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Cultural Communities among African Students at Yale College

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the prevalent negative perceptions of cultural communities, this study seeks to better understand the phenomenon of informal cultural communities formed by international students at institutions of higher education. Specifically, this study looks at how cultural communities shape the experiences of undergraduate African students at Yale College. Using a phenomenological approach, 11 undergraduate African students were interviewed about their experiences in various cultural communities, and two focus groups were conducted: one prior to the interviews in order to decrease interviewer bias and shape the interview questions, and one subsequent to the interviews in order to decrease bias in data analysis. The research finds that African student cultural communities form based both on internal factors such as cultural similarities and external factors such as ignorance and discrimination from the host community. Cultural communities help to bridge the gap between home and host culture throughout the adjustment process, help students to maintain their cultural identity away from home, and provide a haven for individuals to connect and comfort each other over similar experiences of prejudice and stereotyping from classmates, faculty, and administrators. They provide a crucial role as support networks, filling the gaps where institutional support services do not go far enough. While they can make it easier for their members to avoid meaningful interaction with the broader campus community, this isolation is in major part a symptom of a larger problem rooted in ignorance and ethnocentrism by the dominant culture in the US, not a problem created by cultural communities. Furthermore, cultural communities can be beneficial in promoting cross cultural interaction on university campuses by providing the support students need to persist to graduation and providing students with a social safety net which gives them the confidence and support to branch out socially. As students, educators, members of the dominant culture, we must all recognize our role in creating the existing campus climate. Only after acknowledging our individual roles can we seek to create a more inclusive campus environment for all students and eliminate the external factors that push African students into cultural communities.

Introduction and Statement of Research Question

Over the past several decades, the number of international students studying in the United States has risen tremendously. But studying in the States does not automatically mean that international students will integrate with domestic students. According to CindyAnn and Reuben Rose-Redwood (2013), "meaningful social interactions between international and American students are all too often the exception rather than the rule" (p. 414).

During my undergraduate years at Ohio State University (OSU), I noticed that international students often kept to themselves, many times hanging out in groups of people from their own country or similar cultures. This was a prevalent observation among my peers at other schools who noticed similar occurrences, as well as between students at OSU. Conversely, when I started to work at OSU's Office of International Affairs, I heard from international students that it was so hard to break into new social groups and interact with Americans because Americans kept to themselves. Now as a graduate intern at Yale University, I am seeing similar patterns. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to these informal social groups formed around similar cultural identities as "cultural communities."

Many people from all different backgrounds have formed opinions about cultural communities. There is an extensive array of perspectives about this phenomenon, both positive and negative. It seems that many people focus on whether these cultural communities are good or bad for the university as a whole, rather than seeking to understand why they form, how they affect the cultural adjustment process, or how they shape the experiences and perspectives of international students.

As I am conducting relatively small-scale research and do not have the time or resources to draw any conclusions about the international student population at large, I focused my study on a specific segment of Yale's international student population, African students. My research question is, *"How does involvement in informal cultural communities shape the experiences of undergraduate African students at Yale University?"* My purpose in researching this subject is to gain insight into this

phenomenon by trying to understand in a comprehensive way the experiences of African students who

participate in cultural communities. Shedding light on cultural communities from student perspectives

could improve the way international offices and individuals understand the international students they

seek to welcome and may have important implications for the ways in which universities support

various international student populations.

I chose to focus on African students for several reasons. First, many African students at Yale

University are a part of YASA, the Yale African Student Association, and therefore self-identify and group

as African students. This makes sense because African students make up a relatively small portion of the

international student population as a whole, and therefore may not have the luxury of further grouping

based off of nationality or ethnicity. During 2015, there were 65 African students at Yale College, the

liberal arts undergraduate school at Yale, out of 613 international students and 5,532 students total

(OISS, 2016). Therefore African students make up 10.6% of the international student population and

only 1% of the total student population at Yale College *(see appendix A)*.

Second, during my time working in the Office of International Students and Scholars at Yale, I

got to know several undergraduate African students and witnessed many as they participated in cultural

communities. I started to understand that cultural communities are an important aspect of life at Yale

for many international, and specifically African, students, but these communities tend to be

misunderstood by outsiders including both administrators and fellow students.

Third, during a sequence of racially charged events and conversations in the fall semester of the

2015-2016 school year that dramatically shifted Yale's campus climate, many African students found

themselves at the center of conversations about race and identity in America. First, Erika Christakis, a

Professor and Associate Master at one of the undergraduate residential colleges, responded to an email

sent out by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion which suggested that students be mindful before

choosing to wear potentially offensive Halloween costumes. In an email to students in her college,

Christakis challenged whether the university should play any role in moderating costume choice (Grewal, 2015). This led to a largely binary debate about protecting free speech versus creating a respectful campus climate that supports all students. Second, at a fraternity party soon after the emails, one of the fraternity brothers allegedly turned away some female students of color saying, "we're only looking for white girls" (Grewal, 2015). This further sparked campus debate and caused emotions to run high on all sides. Yale's campus events were the object of both national and international media attention in the midst of a larger conversation about how well American universities are set up to support students of color and other minority students.

These events triggered a student-led movement on Yale's campus based on issues that have been around for decades. A student group called Next Yale issued several demands to university administration pressing the university to improve support for minority students and to create a more inclusive campus climate. According to Professor Zareena Grewal, "Our students' aim isn't to suppress the free expression of their classmates, but to press the university that recruited them, and that they chose, to provide an academic environment where they're provided respect" (2015). In the thick of this highly charged campus climate, international students, but specifically African students, found themselves in a unique and stressful position where they were forced to navigate among their many different identities in an American context and find their places amid the other student voices. Besides the fact that most African students are people of color, YASA sits in the African American Cultural House (AFAM House) on campus, a hub for the fall 2015 student protests. Of all of the international students, African students especially seemed to be thrown into the thick of the conversation involuntarily based on race and many of their affiliation with the AFAM House through YASA. I was interested in the role cultural communities would play during a stressful and divisive situation like this.

As an institution, Yale is distinctive. Not only is it an elite Ivy League university, but it also has a unique residential college system which affects the dynamics of student life. The college system, based

off of systems at British schools like Oxford and Cambridge, consists of twelve residential colleges which students are assigned to at random. Students generally live in their college for all four years of their college experience, and, according to Yale's website, the colleges "allow students to experience the cohesiveness and intimacy of a small school while still enjoying the cultural and scholarly resources of a large university; the residential colleges do much to foster spirit, allegiance, and a sense of community at Yale" (OISS, 2016). Each college is meant to be a microcosm of the Yale campus as a whole and represