given African Caribbean immigrants’ historical presence in the United States, their increased demographics, and their representation in the Black population in the United States overall, counselors should educate themselves about issues that are important to them. One such issue that often has been overlooked in the counseling literature, and of which counselors are unaware, is the experience African Caribbean immigrants have with race in America. Given that race in America is a unique social construct (Smedley, 2012; Yudell, 2011; Yudell, Roberts, DeSalle, & Tishkoff, 2016), these immigrants who come to America face a very different understanding of race than that with which they are familiar in the Caribbean (Morrison, Steele, & Henry, 2015; Waters, 2001). As they seek to assimilate into American culture, these immigrants find that, in addition to other sociocultural differences, they also must adjust to this American construct of race, which not only diverges from that to which they are accustomed, but also influences various aspects of their daily lives (Perry, 2002) with which they are unprepared to cope (Rogers, 2006; Waters, 2001). Consequently, this experience weighs on them and complicates their transition to the United States further. Counselors have yet to understand what that experience and adjustment is like for these immigrants.

**Caribbean Geography**

Delineating Caribbean geography is a complex and controversial issue (Premdas, 1994; Trouillot, 1992; Waters, 1999). Traditionally, the Caribbean region refers to the archipelago in
the Caribbean Sea that arches between the southern tip of Florida and the northern shore of South America (Martin, 2012; Pons, 2007; Waters, 1999). However, there is no consensus on its precise geographic designation. According to Premdas (1994), “The Caribbean as a unified region that confers a sense of common citizenship and community is a figment of the imagination” (p. 2). Waters (1999) concurred, “The Caribbean is a very imprecise place that is difficult to define both in academia and popular use” (p. 16).

Knight (2012) explained that within the Caribbean region itself, history, customs, and culture have resulted in ambiguous variations in the use of the term, a confusion he insisted is attributable to the colonization process. Several Caribbean scholars concur that waves of immigration, both voluntary and involuntary, shaped the Caribbean’s culture and society today (Knight, 2012; Martin, 2012). Others have described them as “Imported people in a largely imported environment (Parry, Sherlock, & Maingot, 1994, p. ix). However, Knight (2012) contended that, “To avoid terminological confusion, it is essential that the term Caribbean always connote a broader, more regional application because the Caribbean does form a cohesive geographic and cultural area, although one that is neither uniform nor united” (p. ix).

Essentially, Knight suggested that the Caribbean should be viewed as a conglomeration of societies and states that share common cultural and historical themes, and asserted each island’s and state’s uniqueness and autonomy, while maintaining a regional Caribbean identity.

For the purposes of this research, the Caribbean constitutes three physiographic regions: (1) the Greater Antilles, comprising the islands of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Puerto Rico; (2) the Lesser Antilles, including the Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, the Grenadines, Barbados, and Grenada, and
(3) the isolated island groups of the North American continental shelf—the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands—and those of the South American shelf, including Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curacao, and Bonaire (Rogoziński, 1999). Further, because of their shared culture, and history of slavery and colonization, certain regions in South America, i.e., Guyana, also are included (Deaux, Bikmen, Gilkes, Ventuneac, Joseph, Payne & Steel, 2007; Foner, 2001).

In addition to demarcating the Caribbean’s geographic region, the experience of Caribbean people of African descent is crucial to this research, as there are prevailing commonalities across the region. These include Africans’ enslavement, slavery’s continued perpetuation, and European colonialism’s enduring legacy and subsequent forms of post-colonialism in the region, all of which have shaped the culture, history, and identity that African Caribbean immigrants bring to the United States (Knight, 2012; Martin, 2012; Pons, 2007). Because this study was interested in that identity, history, and culture, the term “African Caribbean” will refer to people from those Caribbean states and countries who identify with this history and culture and have immigrated to the United States (Brah, 1991; Kasinitz, 1992; Roger, 2006; Warner, 2012; Waters, 1999).

**Caribbean Demography**

Caribbean scholar Trouillot (1992) wrote, “Caribbean societies are inescapably heterogeneous…the region—and indeed particular territories within it—has long been multi-racial, multi-lingual, stratified, and, some would say, multi-cultural” (pp. 21-22). Premdas (1994) explained that Caribbean demography includes Europeans, Africans, Asian Indians, Indonesians, Japanese, Chinese, Aboriginal Indians, and many mixed races. While many Caribbean states have a predominantly Black population, others have a variety of demographics.
For example, according to the United Nations population statistics, 90% of the population in Jamaica and Barbados is of African ancestry (United Nations, 2017). However, in Trinidad and Tobago, only approximately 34% of the population is of African descent, while approximately 35% identifies as being of East Indian descent, and roughly 8% identifies as being a mix of East Indian and African descent (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

It should be noted that many terms have been used to refer to Caribbean populations in the research literature. These include primarily: Black Caribbean, African Caribbean, and West Indian. While Black Caribbean and African Caribbean are used interchangeably in this study to refer to individuals from the physiographic regions mentioned previously who identify with their original African ancestry, the term West Indian will not, as it is understood to refer only to portions of that population. Specifically, West Indian refers to individuals only from independent, English-speaking, former British colonies, including Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos, and the mainland nations of Guyana and Belize (Foner, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2002).

Race in the Caribbean

Given their demographic heterogeneity, each Caribbean state or country has unique demographics that can influence island-specific political and social views of race. While an examination of each Caribbean state’s racial dynamic is beyond the scope of this research, several scholars have observed a similar understanding of the ideology of race that prevails in the region. These researchers have explained that the concept of race is more nuanced in the Caribbean than the Black and White dichotomy of social labeling found in America (Bryce-Laporte, 1999; Waters, 1999; Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Hall, 2010; Hunter, 2005). For example,
when she described what race in the Caribbean looks like, Waters (1999) contended, “Nowhere in the Caribbean is race a simple bipolar distinction between White and Black” (p. 28). She continued to explain, “In the Caribbean, race exists more on a continuum in which shades of skin color as well as other physical and social characteristics are considered in the social process of categorization” (p. 29).

In Caribbean racial structures, discrimination exists in the form of colorism, wherein preferences and privileges are given to individuals with lighter or “whiter” skin tones (Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Hall, 2010; Hunter, 2005). However, several scholars have explained that this type of racism is very different from the blatant daily racism Blacks in the United States encounter (Gopaul-McNicol, 1993; Sutherland, 2013). Further, skin color is only one of many factors of social categorization in Caribbean communities. For example, some scholars have suggested that the Caribbean racial/social order is comparable to a class system, where access to human capital, and education particularly, makes a significant difference in one’s ability to achieve social mobility and therefore, takes priority over skin color in social classification (Gopaul-McNichol 1993; Foner 1985; Dominguez, 1975). Thus, in the Caribbean, although lighter-skinned individuals often receive privilege, skin color is not the sole determinant of privilege, in that a dark-skinned person with a high level of education or professional training will have higher social status and privileges than will an uneducated light-skinned person.

In addition, because individuals of African descent often constitute the majority population in Caribbean states, and it is common for Blacks to hold positions of leadership and authority, this experience with discrimination is not considered as destructive as is American racism (Bryce-Laporte 1972; Foner, 2001; Kasinitz 1992). Having become accustomed to this experience with race in their countries and states of origin, African Caribbean immigrants must
make a unique adjustment to the United States, as they must assimilate into a society that is
categorized by strict, fixed racial hierarchies that cannot be transcended through education,
professional attainment, or other sociopolitical or economic characteristics, as in the Caribbean
(Bashi, 2007; Kasinitz, 1992).

**Race in America**

The construct of race as it is understood in America today follows a long, complicated
history that originated from beyond it shores. According to Spitzer (1948), the word *race*
derives from the Latin *ratio* (reason) or *radix* (root), as well the Hebrew word for head or
origin, *ras* (pp. 47-69). Samuel Johnson’s (1755) first edition of *A Dictionary of the English
Language*, defined *race* as: “A family, ascendancy…generation; a collective family,” and “A
particular breed” (p. 247). As Smedley (2012) stated emphatically, the original use of the term
race espoused a “…classificatory term similar to, and interchangeable with, people, nation, kind,
type, variety, stock” (p. 37). It is clear that originally, race was used as a term to identify people,
groups, or nations, and did not include the phenotypic descriptive or demographic stratification
that it connotes in the United States today.

Several scholars have cited the eighteenth century as the critical turning point at which
race deviated from this original use to that we have today (Allen, 1997; Hudson, 1996; Smedley,
2012; Yudell, 2011). Yudell (2011) explained that during the eighteenth century, *race* developed
into an ideology and came to be used as a way to explain human diversity. Smedley (2012)
agreed, and explained that race as we experience it today originated not from scientific
investigation, but rather was a folk idea. “The folk idea,” she continued, “…was subsequently
embraced, beginning in the mid to later eighteenth century, by naturalists and other learned
people” (p. 24).
Yudell (2011) and Smedley (2012) outlined four intersecting influences that are consistent with the European folk concept of race to create its modern-day connotation. First, Europeans’ experience with new peoples during colonial exploration and expansion fostered beliefs about European superiority and others’ inferiority (Ligio, 1976). Second, pseudo-science was used to give meaning to European superiority and others’ inferiority. Smedley expanded this further, stating, “Given credence and legitimacy as a supposed product of scientific investigation, scientists undertook efforts to document the existence of the differences that the European cultural worldview demanded and had already created” (p. 24).

American scientists continued to advance the European racial ideology and, at the dawn of the 20th century, explanations of racial differences based on measurable and observable physical traits (such as cranial capacity and skin color) gave way to an entirely new way of thinking about the subject. Race came to be understood as a reflection of unseen differences that scientists of the time attributed to recently discovered factors of heredity, also known as genetics. Genetics provided the formative language of modern racism quickly as ideas about racial differences became rooted in biology. Consequently, Smedley (2012) explained, “The scientific theories promulgated by these scientists and others embraced the European folk concept of race, giving it credibility that by the latter half of the eighteenth century ‘race’ became the most useful term for conveying the qualities and degrees of human differences that had become increasingly consonant with the English view of the world’s peoples” (p. 38).

The third influential factor that cemented racial ideology was Europeans’ need to justify slavery, which began to boom and take hold in European colonies in America and the Caribbean. According to Fields (2001), slavery was formative in entrenching race in the North American colonies during the time of the American Revolution. It appears that as colonial America fought
with Great Britain to gain its eventual independence, race became instrumental in justifying slavery, a major source of the American colony’s economic foundation. Consequently, by the late eighteenth century, slavery in America was a firmly established social, political, and economically lucrative institution (Yudell, 2014). It is estimated that between 1500 and 1870, more than 12 million African captives were removed forcibly and taken to the colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean (Curtin, 1969).

Although the 13 U.S. colonies affirmed their liberation from Great Britain through the Declaration of Independence, stating, “All men are created equal…endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights…life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Declaration of Independence, 1776), they grappled with a significant irony. How can this new nation, which justified its liberation from the colonizer based on these rights, maintain an oppressed population within its borders? Ahluwalia (2006) explained that race became a way not only of resolving, but also justifying, the continued system of slavery. The European folk idea that false science supported was significant in soothing the conscience of many and ensuring the economic prosperity the new nation needed desperately. “In this way,” Ahluwalia (2006) said, “the concept of race, already evident within Western epistemology, took on poignant significance” (p. 542).

Slavery and racism could be maintained because “Whiteness” demarcated the line of superiority and humanity and ascribed to those of European descent innate superiority and the right to subjugate, while “Blackness,” as a manifestation of inhumanity and inferiority, therefore was subject to subordination, including slavery. According to Blackburn (1997), when the system was challenged, scientific and religious validations often were marshalled to justify a racial hierarchy and hence, slavery. Blackburn (1997) continued to explain that as the plantation
system developed, these justifications became important mechanisms of control that both protected fellow Europeans from the rigors of full slavery and designated Africans or blacks as its proper victims.

The fourth factor that gave race the prominence that it has in American society to this day is the creation of the term “White.” Several scholars, including Allen (1994), Haney-Lopez (1996), and Roediger (1991), cited the Virginia colony for establishing “White” as a race legally. Roediger (1991) acknowledged that the term White arose first as a designation for European explorers, traders, and settlers who encountered Africans and the Americas’ indigenous peoples. The idea of whiteness emerged next in the development of America’s free-labor market in the Virginia colony. Allen (1994) explained that the ruling elites in the colony created a class system intentionally in which they separated their bond laborers, which included both individuals of both European and African descent. Tired of the poor conditions under which they worked and their enduring financial hardships, these bond laborers united and rebelled against the ruling elites constantly.

After the successful rebellion named after its leader (Bacon), these businessmen divided the bond laborers intentionally by creating a set of laws that delineated Blacks as Africans and Whites as Europeans, with special privileges reserved for the Whites. “They began to homogenize all Europeans, regardless of ethnicity, status, or social class, into the new category ‘White’” (Smedley 2007, p. 118). Allen (1997) put it thusly, “The exclusion of free African Americans from the intermediate stratum was a corollary of the establishment of ‘white’ identity as a mark of social status” (p. 249). Eventually, as privileges were accorded to Whites, Blacks lost those privileges increasingly until they were condemned to permanent servitude. Thus, while the folk concept of race originated in European social thought and was embodied with
supposed scientific theories that justified slavery, the ideology or worldview of race was formed fully. Blackness was juxtaposed with Whiteness and Whiteness became the norm.

By the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of geneticists, anthropologists, and social scientists were able to reveal the biological shortcomings of the concept of race with increasing sophistication and precision, and concluded that there is no biological or genetic basis for categorizing humans by race (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Montagu, 1972; Templeton, 1998). In 1998, the executive board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a statement on race that explained that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups (AAA Statement on race, 1998). Social scientists now accept clearly that the social significance of the notions of “race” and “whiteness” are guided not so much by any biological foundation, but by the social meanings that are ascribed to them. Race is a social construct that each society’s context shapes.

Despite this unity in the scholarly communities, the social concept of race continues to persist in America. According to Smedley (2008):

Since the 18th century, Americans and many other people in the world have been conditioned to believe that race as biology is the main source of human identities. Because Americans see the world’s populations in racial terms, it becomes extremely difficult for many to recognize the reality of natural human biological variation. Americans are discomforted by phenotypic ambiguity because the ideology of race tells them that races should be clearly differentiated, each having its own physical signifiers of social status. (p. 181)
Thus, discrimination based on race remains a pervasive experience in many racial and ethnic groups’ daily lives, and it is this enduring construct of race that African Caribbean immigrants meet when they migrate to America.

**Problem Statement**

Research on African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences is established in the professional counseling literature. For instance, Bachay (1998), Mitchell (2005), Mitchell and Bryan (2007), Morrison and Bryan (2014), Carter (2011), Morrison, Steele, and Henry (2015), and Pottinger and Brown (2006), all have explored issues related to this population. However, the intersectionality of Black immigrants’ experience with race in America remains understood poorly. The very few studies that have explored African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences with race in the United States, such as those of BelIZaIRe and fuertes (2011), Case and Hunter (2014), and Redway (2014), suggest that their encounter with race in America is an area of concern. Specifically, these studies have indicated that African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences with race in America seem to change with the duration of their residency, such that the longer they reside in America, they more they report poorer outcomes in their health and wellbeing overall.

Other academic disciplines in the social sciences also have examined African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences with race in the United States (Benson, 2006; Foner, 2001; Henke, 2001; Hunter, 2008; Joseph, Watson, wang, Case, & Hunter, 2013; tormala & Deaux, 2006; Waters, 2001). Although dated, these voices are dominant in the research on African Caribbean immigrants and have yielded two conclusions. First, African Caribbean immigrants consider issues of race trivial and of no concern when they first enter the United States (Deaux et al., 2007; Henke, 2001; Hunter, 2008; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Waters, 1999). Some even suggest
that this inexperience or unawareness of racism provides some protection from the malicious psychological consequences of racism-related incidents (Tormala & Deaux, 2006; Hunter, 2005; Model, 2008).

Second, like the professional counseling research, these studies have found that the longer African Caribbean immigrants reside in the United States, the more they find that race influences their wellbeing significantly (Rogers, 2001; Vickerman, 1999; Warner, 2012; Waters, 1999), and many find that their skin color becomes a problem they never can overcome. They realize that in the United States, they are Black first and foremost (Laguerre, 1984) and that being Black in America is a barrier to their upward mobility (Rogers, 2006). Consequently, African Caribbean immigrants begin to manifest many psychological and physical conditions associated with race-related distress (Lincoln, Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 2007; Miranda, Siddique, Belin, & Kohn-Wood, 2005; Ryan, Gee, & Laflamme, 2006; Williams, Haile, Gonzalez, & Neighbor, 2007).

In summary, the existing research on African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences with race in America suggests that they encounter it and find that it is very different from that to which they are accustomed in the Caribbean. Initially, it appears that their encounter does not bother them, but over time, it leads to a decline in their physical, mental, and emotional health overall. Herein lies the gap in the literature: Something is bothering them, and it pertains to their experience with race, but we do not know what or how. Something is missing in our understanding of these individuals’ encounter with race in America—the way they make sense of it and what meanings they attach to it.
Purpose Statement and Research Question

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe and understand the experiences that first-generation African Caribbean immigrants who live in the United States have with race. My primary research question was: What sense do African Caribbean immigrants make of their encounters with race in America? Understanding the way they do so overall is important because it will help professional counselors and other mental healthcare professionals understand and address their immigration issues. Specifically, counseling professionals will be able to obtain a sense of the way their encounters with race in America affect their mental and emotional health, as existing research suggests.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

Understanding clients’ needs is a professional counselor’s most basic ethical duty, and ethical decision-making is based on the principles of autonomy, non-malfeasance, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2017). Therefore, professional counselors are expected to be multiculturally competent in key areas, such as attitude, knowledge, and behaviors of the diverse groups of clients they serve (Arredondo & Arcinega, 2001; Erickson Cornish, Schreier, Nadkarni, Metzger, & Rodolfa, 2010; Sue & Sue, 2008, Sue, 2016). Counseling scholars and practitioners, including Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), Arredondo et al. (1996), and Pedersen (1994), long have argued that multicultural competence is a central need to work effectively with diverse clients and provide culturally responsive counseling environments.

A key aspect of multicultural competency as described in the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), is professional counselors’ awareness of their clients’ worldviews and experiences (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough,
Therefore, professional counselors are unable to meet certain clients’ needs because of their limited knowledge of their experiences, and there is a gap in the literature concerning African Caribbean immigrants’ perspectives on, and experiences with, race in America. This research gap can leave professional counselors inadvertently unaware of things that are important to their African Caribbean clients and impede a working alliance in therapy. This study not only will help professional counselors understand pertinent Caribbean immigrant issues, but also will help them develop and provide more culturally sensitive approaches to address those needs.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview and analysis of previous research on African Caribbean immigrants’ experience with race in America. After defining selected relevant terms, it begins with the migration story of humans who originated primarily from one region of the world, but migrated and settled in various other regions for several reasons. The chapter follows this brief account of the broad human migration story from a historical to present day perspective. It then interlaces with the historical and modern American migration story as part of that global migration narrative. Thereafter, the chapter reviews the many immigrant narratives in the American migration story. It then associates Black Caribbean people’s migration story with these narratives, and explores issues unique to them, specifically, challenges in their adjustment to race in America. The chapter then transitions to issues related to Black immigrants’ assimilation. Lastly, it examines previous research relevant to African Caribbean immigrants’ encounters with race in America, highlights significant findings, and identifies gaps in this research as well. The analysis explores both professional counseling and social science (sociology, anthropology, etc.) research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the gap in the existing literature and justifies the need for this study.

Migration

Migration has been humanity’s story since the beginning. While there is some disagreement about the human family’s origin and exact process of its development, both creationists and evolutionists generally designate locations in Africa as humans’ geographic origin (Hublin et al., 2017). Paleontologists maintain two origins for modern humans’
predecessors: The Out of Africa (OOA) and Multiregionalism (MRT) theories. While they vary in geographic trajectories, both indicate that modern humans are related to common ancestors who came from Africa (Owen, 2007; Price, 2018). Similarly, Christian theologians maintain that God caused humanity’s great migration out of Africa after thwarting their plans to build the infamous Tower of Babel. Genesis 11:9 states, “…from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:9). Similarly, in Islam, all humans are classified as migrants. For example, Saritoprak (2011) wrote that as Adam, the father of humanity, migrated from heaven to earth, all human beings can be considered immigrants.

Hence, whether from a creationist or evolutionist perspective, migration is a crucial aspect of the human experience, and it can be stated aptly that to be human is to be a migrant. We migrate to survive, search for food and better jobs, and avoid danger and adverse changes in temperature or environment. We migrate toward advanced medicine, technology, and other improvements in life. Whether from a rural town to a large city, or from one country to another, we migrate away from less and toward better. Migration is humanity’s story, and is one of the aspects of our history that gives us a shared experience.

Global Migration

Human migration continues to be a global phenomenon that has increased dramatically over the past decade. According to the most recent data from the United Nation’s 2017 International Migration Report, the number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow rapidly over the past 19 years, and reached approximately 258 million in 2017, up from 244 million in 2015, 222 million in 2010, and 173 million in 2000. The UN’s current global statistics on migration suggest that in 2017, half of all international immigrants lived in 10 countries, primarily Germany (12.0 million), Russia (11.6 million), Saudi Arabia (10.2 million),
and the United Kingdom (8.5 million) (International Migration Report, 2017). However, the largest number of international migrants resides in the United States—49.8 million, 19% of the global total, or approximately one-in-five (International Migration Report, 2017). These data reflect the global and human aspect of migration. All around the world, people move from one place to the other. However, globally, it seems that America remains immigrants’ primary destination.

**American Migration**

It is difficult to extract immigration from the United States’ history and formation because it is integral to the nation’s fabric and landscape. Handlin (1951) demonstrated the enmeshment of immigrant narratives in the chronicles of nation formation when he wrote in the introduction to his book *Uprooted*, “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history” (p. 3). The 2017 statistics from the United States Census Bureau’s ACS reflects this enmeshment of immigrants in the American experience, as it estimates that the American immigrant population accounts for more than 44.5 million, or 13.7% of the United States’ total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Further, as Zong and Batalova (2019) indicated, the United States gains about one million additional migrants per year (Zong and Batalova, 2019). Hence, true to Handlin’s (1951) pronouncement, the United States historically and currently always has had an immigrant narrative.

Immigration patterns have varied throughout American history. For example, because immigration policies in the United States favored Europeans predominantly, before the mid-1960s, most emigrants originated from European countries (Healey, 2012). However, in 1968, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act (also known as the Hart-Cellar
Act), which abolished the National Origins Formula, an earlier quota system based on national origin, and established a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families and attracting skilled labor to the United States (Immigration and Nationality Act, 1965). This act’s passage changed migration patterns drastically, as the United States saw an increase in the number of immigrants from countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean (Le, 2014; Nelson, 1993).

This flow of non-European immigrants has continued unabated (Gerstle & Mollenkopf, 2001) and accounts for nearly 85% of all individuals immigrating to the United States, while European immigration has declined drastically (Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS], 2014). Recognizing this new flow of immigrants’ needs, the American Psychological Association (APA) commissioned a task force in 2011 that concluded that, given the geographic origin of the flow of immigrants in this country, there is a high likelihood that mental health practitioners will serve immigrant populations increasingly in a variety of settings. Consequently, the task force recommended that mental healthcare providers learn more about these populations to identify their mental healthcare needs and provide culturally relevant or sensitive services to meet them (APA, 2012). One such group that has unique needs, African Caribbean immigrants, is growing at a remarkable rate (Kent, 2007; McCabe, 2011).

**Caribbean Migration**

Emigration from the Caribbean always has been part of the region’s history, and the Caribbean people have used immigration consistently as a progressive economic tool to achieve upward mobility through the accumulation of financial and social capital (Pottinger & Brown, 2006; Thomas-Hope, 2002). Although migration within the Caribbean region began during the early 1800s (Richardson, 1989), large scale migrations outside the region, primarily to European
destinations, specifically the United Kingdom, followed soon after (Thomas, 2012). Caribbean emigration to the United States was stagnant for centuries until two factors triggered an outpouring of Caribbean migrants to the United States in the 1960s.

First was a drastic change in American immigration policies, i.e., the Immigration and Nationality Act mentioned above, which placed a new priority on family-based migration (Thomas, 2012). The second was that the Act’s passage occurred just as many former European-colonized Caribbean states began to establish their sovereignty. As opportunities for skilled workers became limited in these countries, and the seemingly endless opportunities in more developed countries beckoned them, many Caribbean citizens saw immigration as an opportunity for economic and social survival. While many people from the Caribbean migrated to Great Britain, Canada, and France, the majority arrived in the United States (Kasinitz, 1992; Thomas, 2012). This trend in immigration continues today, as the United States accounts for more than 60% of the 6 million Caribbean migrants worldwide (Zong & Batalova, 2019). Currently, most Caribbean immigrants who come to America as permanent residents are admitted based on family ties (Thomas, 2012), and more than 90% of these come from five countries: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago (Zong & Batalova, 2016).

Assimilation, Racialization, and Migration

Sometimes referred to as integration or incorporation, assimilation is the process whereby diverse groups come together to create a common culture (Brown & Bean, 2006; Healey, 2012). For immigrants, assimilation means social, cultural, and political integration into the dominant culture, which leads to the social and economic advancement they migrated to achieve. Alba (1990), Alba and Nee (2003), and Gordon (1964) espoused traditional models of assimilation grounded in Park’s (1930) work. Park believed that intergroup relations go through a predictable
set of phases he referred to as the “race relations cycle.” According to this cycle, when groups come into contact first through immigration or conquest, their relationships are conflicted and competitive. However, the cycle moves eventually toward assimilation, or groups’ “interpenetration and fusion” (Park & Burgess, 1921, p. 735). Park (1926) also argued that assimilation is inevitable in a democratic and industrial society.

Assimilation once was viewed as egalitarian, or a melting pot concept, that emphasizes sharing and inclusion. However, traditional models of assimilation long have been criticized, and it has been suggested that racial hierarchies have a large influence on shaping identities and integration (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Zhou, 1999). For example, Sutton (1973) argued that assimilation holds different meanings for Black and White immigrants. The latter believe that becoming an American means upward social mobility, while Black immigrants believe it means “merely being American Black,” which leads to downward social mobility (p. 142). This divergence in White and immigrants of color’s experiences with, and meanings of, assimilation is attributable to the racialization that both groups experience upon their arrival in America, which then leads them to have different experiences in their assimilation into American culture.

Omi and Winant (2014) defined racialization as, “…the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified social relationship, social practice or group” (p. 111). Racialization as part of immigrants’ assimilation process is different for White immigrants than those of color (Adler, 2006; James, Kim, & Redclift 2015; Maldonado 2006, 2009; Omi & Winant, 2014). For example, Chaudhary (2015) explained that while immigrants may have their own ethnic and cultural identities associated with their countries of origin, once they arrive in America, they are incorporated into a society that largely is organized along racial lines. Further,
as Omi and Winant (2014) and Chaudhary (2015) determined, because Whites’ and Blacks’ lived experiences in American society diverge in most areas of social life, the racialized category into which immigrants and their children are incorporated largely will determine their experiences and opportunities in the United States.

This means that White immigrants and immigrants of color will experience a different racialization process. Thus, for example, immigrants from a European country such as Denmark are likely to be incorporated into the White mainstream with the privileges that accompany it, while immigrants of color from the Caribbean are likely to be incorporated into the Black community and experience the racism and systematic oppression that is part of the Black American experience.

Race and Assimilation in the Counseling Research Literature

Although there have been some studies in the professional counseling literature, insufficient attention has been given to the experience of race in African Caribbean immigrants’ assimilation, and very few studies have focused on the challenges that these immigrants face that are unique to their experience of being both immigrants and Black. However, three studies in the counseling and mental health fields have given some attention to these immigrants’ experience with race in America. In the first, Belizaire and Fuertes (2011) examined a group of African Caribbean immigrants and their assimilation issues, and used a multivariate analysis to investigate the relations among attachment, coping, acculturative stress, and quality of life in a sample of 143 Haitian immigrants living in New York City and Miami.

The researchers used several instruments, including the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale, the Brief COPE, the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale, and the World Health Organization Quality of Life assessment. They

24
found that the longer these Caribbean immigrants lived in the United States, the more they experienced anxiety largely attributable to assimilation issues that became associated with a lower quality of life. Among other things, they also found that the participants’ experience with race in the United States was one of the factors that increased acculturative stress and consequently decreased their quality of life.

However, the study had two primary limitations. First, the research participants only were from Haiti. Consequently, the key issue implicit in their deteriorating quality of life was their lack of English language proficiency. While language proficiency is a significant barrier for some African Caribbean immigrants, for many it is not, as English is the primary language spoken in most Caribbean states (Knight, 2012). Secondly, while the study assumed that racial prejudice affected participants’ mental health adversely, it did not offer a broad understanding of these immigrants’ experiences with race, but only implicated issues with racism as an aside. In addition, the study did not describe the way their experiences with perceived racism increased Haitian immigrants’ acculturative stress.

In another study, Redway (2014) explored the effects of racial and ethnic identity, racial socialization, and perceptions of racial discrimination among Black Caribbean immigrants in the United States. He surveyed 120 English-speaking Black Caribbean immigrant adults using the Racial Identity Attitude Scale–Long Form (RIAS-L), the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), the Teenager Experience of Racial Socialization Scale (TERS), and the Perceived Racism Scale (PRS). He found that when first-generation African Caribbean immigrants enter the United States, they are not fully aware of the racial tensions that exist. However, during their assimilation into American society, they begin to develop a dual identity, e.g., Black and Jamaican, in their response to their perceptions of the racial realities that exist in America.
Redway posited that, based on their socialization experiences with race, participants choose to develop this dual identity, one that connects them both to America and their country of origin.

Redway’s study provided some insight into African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences with race in the United States. First, the author used a broad sample of Caribbean immigrants. Second, the results showed that, when they first arrive in America, Black or African Caribbean immigrants have a distinct experience with race. However, a primary limitation of the study was the method of data collection and a gap in our understanding of African Caribbean immigrants’ experience with race in the United States over time. The study included several regression analyses that sought to describe the relations among a number of variables, including race, ethnicity, and socialization. While researchers can use regression techniques to examine these relations, these methods cannot account for all the underlying factors that contributed to the results (Osborne & Waters, 2002). This study also assumed that African Caribbean immigrants’ previous social experiences with race buffered them from the harsh realities of race in the United States. However, it did not explain the way their post-emigration experiences with race altered this pre-migratory understanding. Redway suggested that a dual identity emerges with residency in response to something they are experiencing the United States over a period. However, what remains to be answered is: How does increased length of residency create a need for this dual identity? Further, why do they feel the need to develop this dual identity? What about their experience with race in America leads them to respond in such a manner?

Case and Hunter (2014) also conducted a study of African Caribbean immigrants’ experience with race in America, and explored the role that racial identity plays in increasing their distress, and compared racial identity’s function for Black Caribbean immigrants and Black Americans. The authors sampled 171 individuals, of whom 104 identified as Black American...
and 67 as first-generation Black Caribbean immigrants. Using the Importance of Racial Group Membership to the Self-Concept assessment, and the Index of Race-Related Stress–Brief Version, they conducted two hierarchical linear regressions to explore racial identity as a psychological mechanism and compared increased cultural and racism-related stress with length of residency in the United States.

They also found that Black Caribbean immigrants’ cultural and racism-related stress increased the longer they resided in America. Further, the results indicated that while the degree of importance placed on racial group membership predicted Black Americans’ cultural and racism-related stress, it had no effect on Black Caribbean immigrants. This suggests that because African Caribbean immigrants categorize their racial identity as Caribbean and not Black American, they do not perceive race-related barriers. This study’s findings were consistent with those of Redway (2014). Again, it appears that when they first arrive, African Caribbean immigrants do not perceive that their experiences with race are negative or harmful, or directed at them because of their cultural identity as “Caribbean.” However, as their length of residency increases, something in their experience with race in America changes and elicits significant stress (Case & Hunter, 2014; Redway, 2014).

Thus, the few research studies in the counseling literature about African Caribbean immigrants concur that they have certain experiences with race in America that exert increasing stress on them over time. It appears that when they first migrate, they have an initial experience that they consider harmless or insignificant; however, as their residency increases, they have a dissimilar experience that appears to be more psychologically unnerving. Research findings in sociology and anthropology also have reached similar conclusions (Ogbu, 1978; Case & Hunter, 2014; Foner, 2001; Waters, 1999).
Assimilation and Race in the Social Science Research Literature

Research on African Caribbean immigrants’ issues with race as they seek to assimilate in America have predominated and primarily have found that African Caribbean immigrants dismiss issues related to race initially and formulate three specific responses to deal with them. These include what researchers define as: (1) voluntary immigrant theory; (2) transnational identity, and (3) the myth of return.

Voluntary Immigrant Theory

Ogbu (1978) was the first to categorize American immigrants into two groups, voluntaries and involuntaries. He defined “voluntary immigrants” as those who moved to the United States willingly because they expected to be afforded better opportunities (e.g., better jobs or more political or religious freedom) than those they had in their places of origin. He contended that because these immigrants migrated to America willingly, they do not perceive that the U.S. government or White Americans have forced their presence in the United States upon them. Hence, these immigrants are optimistic that they will succeed in the United States with education and hard work. Consequently, they tend to interpret economic, political, and social barriers (such as racism) as more or less temporary problems they will overcome. Ogbu (1983, 1990) argued that as recent immigrants, these voluntaries have not yet been exposed to discrimination long enough to have internalized it.

Ogbu’s (1983, 1990) voluntary immigrant theory holds that because African Caribbean immigrants migrated to the United States willingly and are hardworking, they are somewhat insulated from negative or degrading experiences associated with race in the United States. Several researchers concur with this theory, including Case and Hunter (2014), Foner (2001), and Waters (1999), who found that when they first arrive in America, African Caribbean
immigrants tend to ignore, avoid, or overlook negative experiences with race, believing that they are trivial and transient issues. Similarly, Bashi (2007) found that when certain groups of Caribbean immigrants first arrive, they believe that because they are committed to hard work and social advancement, they will not be susceptible to racial discrimination.

Kasinitz (1992) also found that first-generation Black Caribbean immigrants view themselves as hardworking, ambitious, and committed to education and family, and are militant about their racial identities, but not oversensitive to, or obsessed with, race. However, research on this voluntary immigrant theory also holds that the longer African Caribbean immigrants reside in the United States, and the more the American ideology of race persists, the more difficult they find it to navigate (Bashi, 2007; Kasinitz, 1992; Waters, 1999). It appears that this voluntary immigrant attitude is ephemeral and succumbs to increased exposure to negative experiences with race in America over time.

**Transnational Identity**

Another line of research has found that African Caribbean immigrants develop a certain cultural response to the negative experiences with race they encounter in America. The first is what scholars refer to as “transnational identity” (Waters, 1999), which is the belief many immigrants, including African Caribbean immigrants, espouse, that they are temporary residents in the United States and still belong to their countries of origin (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Immigrants who maintain close contact with their countries of origin, including making frequent trips home, forge a transnational identity. Waters (2004) expanded on Ogbu’s idea that as voluntary immigrants in the United States, Caribbean or West Indian immigrants have a sense of ethnic or cultural identity. She asserted further that this ethnic identity stresses their country of origin and produces a different type of consciousness that creates a buffer between them and
racism that allows them to withstand the negative experiences with race that they may encounter in America. Several researchers agree that, in this respect, African Caribbean immigrants distinguish themselves intentionally from native African Americans (Kasinitz, 1992; Laguerre, 1984; Massey & Denton, 1989; Rogers, 2006; Vickerman, 1999; Waters, 1994; Woldemikael, 1989). Waters (2004) also explained that this “…West Indian cultural response to black-white race relations helps to foster social mobility for many first-generation immigrants” (p. 140).

Although dated, several studies also have found that African Caribbean immigrants use transnational identity as a way to adjust to race in America (Bryce-Laporte, 1972; Buchanan, 1979, 1987; Fontaine, 1976; Fouron, 1987; Glick-Schiller, 1977). For example, Zephir (1996) studied Haitians in New York City and found that they decided consciously to maintain themselves as a distinct ethnic group. She described the way they tended to use their ethnicity and cultural distinctiveness as a situational response, an accommodation tactic to increase their chances of success in their new environment, or as a way to resist their subordinate status.

Similarly, Foner (1985, 1987) indicated that Jamaicans in New York cling to their “Jamaicanness” when they realize that assimilation with Black Americans would cause them to be stigmatized as members of a group that has low status in American society. Thompson and Bauer (2003) and Wallen (2001) also found that Jamaicans tended to identify themselves based on their island of origin. Similarly, in a study of West Indian immigrants and their ethnic identification, McLaughlin (1981) found that they defined themselves largely based on nationality (i.e., their identification with a particular place of origin, such as Haiti or Jamaica) rather than race. Rogers (2001) also found that while a group of 59 first-generation African Caribbean immigrants did not reject their race, they preferred to use their ethnicity as their primary identification. However, this research also suggested that length of residency in the
United States was a significant factor in African Caribbean immigrants’ perceptions of, and experience with, race. Murphy and Mahalingam (2004) explored the correlation between Caribbean immigrants’ transnational ties and mental health and found that retaining a connection to their countries of origin played a significant role in their perceived social support, ethnic identity, and better wellbeing.

**Myth of Return**

The concept some researchers have referred to as “the myth of return,” the belief that if things do not work out in the United States, one can simply return to the home country, is related closely to transnational identity (Foner, 2001; Shaw-Taylor & Tuch, 2007). In her research, Rogers (2001) found that if African Caribbean immigrants find that insuperable racial barriers block their social mobility, they likely will maintain their transnational attachments to maintain the myth of return. Similarly, after they were asked how they coped with American racism, Foner’s (2001) research subjects articulated their belief in this exit option repeatedly.

While proposing these theories, the research findings in sociology and anthropology overall also have supported the findings that length of residency in the United States is a significant factor in African Caribbean immigrants’ perceptions of, and experience with, race. The research suggests that over time, many of the cultural coping mechanisms or responses mentioned previously become less effective in combatting negative racial experiences in the United States. What is missing from this research is an understanding of the way these immigrants process their encounters with race in America over time. Further, what factors contribute to their coping strategies’ decreasing effectiveness? Lastly, are there other strategies that African Caribbean immigrants use to negotiate America’s racial reality?
Summary of Existing Research and Gap

The existing body of research in professional counseling and other academic disciplines has indicated that the longer African Caribbean immigrants reside in the United States, the more they will describe their experiences with race as psychologically and emotionally disheartening (Bashi, 2007; Kasinitz, 1992; Lincoln et al., 2007; Miranda et al., 2005; Read & Emerson, 2005; Waters, 1999; Williams et al., 2007). Although initially, they see race in America as inconsequential, the research shows that they learn eventually that living with racism is a demoralizing process that cannot be ignored, avoided, or overcome (Bashi, 2007). Therein lies the gap in the research literature: professional counselors and counselor educators still know little about the cognitive, emotional, and psychological factors involved in the way African Caribbean immigrants talk about, or make sense of, the realities of race in America. Professional counselors continue to have a limited understanding of the factors that contribute to African Caribbean immigrants’ increase in psychological and emotional distress, despite their attempts to cope with what they are experiencing. Further, we have yet to understand the way these immigrants make sense of this experience the longer they live in America.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The primary research question in this study was: What sense do African Caribbean immigrants make of their experience with race in America? The interpretive phenomenological analysis’ relevance in this study is discussed in this chapter. The research methods, including study participants, procedures, analyses, and concerns about trustworthiness also are discussed.

Design

This research used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. According to Taylor (1985), IPA assumes that people are “self-interpreting beings,” which means they engage actively in interpreting the events, objects, and people in their lives. Therefore, IPA explores an individual’s personal perceptions or account of an event or state rather than attempting to produce an objective record of the event or state itself. Thus, the outcome of a successful IPA study allows the researcher to “give voice” to, and “make sense” of, the research participants’ experiences (Harper & Thompson, 2012). Hays and Wood (2011) suggested that IPA is congruent with counseling because assessing detailed information about client experiences is a natural part of professional practice. Through the IPA methodology, this research sought to give voice to African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences with race by making sense of their narratives.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used in this research, in which the researcher selects individuals and sites to study intentionally because they can provide an understanding of the research study’s problem and central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For example, I recruited participants
specifically in cities in three states, New York, Connecticut, and Florida, because of their larger populations of first-generation African Caribbean immigrants who were likely to have experiences with race and racialization in America and could inform an understanding of the research problem, as well as provide broad perspectives in their variety of experiences.

A maximum of 10 participants was sought for this study. A distinctive feature of IPA is its commitment to a detailed interpretative account of the cases included, and many researchers have recognized that this can be accomplished realistically only with a small sample (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Previous IPA studies have been published with sample sizes of one, four, nine, and fifteen (Eatough & Smith, 2006; Smith, 2004). To be eligible to participate in this investigation, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria. They were required to be at least 21 years old, self-described as first-generation African Caribbean immigrants, have lived in the Continental United States for at least 5 years, and have migrated from one of the Caribbean states identified in Chapter I. The participants’ age and duration of residency was imposed to solicit participants who are informed about the topic and could provide valuable insight. Participants who have resided in the United States longer have a different outlook on their experiences with race compared to those who have arrived recently (Bashi, 2007; Waters, 1999; Williams et al., 2007).

**Participants’ Descriptive Characteristics**

The participant sample included ten self-identified, first-generation African Caribbean immigrants from the islands of Jamaica, St. Martin, St. Thomas, Trinidad, and the country of Guyana; half reported that they emigrated from Jamaica. The participants resided primarily in the Northeastern, Midwestern, and Southeastern regions of the United States, including cities in Connecticut, Florida, Michigan, and New York, although several reported that they lived in other
regions of the United States before they settled in their current community. They ranged in age from 25 to 65 years, with a mean age of 48.2 years (SD = 11). Most were women (7), while 3 were men. Participants’ annual incomes ranged from $15,000 to over $85,000, with a mean of $48,000. One of the participants had only a high school education, two had some college education, and more than half reported that they had a college education ranging from Associates of Arts to doctoral or professional degrees. Participants reported that they had resided in the United States from 5 to 30 years, with a 21-year median length of residency. Some participants’ stories and experiences were used more than others because of their relevance to the research’s intent and the fact that I allowed the data to reveal their lived experiences with race in America.

Although a short biography of each participant often is provided in similar qualitative inquiries to give context to the participants’ responses and the analysis, this is not provided here because of commitments of confidentiality made to several respondents who shared their experiences on the condition that they would remain as anonymous as possible. In lieu of this, a broad description of the participants, all of whom were assigned aliases, is provided, and the details are summarized in Table 1.
Table 1

Participants’ Descriptive Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Annual Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Years in US</th>
<th>Island</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>40-55</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>St. Thomas</td>
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<td>40-55</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Trinidad</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>St. Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Widowed</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Guyana</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>85</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
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<td>Sam</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Trinidad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>40-55</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
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<td>Separated</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Procedures

Specifically, following the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board’s (HSIRB’s) approval of the study (Appendix A), I began to solicit potential participants using a flyer (Invitation to participate in study, Appendix B) that contained my contact information so that potential participants could learn more or express interest in participating in the study. The flyer was circulated among potential participants’ social networks, such as churches, community centers, and Caribbean clubs or organizations. Specific individuals who were recognized as leaders in these networks were instrumental in soliciting potential participants. Their acceptance and positive regard of the study prompted them to encourage individuals with whom they had influence to participate in the study.

Once potential participants contacted me and expressed their interest in the study, I summarized information about it and provided them copies of the Informed Consent (Appendix C) via email. The consent form contained more specific information about the requirements to participate. For example, potential participants were informed of the study’s general purpose, what was expected of them, how long they were required to participate, the potential risks
associated with the study, their right to withdraw voluntarily at any time, and benefits of participating. Potential participants also were asked for their permission to record and transcribe their interviews. Once the consent form was reviewed and signed, I scheduled one-on-one interviews with the participants. In some instances, the consent forms were read, reviewed, and signed on the day of the interview.

A nine-item demographic questionnaire was used to collect data concerning participants’ demographics and other characteristics (Appendix D) described in Table 1. In addition, a standard interview guide was used to conduct each interview (Appendix E). However, some flexibility in each person’s questions was allowed to account for participants’ differences. For example, the participants’ experiences varied by gender, and the women were asked about certain experiences that are irrelevant to men. Further, because of their pursuit of advanced degrees, some participants discussed their experiences in educational settings that had to be probed in comparison to others who did not have encounters in those environments.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) stated, “One of the most important aspects of the interviewer’s approach is conveying the attitude that the participant’s views are valuable and useful” (p. 145). I employed a semi-structured, in-depth interview technique in this research to gain insight from the participants about their experiences with race in America. Tod (2006) explained that semi-structured interviews offer a more flexible approach to the interview process. He stated that while they may use an interview schedule for predetermined topics, they allow unanticipated responses and issues to emerge using open-ended questions. Padget (2008) also indicated that they allow researchers to obtain targeted information about the participants’ experience, while giving them the freedom to describe those experiences in detail. According to the author, in-depth interviews also give interviewees a chance to present more information that
the researcher may not have considered. This interview process allowed participants the freedom to express their experiences with race in America with the details and anecdotes they chose.

Before the interviews were conducted, the questions in the interview guide were refined through pilot testing. Padgett (2008) recommended pilot testing the interview guide on several individuals drawn preferably from the population of interest. Creswell (2007) also indicated that pilot testing is a way to refine and develop research instruments, as well as a way to assess the degree of observer bias and frame the research questions properly. To test the interview questions, I selected two individuals who met the study’s inclusion criteria. They were informed of the research’s purpose, after which I conducted mock interviews with them. Their feedback provided insight that allowed me to refine and clarify the interview questions.

I also used a funneling technique in the interview process. Marshall and Rossman (2011) described funneling as a qualitative research technique in which the researcher begins the interview with relatively straightforward, broad questions or topics that respondents find easy to answer or talk about, then moves on to more specific questions or difficult topics. The authors reported that funneling helps create a relaxed atmosphere and establishes rapport between the interviewer and respondents. Three broad questions guided the interviews:

1. What was your life like before you emigrated to the United States?
2. What were some of your experiences with race when you first moved to America?
3. Now that you have lived in America for some time, how have you come to understand race?

Sample questions included the following:

1. What was your experience with race when you first arrived?
2. What does it mean to be defined as Black in America?
3. What are some key experiences that have shaped your understanding of race in America?

4. Where are you now regarding your understanding of race?

During the interviews, I remained alert for subtle clues that suggested potential unexamined themes and probed participants to share more about those particular themes. According to Padgett (2008), “Probes are critical for getting beyond rehearsed accounts and prefabricated renditions” (p. 108). During the interview process, I also wrote memos and kept a journal about the data collected. Several scholars have emphasized memos’ importance throughout the research process, particularly during data collection and analysis (Knight, 2002; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). An example of a memo I wrote after interviewing a participant was:

Carlton appeared very emotional when describing his coming to awareness and realizing that race was different in America than what he was used to back home. He teared up during the interview. This coming to awareness was painful for him. This “I became aware” moment seems to connect to two previous participants who shared having a similar awakening moment. “I became aware” is emerging as a significant and common experience. Be on the lookout for further instances.

All interviews were held in person and each lasted an average of one and a half hours; the longest was 2 hours. Interviews were conducted at locations that were convenient for the participants. For example, five were interviewed in a community leader’s home, 3 in a church, and 2 in their homes. After the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology.
Data Analysis

There are no strict guidelines for data analysis in IPA. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), IPA research provides a set of flexible data analysis guidelines that illustrate merely one conceivable way to analyze qualitative data. Accordingly, researchers can adapt the guidelines based on their research objectives. Smith and Osborn (2007) also emphasized that “…qualitative analysis is inevitably a personal process, and the analysis itself is the interpretative work which the investigator does at each of the stages” (p. 67). One thing is clear about IPA analysis: whatever process is used to analyze the data, the researcher should work hard to maintain the concept of the phenomenon as a whole.

The data analysis began before the coding process through my reflective journaling and memoing (Creswell, 2007). Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggested that both reflective journaling and memoing address issues of researcher bias, and also provide rich insight throughout the process. In reflective journaling, researchers talk about themselves, “…their presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process” (Mruck & Breuer, 2003, p. 3). Groenewald (2008) defined memoing as the act of recording reflective notes about what the researcher is learning from the data. These two processes were very critical in giving me insights into my own emotions and thoughts about, and observations of, the participants and the research. These processes also were instrumental in helping capture the concept of the entire phenomenon, as Groenewald (2004) cautioned.

My data analysis process was adapted from that of various researchers, including Holloway (1997), Hycner, (1999), and Eatough and Smith, (2006). After transcribing the interviews, participants’ names and any identifying information were deleted from the data, and each interview was assigned an identification code, and each participant an alias. Once this was
done, I then read the individual transcripts and listened to the audio recordings several times. Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999) recommended that the researcher listen to each interview’s audio recording repeatedly to become familiar with the interviewees’ words to develop a holistic sense, or “gestalt” of their experiences.

Next, I began to code individual transcripts. Marshall and Rossman (2011) defined coding as breaking data down into meaningful and manageable elements. Coding helps prevent the researcher from placing too much emphasis on the importance of any one aspect early in the study and helps ensure an in-depth analysis of the entire interview (Charmaz, 2006; Stake, 2010). I engaged in a two-step coding process. First, I went through each individual transcript and performed a line-by-line analysis. This step, also referred to as open coding (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013), was a critical part of the data analysis that helped me focus in detail on every participant’s transcript. Code labels often were made in vivo, in that they emerged directly from participants’ own words (Padget, 2008). For example, for the following participant’s statement,

“So back home, we’re family. It doesn’t matter if this is a neighbor, that’s my brother, that’s my sister, that’s my family,” I assigned the code: FAMILY.

I also wrote the following memo in the margin of this participant’s transcript about this and similar statements that received the same code:

*S Speaks to his experience of the broad context of family in St. Martin. Also, gives a sense of what his community was like in St. Martin. An example of a collectivistic culture?*

I continued coding each individual transcript line-by-line until all 10 were coded. Some codes were redundant throughout the 10 transcripts. Joffe (2012) commented that the higher the frequency of occurrence of the same code, the more reliable it is. While open coding is helpful because it allows the researcher to stay close to the data and capture the phenomenon holistically,
it also results in many codes (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart, 2013). Thus, many codes were created during this stage, most of which were irrelevant to the central phenomenon the research explored.

Consequently, after the open-coding process, I looked next at the codes in each individual transcript and categorized those. Marshall and Rossman (2011) recommended grouping codes according to conceptual categories that reflect a commonality. Rubin and Rubin (1995) also recommended refining each data category’s contents (working within) before comparing them with each other (working across) (pp. 241, 251). Further, Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggested refining each category by developing a rule for inclusion that codes in each category must meet during this process. For example, because the study’s goal was to explore participants’ experiences with race, I developed a category called, Pre-emigration Racial Realities, in which the rule for inclusion was: “The participant shares experiences, understandings, feelings, or events regarding race before emigrating to America.” Codes that met this rule were then placed in this category. This process of categorization was performed first within each dataset, then across the data through prolonged engagement with them. During each phase of the analysis, I reviewed the data in previous phases continually so that I made connections between them constantly until saturation occurred. Marshall and Rossman (2012) suggested that saturation is achieved when themes in the dataset become redundant. To ensure reliability, the categories, inclusion criteria, and their codes were given to one of my peer advisors, who went through the data and verified the categories independently. After I refined the categories based on her feedback, I then examined them closely to identify emerging themes.

Next, I combed through the entire dataset again, noting the frequency of these emerging themes, and searching for alternative explanations as well. Marshall and Rossman (2011)
suggested that researchers should challenge the very explanations and interpretations they are proposing constantly during data analysis. These emerging themes or sub-themes were grouped in clusters and produced 4 main themes.

The results of the data analysis were the culmination of the participants’ voices and provided a profound perspective on their lived experiences with race in America. A variety of quotations and anecdotes are shared herein to allow the participants to speak for themselves and provide multiple perspectives to help the reader understand each participant. As such, the data are organized as follows: the major theme and sub-themes related to participants’ pre-emigration experiences with race; experiences with race when they first immigrated and, lastly, their current understanding of, or experiences with, race in the United States.

**Trustworthiness**

Because the terms *validity* and *reliability* conflict with the epistemological and ontological positions qualitative researchers adopt, many choose other terms to describe their research’s truthfulness or trustworthiness. According to Sandelowski and Barroso (2002), one of the most solemn questions in qualitative research centers on defining what is “…a good, valid, and/or trustworthy qualitative study” (p. 2). Although qualitative inquiry’s ever-changing landscape guarantees inherently that opinions about rigor will differ, qualitative researchers still seek legitimacy in their research (Padget, 2008). Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1995), pioneers in the development of methods of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry, proposed that *credibility*, *transferability*, *auditability*, and *confirmability* indicate fidelity or truthfulness in qualitative research.

Credibility is the degree to which the research participants’ views and the researcher’s descriptions and interpretations are consistent (Padget, 2008). Credibility is imperative in
qualitative research, as it ensures that the participant’s representations are identified and depicted accurately (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Transferability refers to the ability to generalize, not the sample, but the study’s findings. Donmoyer (1990) asserted that external validity is not a priority because qualitative research focuses on subjective meaning, and depth over breadth. According to Padget (2008), auditability or dependability means that the study’s procedures are documented and traceable. She emphasized that they do not need to lead to the same conclusion, but should have a logic that makes sense to others. Confirmability is achieved by demonstrating that the study’s findings were not imagined or concocted, but rather, derived clearly from the data.

Creswell (2013) suggested that numerous paths can lead researchers to effective trustworthiness, and I used several strategies designed to ensure the study’s truthfulness. These included the memoing and reflective journaling mentioned above, which I describe further in the data analysis section. I also used a peer advisor who engaged in the research previously and understood the importance of credible research. Several scholars have suggested that using peer advisors or peer groups is an effective strategy to keep the researcher honest, reduce bias, and serve as a lifeline to share the research’s emotional ups and downs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, Mathew, & Conte, 2004; Steinmetz, 1991). I also worked very closely with my dissertation chair, who is well versed in the methods of qualitative inquiry. During the process of analysis, he held me to tasks constantly to ensure not only that I was being transparent, but that I allowed the data to guide the research outcomes. This was particularly important to mitigate bias, as I am a member of the group that I was studying. My chair’s commentary and suggestions were interwoven into this research. These two methods occurred simultaneously
throughout the research, particularly during the data analysis, as I strove to interpret the data accurately and ensure that the findings were based on them objectively (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

**Research Reflexivity**

Being transparent about the researcher’s background and inherent bias is important to ensure truthfulness in qualitative research. Ely et al. (1991) explained that qualitative researchers find topics for research that are interwoven intimately with their deepest professional and social interests and commitments. Consequently, biases often accompany the passion, excitement, and insights that motivate a research project (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Therefore, in qualitative research, there is no need to question whether a qualitative researcher is biased, as that is assumed; rather, the study should examine the kinds of biases the researcher has, and the way s/he addresses and documents them (Agar, 1980).

In this case, I am a first-generation African Caribbean immigrant who has lived in America for over 20 years. My immigration experience from the Caribbean and adjustment to American culture, specifically with respect to race, was the primary motivation for my research inquiry. In my attempts to explore my experience, I have sought to extract meaning from the publications in my academic discipline of counseling, only to find a paucity of empirical studies about African Caribbean immigrants’ needs and experiences related to assimilation or adjustment to race in America. This led to my desire to give voice to a group of people like me, who have come from a very different background and have had very distinct experiences with race, but have not been represented well in the counseling and mental health fields. Consequently, I believe it is necessary to share some of my background, both to be transparent in the process, and help the reader understand the assumptions I bring to the research. First, I will describe my pre-migratory home, then summarize my experiences with race both pre- and post-
immigration to America. Lastly, I will describe the philosophical stance that I bring to this research.

My African Caribbean immigrant narrative originates in the southern Caribbean island of the Dominica (officially The Commonwealth of Dominica), where I was born and raised until I was 14 years old. Dominica is on the southern tip of the Caribbean archipelago between the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. The island is approximately 290 square miles and had a population of approximately 72,000 in the 2011 census. Originally, several native tribes, primarily the Kalinagos and Tainos, inhabited the island. Later, it was colonized by Europeans, predominantly the French, from the 1690s to 1763, and then Great Britain in 1763 (Honeychurch, 1995). Consequently, while English is the official language and is spoken and understood readily, Dominican Creole, an Antillean Creole based on French, often referred to as “Patwa” or “Kwéyòl,” is spoken widely on the island as well (Honeychurch, 1995). Dominica is home to a wide range of people. While most Dominicans are descendants of Africans brought to the island as slaves, there is a smaller population of remaining native people—Kalinagos—who live on 15 km² of territory on the island’s east coast. There also is a smaller population of people of European descent, Chinese, Arabs, and multi-ethnics. This mix of cultures has produced the current culture in which I was immersed during my formative years.

My understanding of race while in Dominica was that I was Black. However, it was more important to me to be defined as Dominican than Black. The construct of “Black,” or “Blackness,” in Dominica is loose; it infers a descendence from African slaves, but has no distinct association with respect to a separate or additional identity. We have no hyphenation because we all are Dominicans. Further, for Dominicans, social status or standing includes several sociopolitical identities, such as the consensus of race ideology throughout the Caribbean
region discussed in Chapter II. While it can include phenotypic features, such as skin color, hair structure (straight, kinky/curly), and aspects of colorism are practiced, it is much broader and includes education, family background, religion, and profession. Before I moved to America, I had never thought much about being Black or given attention to my skin tone’s social implications. I came to realize that, as a “light-skinned” Black person, I had privilege in Dominica simply because my skin was considered light only when I explored the way race is understood in the Caribbean. This will be discussed further in Chapters IV and V.

When I was approximately 14 years old, my family emigrated to the U.S. Virgin Islands, specifically St. Thomas, where I lived for four years. The U.S. Virgin Islands retains a strong Caribbean identity and culture, but as an insular American territory, has the benefits of American citizenship and economic opportunities not afforded to many other Caribbean countries. This, together with its proximity to other Caribbean states, make the U.S Virgin Islands a prime destination for immigrants from other Caribbean islands, referred to often as “down islanders.” Combined with the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands (both British and American) long have been cited as one of the main receiving countries in intra-Caribbean migration (Ferguson, 2003). The U.S. Virgin Islands have an estimated population of 104,000, predominantly Black descendants of African slaves (U.S. Population Review, 2018). Other demographics include approximately 17% Hispanic or Latino (primarily Puerto Rican and Dominican from the Dominican Republic). Approximately 16% of the population is White, 1.4% Asian, and 2.1% is mixed or some other ethnicity (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

Initially, I retained my previous understanding of race when I moved to St. Thomas. However, after I lived there several months, I noticed that Whites, mostly from the U.S. mainland, often were more affluent and owned most of the more lucrative businesses. They also
lived in separate communities that typically were isolated from the many Black communities on the island. I discovered that the reason I did not see many White children in the schools that my cousins and I attended was because they primarily attended private schools. Because I believed that hard work leads to success and wealth, I assumed that these children and their parents were wealthier and successful because of hard work. However, I thought it was a curious thing that most of the wealthy people not only had White skin, but also lived separate from the majority population. Although minor, that was the first time I noted the possible concept of race that included disparity and differed from what I experienced growing up in Dominica.

After I completed high school, I moved to Alabama, where I attended a historically black college/university (HBCU) for five years. While there, I was inundated with African American culture, which was foreign to me. Although I identified as Black, I felt out of place because I could not identify with the African American culture, history, and experiences. I had learned about the history of African Americans in this country and the struggles they endured to reach their positions in American society, and had read about racism and oppression in America. However, before I experienced it, I did not believe it still existed. Instead, I believed firmly that regardless of race, if someone was willing to work hard in America, s/he could accomplish anything. When I heard stories from my African American friends in college, I somehow rationalized that they must have done something wrong to have received such harsh treatment. I also thought that they were reacting angrily to what their parents and grandparents experienced and were unwilling to forget the past.

Within the first two years that I lived in Alabama, I discovered that I was Black in the American sense, and that Black in America means something else entirely than it does in Dominica, and I had many experiences that led me to understand what it means to be Black in
America. Although I had many blatantly negative experiences because of race, for the most part, I was able to dismiss or rationalize them. I always found a reason to explain being pulled over by the police randomly, followed in the store, or told “no” or “it isn’t our policy” for something that I saw Whites accessing without objection. I was in my sophomore year when I finally had an epiphany, when the truth of what I was experiencing became clear to me. I came to realize that race in America is a major point of social and economic distinction and that people who do not know you make assumptions about you (often negative) nonetheless, simply because of your skin color. These assumptions then lead to many forms of ill-treatment that deny your humanity.

Recognizing this discouraged me. I had been in America for two years and had many moments of culture shock, but this one was distinctly different, and was difficult to process because I could not determine the way to make sense of it. I am not a criminal. I am a good man. Disheartening thoughts came to my mind as I realized slowly that, after making many sacrifices, I came to America to have a better life, yet my determination and intentions to work hard did not matter to a large segment of American society because I have black skin. I felt dehumanized. For several days after my epiphany about race in America, I recall generally feeling betrayed, frustrated, depressed, angry, and anxious.

Processing this realization of race as it exists in American society was difficult because it created a huge dissonance. For over 20 years of my life, I believed firmly that an individual should be judged by his/her productivity or lack thereof. That is the way people obtain their social status. However, it is different in America; no matter how hard you work or what you achieve, being Black put you in an inferior social position. Having black skin creates suspicion and scrutiny and can result in psychological, physical, economic, and/or social harm. For the first time in my life, I had to think every day about the consequences of being Black in America.
As time passed, I continued to have a variety of experiences that reinforced this new reality of race consistently. Eventually, I found ways to cope. I recalled that I was more vigilant when I ventured off campus and encountered White Americans. I began to notice Whites gazing at me, particularly when I was the only Black person in a room, store, restaurant, or section of the mall. Even when Whites were friendly to me, I was suspicious and wary of them. I soon learned to avoid these encounters as much as possible by formulating strategies that ensured that I socialized primarily with Blacks. Ultimately, it became my strategy for survival in this country. After employing these strategies for some time, I was able to regain a sense of autonomy, self, and safety and freedom.

After I graduated from college in Alabama, I moved to Michigan to pursue a graduate degree. My experiences in Alabama had given me a harsh and blatant view of the realities of race in America. However, my experiences with race in Michigan and its neighboring states were somewhat subtler, such that I found myself questioning sometimes whether they could qualify as racist. However, I learned during my graduate studies in counseling that these experiences felt negative because indeed they were projections of racism, or “racial micro-aggressions,” as Sue et al. (2007) described them.

With respect to my philosophical orientation to race, I must say that it is a composite of several ideologies. First, growing up in the Caribbean instilled in my core the ideology of *Imago Dei* (“image of God”), a theological term that denotes the symbolic relation between God and humanity (Michot, 2005). While this theological construct is far more complex than I can discuss here, it is enunciated clearly in the Bible, which states, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, New International Version). *Imago Dei* represents not only all humans’ inherent worth
their Creator bestowed upon them, but also their inherent endowment with the capacity to choose, act, and think independently.

Next, my overall experience as an individual with Black skin in the United States has led me to accept several of the critical race theory’s (CRT) tenets. Although initiated in legal studies (Bell, 1992), CRT has emerged as a multidisciplinary ideology (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; Wing, 1996; Aguirre, 2000. CRT’s basic model consists of five core tenets: (1) the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the idea of an interest convergence; (3) the social construction of race; (4) the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling, and (5) the notion that Whites actually have been the recipients of civil rights legislation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Tate, 1997).

My experiences with race in America have led me to believe that racism indeed is ordinary in American culture and is a part of African Caribbean immigrants’ experience as well. Another of CRT’s key aspects is that it holds to the centrality of experiential knowledge (Bell, 1992; Tate, 1997), that is the counternarratives of people of color. This is consistent with phenomenological research, which emphasizes people of color’s subjective narratives (or counter-stories) of their experiences. I approached this research having had these experiences, and with this philosophic orientation (my bias), my intention to tell my participants’ stories is paramount. Their stories challenge the dominant narratives, which often ignore people of color’s experiences, and in this case, immigrants of color. Therefore, it is important for this research to capture and represent the participants’ experiences accurately.

Lastly, as a response to my experience with race since I came to America, I have come to agree with Africana existentialism (Black existential philosophy), which is a school of thought that challenges domination and affirms the empowerment of Black people in the African
diaspora (Bassey, 2007), explicating, among other things, that spirituality and agency for people of African descent are central to their situation, as Gordon, (1997, 2008), Fanon, (1968), Henry and Johnson (2016), Adkison-Johnson and Johnson (2018) and Tunstal (2008) described. These aspects of spirituality and agency resonate with my own understanding of human existence and support my desire not only to affirm Black individuals’ lives, but demonstrate in their behavior their proclivity to aspire to greatness despite their experiences with race, racism, and racialization.

I came to this research expecting that the people I studied would have had negative experiences with race that would conflict with their pre-emigration beliefs and experiences, and that they would have difficulty making sense of them, but eventually would come to some resolution. Sharing my personal background and immigrant narrative, and the methods used to minimize my inherent bias bring an openness that ensures the trustworthiness of this study’s findings.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study’s purpose was to describe and understand the experiences that first-generation African Caribbean immigrants living in the United States have with race, and a phenomenological approach was employed to do so.

Emergent Themes

After interviewing the participants and analyzing the data, four major themes emerged (Table 2), each of which have several sub-themes that, taken together, shaped my understanding of their lived experiences with race in America. The major themes—(1) “Back-home;” (2) “I try not to let it be what it is;” (3) “I became Aware,” and (4) “Racism exists, and you got to deal with it”—provided a rich description of the participants’ insights into their experiences with race in America as African Caribbean immigrants.
Table 2

Emergent Themes and Sub-themes

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
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| “Back home”                  | You’re a child of God  
|                              | We had mostly Blacks  
|                              | It (race) was not a Black and White thing  
|                              | The color of your skin makes a difference  
|                              | Other things, like family and money, played a part |
| “I try to not let it be what it is” | I dismissed it  
|                              | There were certain areas where you weren’t welcome  
|                              | I did not know what to do |
| “I became aware”            | I noticed it (the American construct of race) for the first time  
|                              | It (racism) became real to me… |
| “Racism exists, and you got to deal with it” | I accept it  
|                              | I confront it  
|                              | I’m glad I wasn’t born in this country  
|                              | My faith in God keeps me strong |

Theme One: “Back Home”

Participants in this study used the phrase “back home” consistently to speak about their pre-emigration understanding of race based on messages they received about it before they came to America. Five sub-themes shaped the understanding of their pre-emigration perspective, including: (1) You’re a child of God; (2) “We had mostly blacks;” (3) “It was not a Black and White thing;” (4) “The color of your skin makes a difference,” and (5) “Other things, like money and family, played a part.”

“You’re a child of God.” Most of the participants in this study shared not only having a belief in God, but that this belief is the thing that established their identity and sense of worth as individuals.
For example, Alicia shared that her family taught her that she had worth because she was a child of God and was no less than anyone else. She said:

We were taught that each person is important. You’re a child of God. And so, you have a certain amount of self-worth. And you weren’t taught that you were different, that anyone was better than you. We didn’t grow up that way. So, the way we grew up believe that you’re a person and you are valuable.

Similarly, Natalie indicated that her belief in God ties her to the belief that everyone is equal. She stated:

I feel like we’re all one...I was raised with an understanding in the Bible, with the story of Adam and Eve and basically that we evolved from those two people. That’s why I just feel like we all are one. Plain and simple, no matter how you put it, we’re one. We’re all God’s children.

Like Natalie, Mary shared having the belief that because God created everyone, that everyone is equal. She said simply, “We’re all brothers and sisters. We’re from one God and we’re the same.”

“We had mostly Blacks.” While there was some demographic diversity in their previous homes, participants shared that Blacks of African descent often made up the largest ethnic group. Some stated that because of this, they were accustomed to seeing Blacks in leadership positions, or what some referred to as “running things.” For example, Carlton from St. Martin stated:

St. Martin is predominantly Black, about 80%, and then you have people from other Caribbean islands like Dominica and others. We also have the occasional tourist from America who visit[ed] and like[d] it and decided to live there. They come from Europe
too, like France. But there’s a bunch of Black people in very high places. Like in
government, they’re mainly black, and so you have black people running the country and
black people owning businesses. Teachers, doctors, lawyers, they’re mostly Black.
Rose from Jamaica explained similarly:
…in Jamaica, we have Caucasian or white, Indians, Blacks. But the Blacks are the
predominately greater. I’d say about 50% of the population.
Avril from Trinidad stated:
…in Trinidad, we had mostly Blacks, you know, of African descent. We also had
Indians, but they’re dark skinned just like us. We also had Syrians who were considered
Trinidad whites, but we didn’t have a white society, per se.
Sam, who also grew up in Trinidad, indicated:
I would have to say that maybe about 40% of the people are of African descent, then we
have Syrians, Jews, Chinese, Jamaicans, Guyanese, Grenadians, and Vincentians. You
name it.
Elizabeth recognized this diversity not only in her country of Guyana, but also in her
family:
…we’re called the land of six peoples because we have six races there in Guyana. You
have Blacks who are descendants of African slaves, then there are Indians-Amerindians
or Indo-Guyanese. Those are the two main ethnic groups. Then you have Portuguese,
Chinese, Indians from India and Dutch. We also have Whites, mainly from England,
because we were a British colony. There was no distinction growing up. My family for
instance is a rainbow, we have every shade in my family.
“It was not a Black and White thing.” Participants in this study reported that Black and White racial differences either did not exist back home, or they did not place a huge emphasis on these distinctions, even when they were apparent. For example, Natalie explained that in St. Thomas, there was not much of a Black and White social dynamic. She asserted rather that people were classified more according to their family background or other cultural distinctions, such as the other Caribbean islands from which they may have emigrated to St. Thomas:

…back home, it was never really a Black and White thing. It was just people. We just classified others by either the islands they came from or their family background or whatever…back home there was no Black and White, you just played with your friends.

Sam shared a similar perspective of growing up in Trinidad. He found it very different from what he experienced in America, as the concept of race, or division between Black and White, was not important to them. He stressed that people were distinguished by what he referred to as skin complexion and cultural differences:

We got to interact with people, with different races without even thinking about what race we were. We knew that people had different complexions, different features because of where they came from, but it wasn’t important. It wasn’t important until I came here.

Alicia, who lived in Jamaica before migrating to the United States, shared that for her, the idea of race with an emphasis on Black and White dynamics was nonexistent. Although she socialized with Whites in Jamaica and knew they looked different from her, she interpreted that difference simply as “a different shade of a person”:
I never knew there was a difference between Black and White. Back home, I went to a high school that had a lot of White students from the U.S who came down for boarding school. So, we interacted with a lot of Whites, but we didn’t see a difference. But then, you know, in the back of your mind you probably knew they were different, but it didn’t really matter to you. It was just the different shade of a person. I didn’t even see shades. The first time I knew I was black was when I came to the United States.

Carlton shared an analogous perspective, emphasizing that he grew up in a “color-blind” community:

I think we’re color blind. I think that growing up we were taught to be color blind because it [race] wasn’t a big issue at all...if I saw a White person for example, I’m not saying, “Oh, that person is White.” All I’m saying is, “Okay, I’ve never seen this person around before, I’d definitely like to get to know this person.” So, it’s not like you recognize their skin color, but you do recognize that they’re different…Obviously, this person does not look like me, but there was no attention brought to the color of their skin that could further interpret their value in our society…

“The color of your skin made a difference.” While on the one hand, participants reported a deemphasis on Black and White racial dynamics, on the other hand, differences in skin color were emphasized highly, and often were important in demarcating class distinctions among Blacks. Juxtaposed as “lighter” versus “darker,” or “high-colored” versus “dark-colored,” participants in this study articulated that individuals whose skin was closer to white often had more privileges than those who were considered to have darker or black skin. These distinctions often had adverse social consequences for individuals with darker skin, specifically
with respect to obtaining employment. Rose, who described herself as having dark skin, explained it this way:

…there is some sort of discrimination that’s evident down there as well, in terms of complexion, between the lighter hue and the darker hue. The lighter hue tends to think that the darker hue is of a less, value…if your skin is lighter, then you are more apt to get one of the so-called top jobs…if your skin is [dark] like mine, and I go for an interview, nine chances out of ten, I’m not gonna get it.

Similarly, Mary, who also migrated from Jamaica and described herself as having dark skin in comparison to me, [a light-skinned male] asserted during her interview that because I had lighter skin, I would have a competitive advantage in employment over another young man my age, but with a darker skin color:

The color of your skin made a difference. Like with you and I, having a light color made a difference in Jamaica. If you were walking to a place to look at a job, you would get the job quicker than another boy that comes along looking at the same job, but with a very dark color.

Elizabeth expressed that neither skin color nor race was a huge point of distinction in determining class or social standing in the village she grew up in Guyana. However, when her family moved to the city, skin color was a very important determinant of social class:

…shades of skin color or race was not important for social standing in my village because there were people who were White who were poorer than us ourselves. So, it really didn’t have too much significance for us. Where it had an impact in Guyana was in the city itself, in Georgetown, the capital, because that was the seat of government. You had all these English people there and the high-colored people, you know, what we called
the bourgeoisie. That’s where it mattered. But in my village that I grew up, it didn’t matter.

While he agreed that skin color does form a part of a hierarchical class structure in Jamaica, David differentiated between race and skin color:

Growing up, there was more a class problem than a racial problem…color had a part to play…if you’re light brown skin or lighter color skin, you know, there were more chance[s] of getting certain jobs. So, it was not race, but it was color.

Avril seemed to share a perspective similar to David’s, that skin color in Trinidad was emphasized as a point of social distinction, but that it was not an issue of race:

Well, growing up in Trinidad, we didn’t have race issues, because we were all Blacks, but what we had was hierarchies of skin color. The darker you were, you were looked down upon, and the higher brown you were, you get better jobs and stuff.

“Other things like money and family played a part.” Although skin complexion was an important determinant of social class, the participants also added that skin color was only one factor among many. They indicated that having other attributes in their communities were just as, or sometimes more, important than having a “light” skin color. Some of these characteristics included wealth, family, education, profession, and the way one spoke.

For example, although she stated previously that having dark skin was a disadvantage for her in Jamaica, Mary also recognized the importance of family with respect to social class. She explained that her father was known well and respected in the community and, although she had dark skin, being his daughter gave her important social standing and access to benefits, such as employment. For her, family name recognition, which she referred to as “social standing,” trumped having dark skin:
Social standing was more important than skin complexion. If I needed a job, somebody just had to say, “That’s Mr. so and so’s daughter, and I would get the job.” So, family and education carried you a long way.

Mary, who was a high school teacher in Jamaica, stressed that one’s profession and way of speaking also were major aspects of social distinction:

…in Jamaica…you had people who would get a certain type of job. They were in a certain class, like the teachers and the nurses. They would be looked upon highly. Then you had the farmers, no one looked at them. Also, we have what they call Patois [a casual Jamaican based creole language]. But if you speak like that, you were considered low class because you’re supposed to speak the queen’s language [reference to the standard form of English used in the United Kingdom].

Alicia felt that wealth was a greater determinant of social class. Although she was aware of individuals of different ethnic groups and skin color, for her, social class had more to do with money than having light skin. From her experience, she saw that if they were wealthy, even those with dark skin often had greater privileges than those with lighter skin who were not:

What we knew was the difference between the classes. So, you have white Jamaicans, Chinese Jamaicans, Indians who we call Coolie [a derogatory term] and then you have the dark skin, Negro Jamaicans…We didn’t see the differences in those terms. Rather you might have a person who is as dark as I am, but they’re upper class. They have money. They work in a bank. They go to certain schools. So, you see the differences there. Those are the lines that were drawn, the class, not the race. So, we didn’t see any difference among the races.
Similarly, Elizabeth also found that profession formed an important part of social class in Guyana:

Well, my mother had a high status in those days because her father mined gold. So, they were living in the city, in one of the top areas. But after he died, things changed, so they moved to the small village I grew up in.

Participants in this study immigrated to America with a pre-emigration worldview of race. First, they emigrated from regions or states where they and others who look like them constitute the majority ethnic group of the population. Secondly, to them, race did not and does not matter. While on the one hand, they reported a non-existent Black and White racial dynamic like that in America, on the other hand, shades of skin color formed an important aspect of social distinction among their predominantly black populations. However, participants did not consider this a racial issue, but rather one of social class. Lastly, while social class included these skin color subtleties, it also included other identities that seemed to be as important in their cultures as shades of skin color, such as wealth, education, profession, family status, and other sociopolitical dynamics. They migrated to America with this ideology in pursuit of economic advancement. However, when they arrived in the country, they had several encounters involving race that conveyed an ideology that was very different from their “back-home” worldview.

**Theme Two: “I try to not let it be what it is”**

The participants reported having these encounters with race in America randomly and in various aspects of their daily lives, such as on the job, in retail settings, in educational settings, at church, or just when out and about in their neighborhoods. During this initial period of their residency in America, the participants described having a kind of ambivalence in their understanding of, and responses to, their encounters with race. While on the one hand, they
seemed somewhat cognizant that something about these early experiences was awry, on the other hand, they tended primarily to excuse, dismiss, minimize, overlook, or avoid dealing with race altogether. Participants’ statements, (1) “I overlooked it,” (2) “There were certain areas where you weren’t welcome,” and (3) “I did not do anything about it,” shaped my understanding of the second major theme, “I try not to let it be what it is.”

“I overlooked it.” Some participants chose deliberately not to notice racism, even when on some level they were cognizant that it was happening. For example, in reflecting on his early brushes with racism in America as a new immigrant, Sam conceded that he was naïve about his encounters and therefore tended to set them aside:

I was naïve to most of it [racism]. You know, growing up in an island where, you know, racism didn’t really exist, and you come here, and, you know, people say certain things to me, and I just overlook it. You know, I go and apply for a job, and then, you know, certain things come up that, I’m like, “You’re just being ignorant” because, that’s how I look at it.

Similarly, David shared two instances in which he dismissed the individuals’ behavior when he first arrived in America and had negative encounters with race. For example, although he acknowledged the ongoing incidents in which his boss made disparaging statements and manifested differential treatment to his co-workers solely because of race, David not only chose to excuse his boss’ behavior, but also was able to forgive him:

…the owner was Jewish…His best friend was a Jamaican guy. That’s how I got the job. And he wasn’t racist, he was conditioned in a certain way…sometimes, things came out of him that didn’t have a purpose. I would point it out to him. It’s like he was conditioned, in a way, by his growing up. We could forgive him because he didn’t mean
it. He would treat some workers different from other workers, but without realizing that he was doing it because of color, you know. But he would apologize quickly and try to change because it’s not something that he meant to do. It was his conditioning.

In another situation when David observed that certain White customers did not want him to serve them, he again chose to dismiss the notion of race by rationalizing that some other reason must have motivated their behavior:

…but while there, baking, sometimes when things get very busy, I’ll go and help the other people at the front who was serving. And I went to serve somebody once, a White customer. That person was offended that I would make a sandwich for him and told me that he didn’t want me to serve him. He voiced it to the owner and the owner made it for him. This was the first time. I brushed it off as stupidity. Then it happened a second time. I rationalized it away. You know, maybe because I’m baking. I try to find a reason. I didn’t think it was about me being black.

Natalie shared both acknowledging racism, but at the same time trying not to attribute her experiences to race:

Sometimes I second guess myself or start to go against what I was raised and say, “I wonder if it’s because I’m a female, or I wonder if it’s because I’m black.” I noticed that just from hanging out with different people, different jobs…and various places I go; whether it be, shopping or my daily life, going to the grocery store or making friends,…it gets to the point sometimes where I sense it [racism], but I try to not let that be what it is.

“There were certain areas where you weren’t welcome.” Some participants tried intentionally to avoid having these negative experiences with race altogether by engaging in
specific ways of socializing. Because of the information they received from family and friends before immigrating to America, they often chose to congregate within the predominantly Caribbean immigrant communities where they lived. For example, Elizabeth explained that she lived in New York for several years when she first moved to America. While there, she avoided certain areas in New York deliberately where she knew she was likely to have negative racial experiences, and chose instead to live and socialize in Brooklyn, which has a high concentration of Caribbean immigrants:

The thing about living in New York is that I knew that there were certain areas that I wasn’t welcomed…I wouldn’t go there. When I first moved to New York, I was living with friends in Brooklyn within the Caribbean community and people knew each other, and they told me these things. So, I lived in my own little community.

Similarly, Avril resided in New York for several years after she first moved to the United States. She described feeling at home because she was surrounded by individuals who had migrated from the Caribbean. She stated:

Well in New York, I had no problems [with race] because I lived in Brooklyn and it was mainly West Indians. They lived right next to me, and I had no problems.

When she first immigrated to America, Cheryl stated that being able to socialize with a group of students who also emigrated from Jamaica earlier helped buffer the negative experiences she was having with race in high school:

Thankfully, we had a very tight knit group of Jamaicans in that particular school system. They were able to integrate us into the group and that was really refreshing. They were welcoming, and they were the ones who started to teach us of how it happens here and what we have to do to navigate the system.
“I didn’t do anything about it.” Even when they did acknowledge that incidents were based on race, some participants felt powerless to do anything about it. A significant finding in this research was that they experienced this sense of helplessness particularly in educational settings. For example, Cheryl described feeling powerless to respond to what she deemed institutional racism when she was in high school:

…and so, we enrolled in this high school in New York. It was predominantly Jewish and White. And there, I think I met with what I would now in hindsight term institutional racism. I wanted to pursue the pre-med track or some biological science track, but my guidance counselor would always try to deter me. I would go to him to schedule my courses and would ask to take biology and sociology courses. And he would say, “Oh no, we’re gonna enroll you into county history and some sort of humanities. They were not required courses, but clearly just diverting from what I’m focused on…I just wasn’t able to take certain courses because I was blocked. Not because I didn’t have the grades, but because I was Black. It was awful because I felt so helpless…I knew what he was doing. I was clearly being sidetracked. I knew that, and I didn’t do anything about it.

Similarly, Carlton explained that his experience with a White female college counselor caused him significant emotional turmoil that affected his grades because of what he described as her prejudicial treatment of him. He stated that he felt powerless at the time:

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her for the semester...her personal prejudice affected her, how she interacted with me because she didn’t like me as a Black person. So, I flunked classes. I didn’t know what to do, how to handle that. Like I said, this is my first time with racism, I didn’t know people could be like that. So, I got depressed. Her doing a poor job as an advisor had that kind of effect on me because it was obvious that she didn’t like Black people...So that really just messed me up. That was very hurtful...I failed classes that semester.

The participants’ perceptions and responses to their experiences with race as new immigrants in America remained very consistent until they had a moment of awakening during a certain encounter. There was nothing different or unique about these encounters per se; however, they held significance to the participants because they often recalled them as the exact moment when they had an awakening.

**Theme 3: “I became aware”**

After they had been in America longer and continued to have these brushes with race, participants often described having a sudden realization, or epiphany, about race in America. In addition to becoming aware of the different reality of race in America than the Caribbean, the participants described becoming aware that the American perspective on race subjected them to ill-treatment simply because they are Black. The participants often used phrases such as, “I became aware...” or, “I noticed it for the first time,” or “It opened my eyes” to describe this phenomenon.

For example, although David had several incidents with race that he dismissed, he recalled a specific incident during which he had this sudden realization:

I remember the first time I became aware of racism. I walked in a store, in one of those towns, you know, that was predominantly White. When I went in the store, I realized...
that I was being followed. My wife and I were in there for about five minutes, and I realize that everywhere I went, this person who worked in the store followed me. They were White. When I realize this, I said to myself, you know what, I’m not staying in here, and we left.

Similarly, Sam explained that, although he’d experienced what he called minor racial incidents at his workplace, it became “real” to him when he realized that he was getting paid less than a new employee whom he was training:

My first real job in America was working in a bakery. And I’m not going to lie; working there was a joy for me even though, you know, it [racism] was there…but it became real to me because I’m managing the bakery, and the owner had me training a guy, a kid, whom he was paying more money than how much I was being paid. And that was my first real rude awakening.

Carlton had his moment of realization after he purchased an item at a department store:

…I remember this one incident because this was the first time it really hit me and then, from that day on, it opened my eyes for the rest of my life since I’ve been here. I went to Macy’s and bought some gifts. When I tried giving the [White] cashier the money, she told me to put it on the counter…I didn’t think nothing of it. So, I placed the money on the counter. When I was about to leave, it just so happened a White lady came behind me and I noticed that their interaction was totally different than with me. They were smiling, she took the money from her hand…As I’m walking out the store, there was a Black, older lady, she was like, “Did you see what just happened?” …“This lady did something that was pretty messed up. She didn’t take your money because she didn’t want to touch your hand, because you’re a Black man. Did you not see her take the money from the
White person?” I was like, “Yeah, I saw it.” “Well, exactly. You’re black so they’re not gonna do that for you.” And that just opened my entire mind because I’m like, “What other instances has happened in my life since I’ve been up here that was a result of racism that you just totally ignored and wasn’t aware of?”

Quite unlike most of the other participants, Alicia had her moment of awareness when she was 13 years old and had been living in the United States only for approximately nine months. She described having racial slurs hurled at her while she and her family were walking home one day after grocery shopping:

We were walking down the street. We didn’t have a car at the time, and we were on the side of the road headed home with our groceries…Then this guy passed in his car and spat out the window at us. Just spat on us. A White person, he just spat on us and called us the ‘N’ word. That communicated to me that there’s a certain amount of hate directed at me. I couldn’t interpret [it] in any other way than the fact that my skin is different, because the person did not know me. Never met me before. It didn’t make me feel less than, it just made me angry, and it opened my eyes. It made me aware.

Becoming aware also gave the participants insight into the experience of being Black in America. For example, Sam expressed feeling “trapped” and “being in a prison.” He explained further that having to deal with negative racial experiences while in America has affected him:

To come here with that ambition and pride and whatever it is that we have, and then to see, you know, that we’re not as good as we think we are because we’re Black. To hear degrading things about ourselves because of our color, we start thinking “Maybe I’m not that good after all,” without realizing that it happens slowly to you. So, there’s a breakdown. The system will break you down slowly. It changes you. I mean, living in
it, it changes you…But I know I’ve been affected. I know I’m not as outspoken as I used to be. I used to be witty. Now, I think twice before I say a thing. It has affected me, it changed me, it changed my expressions. That sense of freedom that I would have back home. It’s not fully there anymore. It’s like I’m in an oversized prison. I’m a prisoner.

Although she admitted that she can, and has, confronted racist incidents when they occur, Avril stated that having to live in America and deal with racism on a consistent basis has affected her significantly on an emotional level:

Yeah, it [racism] has affected me deeply. The injustices I see. If you wanna say anything affects me, it’s nonstop racism. When people are unjustly treated. Unfairly treated. Racism in that form. So, it’s like I’m always sad. I have this gloomy outlook.

Carlton described having significant mental and emotional turmoil now that he is “aware” and grapples with his “back home” belief and his realization of the racial ideology he perceives in America:

I’m upset with myself because they [American society] have been bombarding me so much with White means this and Black mean this. Now, I’m looking at a person, for some reason, their skin color is still their skin color, but now I have to try extra hard to still maintain my perspective I have back on the island where it’s just a skin color. I’m mad at myself for it affecting me that much. I’m mad that I have to fight so hard to resist or to hold back the ideology that’s being taught that because I’m Black that it means I’m inferior because of American society’s view on race. I have to struggle to fight that back. I hate that I even have to struggle in the first place. That was never something I had to struggle with back home when it came to color and their association with race. But now, I hate that I actually have to fight.
Once participants had this awakening, their perceptions of race in America changed, and they came to realize that they had to do something about it. At that time, they changed the way they negotiated with their encounters with race and racism significantly.

**Theme 4: “Racism exists, and you got to deal with it”**

After participants experienced their “I became aware” moment and realized that the American concept of race poses a personal threat to them, they intentionally became very vigilant in identifying these encounters and began to resist them aggressively, rather than dismissing them, as when they first arrived in America. Although participants were somewhat cognizant of the existence of race when they first arrived and engaged largely in dismissive tactics to cope with it, both their perceptions and reactions to their encounters with race in America changed drastically after they had their epiphanies. They described four separate ways they began to cope with these experiences. The statements, “I accept it,” “I confront it,” “I’m glad I’m not from this country,” and “My faith in God keeps me strong” represent a clustering of their more decisive actions in addressing race in America.

**“I accept it.”** After becoming aware of America’s racial reality and its potential threat to them, participants stated that it was important for them to come to terms with their racial reality as individuals with Black skin in America. Participants spoke of “accepting it,” indicating that they have come to some resolution with respect to their pre-emigration ideological conflicts with the reality of race in America as they experienced it personally. For them, this acceptance was not a passive activity. Instead, it was a rational and decisive action they chose to take to help them cope with a reality that they cannot change. For example, David stated, “I may not necessarily agree with it, but I’m gonna accept this experience, the black experience in America.”
Similarly, although she tries to cling to her pre-emigration ideology, Natalie also acknowledged that she recognizes the reality of race in America and consequently accepts it:

Since I’ve lived here, I can see that there is some race barriers and stuff like that. It’s not that I don’t want to accept it because the longer and more that I live in the U.S., I’ve come to accept that that’s just their way of living here, but when I approach people, I do not approach it with that mentality up front.

Alicia shared similarly that she accepts the racial reality of America, but does not capitulate to it:

They look down on you because your skin is darker. So, I have accepted that that’s the way of things in the United States, but I don’t have to succumb to it. It strengthens me because I have accepted that it’s gonna be a struggle. It’s not gonna change. Some people think that we’ve come a long way. I don’t think we’ve come far enough when it comes to race. It doesn’t do much to me now. I have accepted it.

“I confront it.” Most of the participants described pushing back against racism aggressively after they “became aware.” They often described doing or saying something to the perpetrator proactively at the moment it occurred. For example, Sam explained that since he became aware of racism in America, he has found it necessary to confront individuals when these incidents occur to prevent racism from affecting him:

Before coming here [to the U.S.], I was ignorant to the fact that racism exist. Now, my mind is more open. I’m aware of it, so I’m expecting anything at any time…when these [racist] incidents occur, I confront it head-on. If something is not right, I’m going to come to you about it. The more you feed into racism, the worse it’s going to become.
So, I nip in the butt [sic]. Mentally, it [racism] doesn’t do much to me because I’m going to confront it. That’s the best way to get rid of it. You confront it.

Similarly, since having her epiphany, Alicia views the American reality of race as systematic and that, as a Black female, she is a target of racism, which is a threat to her self-worth. Therefore, she feels obligated to challenge it consistently, although she concedes that it is an arduous task:

It’s systematic. Racism is a system and America makes it legal. It’s institutionalized. If I had an option, I would not have to bother with it, but the fact is, I don’t have an option because the color of my skin is Black when it’s all said and done. It’s an ongoing attempt to belittle you, but I refuse to accept it. I rise above it every time. But it’s a struggle. It’s a constant struggle. Because you might have had this one experience, and the next minute you meet someone else, and you have to go through the same thing again.

Alicia sees racism as a threat not only to her self-worth, but also as a hindrance to her children. For example, she shared how much she has had to advocate for her children in the public-school system:

Through the years, I had to fight for my children every step of the way so that they’re not discriminated against. Because the guidance counselors would tell my children they’re not capable. My children are straight A students. My daughter ended high school with 3.9 GPA, and a guidance counselor looked at my child, who has a 3.95 GPA coming out of high school and said, “You shouldn’t apply to Yale. I don’t think they’ll accept you.” Same thing with my son. He had this experience with his teacher, where his guidance counselor asked him to come in to fill out a college application. And the teacher said to him, “No, I’m not sending you down, it’s not like you’re going to college right now.”
Cheryl explained that she has become used to the experience of race in America while she has been here. Now, she expects to experience it and, unlike when she was in high school and felt powerless to address it at times, she has developed ways to do so:

It hits you in the face, it really does. It’s really a shocker this happens. And then you start to learn. So now, I’m not perturbed by it because I’ve gotten accustomed to it. I expect it. This is what’s going to happen. So, now I’ve learned to deal with it and process it in a different way to make something positive of the experience.

Carlton made a deliberate decision to push back against the American ideology of race, and chose to hold on to his pre-emigration ideology:

I made it my mission that I’m not gonna let this ideology of racism that exists [in America]…affect me as a person and how I see people of different skin color. I made it my goal. Now, this is real, I know that it’s out there. It exists. I’m not gonna let something as stupid and ridiculous as color of your skin affect and change how I see people White or Black. But…I gotta be more mindful now and I hate that I have to be more mindful. Why should I have to be more aware that my skin color means something different than what it was back home? Really? I can’t believe Black people up here had to deal with this stuff for all these years.

“I wasn’t born in this country.” An effective strategy some participants have employed is to maintain a connection to their homes intentionally to cope with America’s racial realities. Statements such as, “I’m not from America,” or, “I wasn’t born in this country,” represent this strategy, and served as a form of mental buffer to distance them from the negative experiences they are having in America because of race. For example, David believes that it is essential for him to stay connected to his Jamaican heritage. Describing previously that he felt that he was in
a prison that restricted his freedom of expression, he likened clinging to Jamaican culture to regaining that lost freedom:

I try to just think of Jamaica. Jamaican music, food. I try to hold on to some normalcy.

I’m talking patois [Jamaican slang] more because I’m trying to hold on. I want to hold on to my freedom. These things are symbolic to me.

Carlton believes that his immigrant status helps him maintain another perspective on his self-worth that buffers him from the bombardment of the American ideology of race:

I’m so grateful I wasn’t born in a system where I had to deal with this my entire life. I’m glad that the islands were where I started from…based on what I’ve experienced just for these five years. The hurt that I’ve experienced, I could see myself being a lot different had I have to go through this whole Black and White system growing up. So, I’m glad I just had to deal with that for five years.

Cheryl shared that because she is from another country, she believes it has given her the ability to perceive a difference between what ought to be and what is:

Clearly, without a doubt. When I first came, and I’m so glad that I wasn’t born in this country…I came into this system and noted that there was a difference. Oftentimes, I’ve heard Caucasian people say, “It’s in your head.” No, I came here with an objective eye. And even as a child, I was able to see that this is not normal, that something is wrong with this structure.

“My faith in God keeps me strong.” Their belief in God sustains most of the participants’ belief in their self-worth despite the racist encounters they experience, but also remains a source of comfort and strength in negotiating their experiences with race in America.

For example, when asked about the way she deals with her negative experiences with race, Mary
stated simply, “God, that’s who I call. Just my relationship with God. That’s what keeps me going.”

Alicia added:

Why am I not crushed? Oh, gee…God’s force in my life. He gives me strength. And some of the things that we’ve been through, you really could just fold and just kind of go into a little protective stance. Like a fetal position. And curl up into a ball. But, I ask the Lord to give me strength to face whatever it is and give me courage to speak up. And I say, “Lord, give me the words that I should say.” If my boss shows discrimination against me, I want to confront that. But give me the words so that when I’m done, I will make my point and keep my job.

Cheryl stated not only that faith is important, but also having others, such as her family, to lean on, is important in her experience:

Prayer has…always been at the forefront of everything that we’ve done and that I have done. And so, with a lot of prayer and a lot of support from a lot of people along the way, strangers included. Family members, my sister in particular. Just having someone just to share the experiences with, the negative experiences with, was important.

**Summary**

The data analysis revealed several major and minor themes that shed light on participants’ experiences with race in America. The data showed that they brought their own ideology or understanding of race with them when they immigrated to America. As they tried to assimilate or settle in the United States, they had several brushes with race that contradicted the concepts of race in their country of origin. When they first arrived, the participants tended to be somewhat cognizant of the different reality of race, but also tended to dismiss it. However, after
some time, the participants seemed to have a moment of epiphany that made them aware of the threat America’s racial ideology poses to them. Once they had this moment of awareness, they began to implement a separate set of more proactive negotiation strategies. These include resisting it verbally when it occurs, as well as subtler intrapsychic activities, such as clinging to their pre-migratory culture and ideology, as well as spirituality. In Chapter V, I discuss these research findings and address their implications for counseling practice, as well as provide recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter relates the research findings with the existing literature. It also discusses practitioner-based implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Connecting Themes to the Current Literature

Back Home

The first significant finding in this study was that the African Caribbean immigrants in this study emigrated to America with a multi-layered worldview combined of messages they received about race before they emigrated, including their: (1) belief in God; (2) upbringing as Black majorities; (3) dichotomous view of skin color, and (4) their conflation of class, skin color, and multiple sociopolitical identities. First, they were told while growing up that they were children of God and therefore, were valuable and equal to others. As Alicia put it, “We were taught that…you’re a child of God…and you have a certain amount of self-worth.” This belief that they are, “a child or children of God” not only affirmed their existence, but was central to their belief that they have inherent worth. This finding is consistent with Africana existential thought, which explicates, among other things, that spirituality and agency for people of African descent are central to their situation, as Gordon (1997, 2008), Fanon (1952), Johnson (2016), Adkison-Johnson and Johnson (2018), and Tunstal (2008) described. For example, Johnson (2016) found that the African American men in his research expected to be treated with respect and dignity because of their inherent worth that they attributed to being created by God.
According to the author, “Each one [man] either specifically stated or implied that his worth had a spiritual source—that is, that his worth came from God and could not be taken away by anyone” (p. 304). Johnson (2016) used the term, *somebodiness*, a concept in the contextualized humanistic framework that espouses that Black people (in the African Diaspora) have an innate sense of self-worth and value and make something positive of their lives purposefully.

While they received these messages about their worth explicitly within their immediate families, they also were communicated implicitly through modeling on the part of Black role models in their communities. Growing up as demographic majorities in predominantly Black-controlled Caribbean States, these immigrants consistently saw people who look like themselves (role-models) in positions of leadership and authority, which reinforced their belief that they could accomplish those same tasks. As Carlton put it, “… in government, they’re mainly Black and so you have Black people running the country.”

This concept that role-modeling increases *self-efficacy*, “…an individual’s belief that he or she can accomplish a task, or reach a future goal” (Bandura, 1977, p. 191), is a concept that is understood well and discussed in the counseling profession (e.g., Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001; Andrews, Bullock-Yowell, Dahlen, & Nicholson 2014; Li, Eschenauer, & Persaud, 2018). According to this line of research, the vicarious experiences social models provide are key in strengthening self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Jourden, 1991). Thus, seeing people like oneself succeed by sustained effort increases an observer’s beliefs that s/he too possesses the abilities to master comparable activities (Bandura, 1994; Schwarzer, 1992). This means that Caribbean children who grow up in Black majority countries have an abundance of social models who help them foster a strong sense of their abilities. Comparable to this is Mouzon and McLean’s (2017) findings in their recent study, that African Caribbean immigrants have an
increased sense of “mastery,” a concept analogous to that of agency because they grew up in Black racial majority environments.

Thus, the primary message about race that these immigrants received in their youth is that because they are children of God, they have inherent worth, and living surrounded by others who look like, and govern and lead them, reinforced this sense further. Thus, a Black child who grew up in these Caribbean states and saw Black doctors, teachers, police officers, and politicians leading their communities, received the consistent message, “I am just like them, a child of God. If they can do it, so can I.” This led them to feel that they belong and therefore, are a valuable, equal member of their community. As David put it fittingly, “We were raised to believe that we could do anything we put our minds to.”

The second layer of African Caribbean immigrants multi-layered view about race is their contradictory beliefs and practices with respect to skin color. This study found that, on the one hand, they seemed to deemphasize skin color, but only in differentiating between themselves and Whites. When they compared themselves to Whites, not only did they deemphasize “race” or skin color, they also used humanizing language. They are just “people” who look different, or another shade of a “person.”

However, skin color variations were emphasized highly in the way in which they distinguished among themselves. The results indicated that Caribbean communities categorized themselves according to skin color, in which Blackness was juxtaposed with Whiteness, which was the norm. This hierarchy of skin color compared Blacks on the one side, who were described as having, “dark skin,” “brown skin,” or “a darker-hue,” against Blacks on the other side who were described as having “light skin,” “yellow-color skin,” or “high-yellow hue.” In contrast to the humanizing, “other kind of person” language used to describe Whites, the
participants used dehumanizing language to describe other Blacks by grading them based on how closely they resembled the ideal White. Accordingly, this categorization was the basis of the way one was received or treated in Caribbean communities. As this study showed, Blacks who were identified as having “light” or “yellow” skin, the color closest to White, often experienced unearned privileges based on their skin, such as preferential treatment in hiring practices.

For example, Mary, who described herself as having dark skin compared to me, whom she described as having “light color” skin, said that I likely would have more employment opportunities than she or other individuals with darker skin, based simply on my complexion.

This phenomenon of elevating Whiteness above Blackness within Black communities in the Caribbean also is found in many regions around the world within the African diaspora, as Arce et al. (1987), Hill (2000), Rondilla and Spickard (2007), and Wilson (2008) reported. This phenomenon has been manifested in such forms as skin bleaching in African countries to lighten dark skin in favor of the white skin preferred aesthetically (Apuke, 2018; Jacobs, Levine, Abney, & Davids, 2016), and the “brown paper bag test,” in which African American Blacks compared each other’s skin tones to a brown paper bag, and assigned privileges in education, employment, social acceptance, church membership, etc., to those whose skin tone matched or was lighter than the bag (Kerri, 2006; Gates, 1996). This was one of the underlying factors that contributed to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which darker-skinned members of the Hutu tribe who felt oppressed by privileged, lighter-skinned Tutsi tribe members, retaliated ultimately with mass slaughter (Andre, 2018; Becker, 2017; Banyanga, Björkqvist, & Österman, 2017).

Scholars have referred to this phenomenon of “Black on Black” racism in many ways—primarily as colorism (Walker, 1983; Fears, 1998; Brown, 1998; Clark, 2007), but also as internalized racism (Hall, 1986, 2003), and double consciousness (Dubois, 1968). Articulated
first by Walker (1983), colorism has many definitions, but essentially is the practice of ascribing privileges to people within the same racial group based on physical appearance (Herring, 2004; Walker, 1983). Baruti (2000) added that colorism is a global prejudice that people of African ancestry have toward each other and seemingly use against others, or for the advantage of themselves and others with a relatively similar complexion. Several researchers, such as Hill (2000), Rondilla and Spickard (2007), and Wilson (2013), have determined that colorism is very problematic for dark-skinned Blacks within the African diaspora. These studies found that within predominantly Black communities around the world, light-skinned people of African descent often had more privileges and access to better economic opportunities than did their darker-skinned counterparts, which has many adverse outcomes in employment and other areas.

Like Hall (2010), Hunter (2005), and Morrison and Bryan (2014), this study also found that colorism is a customary practice in the Caribbean. Further, the colorism practiced in the Caribbean is a legacy of White colonialist racism. This is consistent with other scholars’ thinking, such as Williams (2011) and Fanon (1963, 1967), who cited that the Caribbean experience of slavery and colonialism have left this residual legacy of Whiteness in the Caribbean. Fanon (1967) described that to become “civilized,” colonial subjects in the Caribbean adopted their colonizers’ traits, beliefs, and practices. This included rejecting or disassociating from anything, including skin color, that had a semblance to Black culture. Fanon (1967) stated, “The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become” (pp. 2-3). As he articulated, “Colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly, ‘In reality, who am I?’” (p. 12). By using these varying terms of skin color, Caribbean people essentially are questioning each other’s humanity. Any ideology or practice that equates white skin or White physical features as better or more aesthetic and therefore,
preferable, and dark skin as inferior and less desirable, promotes the very tenet upon which racism was founded, as Buffon (1831) and Linnaeus (Hagberg, 1964) described and Hannaford (1996) stated similarly.

The practice of colorism in the Caribbean shows us that racism is so insidious, and was crafted so masterfully, that even long after the White European colonizers’ departure, the ideology of White racial supremacy, or Whiteness as the norm in predominantly Black majority and controlled Caribbean states, is etched deeply in Caribbean communities’ social consciousness. Accordingly, as professional counselors, we need to continue to focus on colorism and skin privilege. In as much as White privilege is a problem for people of color, so is colorism. It shows that racism has had such a strong influence on Blacks, in this case Black Caribbeans, that even in the “White man’s” absence, a double consciousness, as DuBois (1968) referred to it, remains, the sense that some Blacks have of, “…always looking at one’s self [themselves] through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s [their] soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 2). Colorism in the Caribbean illustrates the fundamental fact that Blacks compare themselves to those with whiter skin with the tape of Whiteness as normal, in which those with darker skin become the other.

Essentially, the immigrants in this study described an egalitarian Caribbean utopia in which “racism,” i.e., “skin color-based” discrimination, does not exist as it does in the United States. However, in daily life, the opposite holds true, and racism is, in fact, very much a part of Caribbean culture, albeit in a form that makes it somewhat invisible. Hence, in as much as Black children growing up in the Caribbean receive the message that they have inherent worth as “children of God” and are comparable to other Blacks in their societies, they also receive the
subtle, sinister message that the whiter your skin, the more beautiful, intelligent, or human you are.

Most damaging is the fact that colorism in the Caribbean remains a subtle, insidious racist ideology that continues to be perpetuated in part as an invisible force, as both the victims and perpetrators practice it unwittingly. For example, similar to Morrison and Bryan’s (2014) findings, the participants in this study also interpreted the practice of colorism, not as an issue of race, or racism, but of class. How can this be explained? It may be that because they live in Black majority populations, this form of discrimination is considered less harmful. In addition, it may be because of the third layer of the multi-layered Caribbean worldview on race. This study found that although colorism is practiced in the Caribbean, the conflation of race, skin color, and multiple sociopolitical identities renders it invisible.

This indicates that, all other things equal, “light” or whiter skin has economic value. However, it is not the sole determinant of social categorization in the Caribbean. For example, although Mary insinuated that light-skinned people in Jamaica have more privileges than she as a darker-skinned woman, she also acknowledged her other sociopolitical identity (specifically her family background and education) which also conferred privilege on her over others. Therefore, racism in the Caribbean is elusive to its victims and perpetrators alike because it is not a clear-cut distinction. Growing up in the Caribbean, the participants in this study believed that, “Even if I have dark skin, if I make something of myself (get an education, become wealthy, or achieve some social standing), I will become somebody.

In summary, this multi-layered racial ideology helps us understand the messages about race that African Caribbean children receive while growing up in the Caribbean. First, they believe that they are people of inherent worth. However, perplexingly, they also believe in a
subtle ideology of whiteness, that the whiter your skin, the more human you are. This ideology is eminently subtle because it is perpetrated within a Black majority and has an exit option, that race (dark skin) can be overcome in the Caribbean. Therefore, while they are aware to some extent that they will encounter discrimination in America, like back home, they hold to the belief that through hard work, eventually they will attain the sociopolitical characteristics that will enable them to overcome such obstacles as racial barriers that they may encounter in the United States. However, when they migrate to America, they encounter an American racial construct that diverges greatly from that to which they are accustomed.

**I Try to Not Let it Be What it Is**

The study’s second significant finding was that, upon their arrival in America, the research participants described having several troubling encounters involving race that included verbal or physical behaviors Whites perpetrated and that occurred routinely and in various aspects of their daily lives. Unaware that they were being racialized because of America’s system of race and were subjected to these racist encounters as a result, they grappled to make sense of them. Although aware that something was not right, they often were conflicted and did not know how to talk about what they were experiencing. Consequently, they made a conscious decision to dismiss, rationalize, overlook, or avoid their negative encounters with race altogether to cope with the emotional and psychological distress that accompanied them.

As discussed in Chapter II, because of the differential racialization process that occurs with Black compared to White immigrants, an American system that seeks to subjugate people of color racializes these Black immigrants, and nothing in their pre-emigration experience prepares them for this. Not knowing the way to make sense of it, they engage in these passive tactics (rationalizing, overlooking, or avoiding) to cope with their encounters. For instance, take
David, who had such an encounter at his job when a White customer refused to allow him to make him a sandwich because he was Black. Although this occurred on several occasions, David rationalized that it must be related to something other than his skin color.

This “rationalizing away” David spoke of, together with the other strategies the immigrants in this study used, were ways they sought to adapt and cope with their new reality. This is very similar to the results scholars such as Berry (2006), Zhang and Goodson (2011), and Michel, Titzmann, and Silbereisen (2012) found, that the immigrants and refugees they studied engaged in what they referred to as psychological adaptation strategies to cope with the stresses they faced when they first settled in host countries.

The latter defined this process of psychological adaptation as “…the outcome of a process of encountering challenging life-changes during cross-cultural transitions…and selecting and implementing coping strategies to deal with them” (p. 60). This also is like Forsyth and Carter (2014), and Hoggard, Byrd, and Sellers’ (2012) findings, who identified avoidance and dissociation as coping strategies Black individuals used frequently in response to race-related stress. Hence, although they are not quite sure what is happening to them and cannot articulate it, these immigrants nonetheless cope with it in the best way they can.

It is very important for professional counselors to understand that their decision to rationalize, dismiss, or avoid these racist incidents is deliberate and illustrates that they are individuals with agency who choose the way they will respond to something they cannot understand. This understanding contradicts the position of some previous research, including that of Deaux et al. (2007) and Hunter (2008), who found that recent African Caribbean immigrants tended to be very blasé about their encounters with race in America, as if they did not bother them, and they were flippant about the way they responded to these encounters. For
example, Hunter (2008) stated that racism in America does not bother recent Caribbean immigrants, as they seem to overlook it, and choose instead to focus on their economic goals. In contrast, this study found that although the participants’ actions or adaptations to racialization were passive, they nonetheless used deliberate strategies to respond to their encounters with race, and did not express a trite, “I don’t care” attitude, as previous research has suggested.

However, it must be noted that while they exercised autonomy when they chose passive and avoidant coping strategies, in the long-term, these techniques likely have had adverse effects on their emotional and psychological functioning overall. While dissociative and avoidant styles of coping, such as those in which the people in this study engaged, can be effective strategies to circumvent painful racialized situations, researchers such as Carlson, Dalenberg, and McDade-Montez (2012) and Polanco-Roman, Lillian, Ashley Danies, and Anglin (2016) also found that over time, they can reduce an individual’s ability to cope with painful and traumatic experiences and may even exacerbate the effects of the distress attributable to these racialized encounters.

This explains why the research on African Caribbean experiences in America discussed in Chapter II, including that of Belizaire and Fuertes (2011), Redway (2014), Case and Hunter (2014), Williams et al. (2007), and others, have found a correlation between African Caribbean immigrants’ increased residency in America and decreased psychological and emotional health. It is possible that while these passive coping strategies may work initially, in the long-term, they become counterproductive and have adverse effects on their health overall.

However, it is significant that many of the participants in this study described engaging in these passive adaptive techniques until they experienced what they referred to as “I became aware,” during which they gained a deeper and clearer understanding of their situation with respect to race in America.
I Became Aware

This leads to the third significant finding in this research, that the immigrants studied described experiencing a pivotal awakening after they lived in America for some time, during which they became cognizant that they were being racialized, and that the racist treatment to which they had been subjected since they arrived in America was attributable to this racialization. This “I became aware” moment, as many of them described it, often emerged as a sudden epiphany during one of their negative racial encounters. For example, although David had several prior unpleasant encounters with racism that he dismissed or overlooked, he recalled a specific incident during which he had such a moment of awareness, which he referred to as having his eyes opened forever. While David, much like the other participants in this study, had many previous encounters with racism, this specific incident made him cognizant that because of the system of race in America, as a person with Black skin, he is perceived a certain way, as someone who cannot be trusted.

In professional counseling, we have been oblivious to the existence of this very critical moment in African Caribbean immigrants’ experience with race in America overall. However, several theories, including epiphany, racial identity development, and racial awakening, can help us understand what these immigrants described. An epiphany is a sudden, striking realization that allows a problem or situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective (McDonald, 2008). Schwartz (2010) explained that epiphany offers powerful moments of insight that make it possible to compare facts, factors, or theories in arrangements not considered previously. Another way to understand the awareness these immigrants described experiencing is that it is like individuals who enter the encounter stage in Cross’ (1971, 1991) racial identity model. According to his model, in the encounter phase, an event or series of events forces
individuals to acknowledge racism’s effects on their lives. As Robbins and Bishop (2008) found, the encounter process captures the point at which one’s attitude and perspective shifts radically. In their moment of awareness, these immigrants developed the insight necessary to become mindful of the way the system of racialization in the United States affects them. Robbins and Bishop (2008) explained further that the encounter process is associated closely with an epiphany, as it captures the point at which an individual’s perspective is altered. Their awareness that they are racialized because of America’s system of race also is a cognizance that they are Blacks in America.

In their research, Neville and Cross (2017) identified a similar pattern of developing awareness as did the participants in this study, to which they referred as racial awakening. The authors defined racial awakening as an experience that triggers personal exploration of one’s heritage and the history of one’s racialized ethnic group or other Black groups, which includes awareness of racism, areas of struggle and resistance to racism, and Black people’s contributions and strengths in their communities and internationally. Neville and Cross (2017) stated further that for the most part, racial awakening “…consisted both of an external event or epiphanic experience that promoted increased critical awareness of what it means to be Black and also a series of changes (e.g., new insight, different behaviors, etc.) that led to establishing a sense of connection to something broader than the individual self” (p. 104).

Regardless of the constructs that are used to explain their dawning awareness, the participants in this study clearly came to the realization that they are considered Black in America and that this subjects them to racism. They also demarcated clearly the time during which they were not cognizant of being racialized and when they became aware that they are.
In fact, the way they respond to negative encounters with race since they became aware of racialization is significantly more active than the passive, avoidant styles they used when they were new immigrants, which leads to another important finding in this research.

**Racism Exists, and You Got to Deal with It**

The fourth significant finding in this study is that after they became aware that they were racialized, the participants began immediately to negotiate differently with their negative encounters with race. Specifically, they stated that it was important for them to accept America’s racial reality first. That acceptance then allowed them to understand that racism in America is harmful to them, and has led them to engage in more active and aggressive responses to these racialized encounters. These techniques include: (1) confronting racist individuals and systems; (2) clinging to their back-home culture and traditions, and (3) relying on their faith in God.

First, it was important for the participants to accept the system of race in America. While when they first arrived, they were unsure how to make sense of their negative racial encounters and avoided or overlooked them deliberately, in contrast, once they became aware of their experience of racialization, they were able to make conscious decisions and choices about the way to respond to these encounters. Accepting that race is different in America and they are subjected to harsh treatment because of it seemed to be the first step for the participants.

In psychology, *acceptance*, which Vowels, Sowden, and Ashworth (2014) defined as “...a broad-based willingness to have pain or discomfort” (p. 391) has been found to be instrumental in helping individuals cope with pain and emotional discomfort. Further, acceptance is seen as an alternative to avoidance, as Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson (2012) described. Their mindfulness of their racialization led them to reconcile the conflict between
their pre-emigration worldview and the reality of race in America. In addition, their acceptance of their racial reality in America gave them clarity, and prompted them to act differently in their post-awareness phase. This is not surprising, given that such researchers as Langer (2004) have found that, “When we make even small efforts to be more mindful, …we become more interested in what we are doing, and our performance improves” (p. 3). Once they became aware and accepted that they were being racialized, they realized that racism in America threatens their emotional and psychological wellbeing, as well as their economic goals. Thus, the participants in this study indicated that they have become intentional, conscious, and proactive in negotiating with race. Their negotiation styles evolved significantly from avoidance and rationalization to those that are more contentious, as De Dreu, Beersma, Steinel, and Van Kleef (2007) described.

The people in this study now prepare for and anticipate these experiences and, when they do have negative racial encounters, they confront the individuals and systems they feel are responsible. Some participants in the study use a subtler and more abstract strategy of pushing back that involves maintaining a connection to their home, which statements such as, “I’m not from America” or “I wasn’t born in this country,” represent. For example, David believed that it is essential for him to remain connected to his Jamaican heritage, and described that he felt previously that he was in a prison because of the system of race in America, and likened clinging to his Jamaican culture to regaining that lost freedom.

For Alicia, making yearly trips to Jamaica, speaking Jamaican patois (local Jamaican dialect) and eating Jamaican food accomplishes the same purpose of clinging to her previous home. As discussed in Chapter II, this connection to back home has been referred to as maintaining a transnational identity (Foner 2001; Rogers 2001; Shaw-Taylor & Touch 2007). Similar to the results of such previous research as that of Foner (2001), Rogers (2001), Shaw-
Taylor and Tuch (2007), and Murphy and Mahalingam (2004), maintaining these transnational ties or a transnational identity has served as a buffer and been a significant factor in the participants’ resiliency. They cling to “back-home” to maintain the sense of autonomy and self-worth with which they arrived in America.

Unsurprisingly, because they also emigrated with a belief that God is fundamental to their existence and source of worth, that same belief in God is essential to these participants, as it also is a factor in their resiliency that has allowed them to reject the dehumanization of their racialization in America. The existing literature supports that this belief in God links religion and optimism. Several studies, including those of Koenig, King, and Carson (2012), Monico (2012), and Lee, Neblett, and Jackson (2015), have found that optimism is associated with greater religious involvement. For this population, despite their appalling experiences with racial oppression in America, they believe strongly that God cares for and is protecting them.

In summary, while the participants in this research came to America with their own messages and ideology of race, they encountered racialization upon their arrival in America that differed from, and challenged, their pre-emigration worldview and were unsure how to make sense of the phenomenon. However, at some point, they experienced an awakening in which they realized that they were being subjected to an American system of racial stratification. After this experience, they came to accept their situation, but changed and have negotiated with racism more actively since. To regain their sense of worth and cope with their new realization and experiences with race in America, the participants have chosen to hold on to aspects of their previous culture, such as their belief in God.
Implications

These findings have several significant implications for professional counseling practice. First, professional counselors must recognize the heterogeneity of the Black population in America. Often in counseling research, Blacks, including African Caribbean immigrants, are assumed to have homogeneous experiences based simply on skin color. However, counselors must understand that African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences—and those of any other distinct racial subgroup—are unique, particularly with respect to their understanding of, and experiences with, race, such that immigrants in America have their own experiences and understanding of race.

Secondly, clinical mental health counselors should be sensitive to African Caribbean immigrants’ stage in making sense of their racialization. Based on where they are in the process, they may need distinct therapeutic interventions. For example, recent immigrants from the Caribbean may not perceive issues with race or deny racism’s existence because they are having difficulty understanding what they are experiencing. Thus, clinical mental health counselors may help these individuals by providing psychoeducational workshops about the reality of race in America, the way to recognize it, and what to do about it. Alternatively, immigrants who have been living here longer may have had their “awareness” moment and are more mindful of the United States’ racial reality and their perceived “Blackness.” These individuals may be experiencing overwhelming emotions or significant psychological symptoms and dysfunction in several aspects of their lives. Consequently, they may require one-on-one therapeutic interventions. Furthermore, professional counselors may explore with these clients different indigenous coping mechanisms from back home that may be beneficial to them as they are dealing with the emotions and psychological symptoms. For instance, because their faith in God
was central to their identity while in the Caribbean, as well as a resiliency factor during their awareness of being racialized, professional counselors may be able to integrate faith, and aspects of spirituality into counseling practice with African Caribbean immigrants. Similarly, for some, other spiritual tools, such as what is referred to as “conscious music” in Caribbean circles, may be useful.

Thirdly, there was a significant indication in this research that these immigrants had multiple negative encounters with race in school and college settings, some of which White school and college counselors perpetrated. As such, it is likely that school and college counselors will be these immigrants’ first encounter with a professional counselor. Thus, it is very important for school and college counselors to understand their ethical duties first, as outlined in both the ACA and the American School Counseling Association’s codes of ethics (ASCA, 2016).

Specifically, school counselors must honor the ASCA code of professional conduct that emphasizes that all students have the right to: be respected; treated with dignity, and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for, and affirms all students from diverse populations; receive the information and support needed to move toward self-determination, self-development, and affirmation within one’s group identities; receive critical, timely information on college, career, and postsecondary options, and understand the full magnitude and meaning of the way college and career readiness can have an influence on their educational choices and future opportunities.

Fourthly, counselor educators need to expose professional counseling students to the heterogeneity of the Black population in America. Salient issues unique to African Caribbean immigrants, such as the intersectionality of multiple identities (immigrant and ...Black, female,
etc.) need to be considered. In addition, counselor educators can use and continue to expand on the established research on Africana existentialism, as it has profound implications for understanding and working with African diaspora clients such as African Caribbean immigrants. Lastly, counselor educators should continue to educate professional counseling students on the internationalization of the counseling profession in concert with the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), which have begun to collaborate with dozens of nations to establish professional counseling standards.

**Limitations**

This study had several limitations. First, although attempts were made to interview a diverse range of individuals from different Caribbean states, the experiences of a broader range of African Caribbean immigrants needs to be explored. For example, understanding the experiences of immigrants from Caribbean states such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti, may have given a different perspective than that of the participants in this study. Second, as the interviews were conducted in English because of my language limitations, this study did not capture the narratives and experiences of non-English-speaking African Caribbean immigrants. Another limitation in this study is that the phenomenon of “I became aware” that most of the participants described was unanticipated and therefore, was not explored in as much detail.

**Future Research**

Accordingly, one focus for future research should be a deeper exploration of the phenomenon of African Caribbean immigrants’ racial epiphany experiences. Such research could investigate the way African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences are consistent with, or
differ from, Cross’ racial identity model and may lead to the development of racial or cultural identity models that are inclusive of a broader Black experience. Further research also could explore the way their experience with racialization in America affects their pre-emigration beliefs about race. For example, what inferences do they make about what they believed about race and class now that they have experienced racism and racialization in America? Future research also could explore the loss of status or alienation African Caribbean immigrants experience when they transfer from a Black majority to a racial minority status in the United States. Lastly, future studies could develop evidence-based, indigenous approaches to working with this population.

**Summary**

This study’s purpose was to describe and understand the experiences that first-generation African Caribbean immigrants living in the United States have with race. My primary research question was: What sense or meaning do African Caribbean immigrants make of their experience with race in America? The data analysis and research findings showed that African Caribbean immigrants emigrate from predominantly Black majority states with a complex understanding of race that early messages they received about race shaped. However, upon arriving in America, they begin immediately to have negative experiences with race that challenge these pre-emigration beliefs. Because they are immigrants of color, they experience racialization in their assimilation process that becomes a precursor to the way Whites perceive and treat them, and as new immigrants, they are unsure how to deal with these experiences and resort to avoidance.

However, at some point, they become mindful or “aware” that they are being racialized in America, and that this racialization has subjected them to the harsh experiences they have been having. Once they reach this state of awareness, they develop a sense of agency and begin to
resist the construct of race actively with various tactics, including accepting the racial reality in which they live, and responding to individuals and systems they feel are responsible for perpetrating such racist incidents. They also choose to retain their pre-emigration beliefs, including faith in God, which helps them maintain the sense of agency they had “back home.” An understating of the messages about race these immigrants bring with them to America and the adjustment they undergo to make sense of being Black in America can give counselors an important perspective that could be brought into the therapeutic setting for the benefit of their African Caribbean clients.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval

Date: March 29, 2016

To: Phillip Johnson, Principal Investigator
   Rommel Johnson, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 16-03-27

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Negotiating U.S. Racial Constructs: First-Generation African Caribbean Immigrants’ Experience with Race” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 28, 2017
APPENDIX B

Invitation to Participate in Study

Dear Interested Participant:

I am a student pursuing my Doctor in Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology degree at Western Michigan University. I am seeking participants for a research study designed to clarify how African Caribbean immigrants perceive their experiences with race in America. The study may be of value to mental health practitioners, counselor educators, and policy makers, and may provide a broad understanding of how Black immigrants from the Caribbean make sense of their experiences with race in the United States. This research is being conducted as part of my dissertation requirements and includes a demographic survey and a one-on-one interview that is expected to be completed in 2.5 hours.

To participate in this study, individuals must: (a) be 21 years of age or older; (b) have resided in the United States for no less than five consecutive years; and (c) have migrated from one of the following Caribbean countries or regions: Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados, and Grenada, Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curacao, and Bonaire and Guyana.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience at (269) 277-3070, rommel.johnson@wmich.edu if you are interested in learning more about participating in this project or have questions. You may also direct your questions to my dissertation chair, Dr. Phillip Johnson, at (269) 387-5123. If you have questions over the course of the study, you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the Vice President of Research at (269) 387-8298.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Rommel Johnson, MA, LPC, CRC
Department of Counselor Education & Counseling Psychology
Western Michigan University
APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education & Counseling Psychology

Principal Investigator: Dr. Phillip Johnson
Student Investigator: Rommel Johnson MA, LPC

You have been invited to participate in a research study titled “Negotiating American Racial Constructs: First-Generation African Caribbean Immigrants’ Experience with Race,” designed to clarify the meaning of race to first-generation African Caribbean immigrants living in the United States. This research is being conducted as part of the dissertation requirements for Rommel Johnson for a Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education and Supervision degree. This consent document will explain this project’s purpose and will go over its time commitments, procedures, and risks and benefits. Please read this consent form carefully and completely, and please ask questions if you need clarification. If you are interested in this study and do not have any questions, or feel that your questions have been answered satisfactorily, please sign this consent form and return it to me by email: rommel.johnson@wmich.edu. Alternatively, I can retrieve this consent form when I meet with you, prior to the start of your interview.

What are we trying to find in this study?
This study is intended to provide counselors with information about first-generation African Caribbean immigrants’ experiences with race in America.

Who can participate in this study?
To participate in this study, you will be required to satisfy the following criteria: must (a) be 21 years of age or older; (b) have resided in the United States for no less than 5 continual years; and (c) have migrated from one of the following Caribbean countries or regions: Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda, Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados, Grenada, Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands, Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curacao, and Bonaire and Guyana.

Where will this study take place?
This study will take place at a location that is convenient for you and affords privacy. In some instances, Skype or Facebook video calling may be used instead of a face-to-face interview.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
The time commitment for participating in this study will be 2.5 hours, typically.
What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
You will be asked to complete a nine-question demographic survey and a one-on-one interview. You will also be asked to complete a one-on-one interview and a follow-up phone call to summarize or clarify statements made during the interview. Your interview will be audio recorded.

What information is being measured during the study?
The purpose of the study is to describe and understand how Black immigrants from the Caribbean make sense of their experiences with race in the United States.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
There are no expected risks involved in participating in this study other than the limited loss of time spent to complete the survey and mild discomfort triggered by recalling certain experiences during the one-on-one interview.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?
The findings from this research study will advance knowledge about this topic and may benefit human service and mental health professionals who may work with African Caribbean immigrant populations.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
There is no cost associated with participating in this study.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
To help protect your privacy, your name will be coded by number and will not be associated with response materials or personally identifiable information. Furthermore, to ensure the confidentiality of the data, once interview information is transcribed, it will be saved on an encrypted flash drive. The flash drive will be kept in my locked office cabinet, and only the primary researcher, the statistical consultant, and I will have copies of the electronic files. The data including the flash drive may be retained for at least three years following the study’s completion. Both will be stored in a locked office cabinet at Western Michigan University.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue your participation at any time, without penalty. Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Phillip Johnson, at (269) 387-5123. If questions arise over the course of the study, you may also contact the Chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298.
Informed consent - Continued

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. You should not participate in this project if the stamped date is more than one year old.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name:

Participant’s Signature Date
APPENDIX D

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Gender:
   □ Female  □ Male

2. Age:
   □ 21-24  □ 25-34  □ 35-44  □ 45-54  □ 55-64  □ 65 or older

3. Legal marital status:
   □ Single  □ Married  □ Partnered  □ Divorced  □ Widowed  □ Separated

4. Approximate annual income in U.S. dollars:
   □ Less than 15,000  □ 15,001- 25,000  □ 25,001- 40,000  □ 40,001- 55,000
   □ 55,001-70,000  □ 70,001- 85,000  □ Over 85,001

5. Highest education earned:
   □ Less than high school  □ High school/GED  □ Some College  □ Bachelor’s degree
   □ Master’s degree  □ Doctoral/professional degree

6. Geographic region that best describes your place of birth:
   □ I was born in an island, nation or state within the geographic region known as the
   Caribbean. Island/country ____________________________
   □ I was not born in the Caribbean

7. Age at the time of migration to the United States:
   □ Under 18  □ 18-24  □ 25-34  □ 35-44  □ 45-54  □ 55-64  □ 65 or older

8. Number of years lived in the United States:
   □ Less than 5 years  □ 5 -10  □ 10 - 20  □20 -30  □ 30 - 50  □ Over 50

9. What is your profession?  __________________________________________
APPENDIX E

Interview Guide

1. Please describe what your life was like before you emigrated to the United States
   a. What kind of job did you do?
   b. Social Standing or Socioeconomic status?
   c. How did you understand differences among people?
   d. What about the notion of race, did it exist where you’re from, if not what did you make of it?
   e. What made you want to migrate to the U.S?
   f. What were your pre-migratory expectations?

2. What were some of your experiences with race when you first moved to America?
   a. What surprised you when you first got here?
   b. What was difficult to adjust to?
   c. Describe your very first experience with race and how did you make sense of it?
   d. What are other key experiences that shaped your understanding of race in America?
   e. Help me understand how does experiences made you feel?

3. Now that you have lived in America for some time, how have you come to understand race?
   a. What does it mean to you to be defined as Black in the United States?
   b. What does it mean to you to be defined as a minority?
   c. How do you think your experiences in with race in America has shaped you as an African Caribbean Immigrant?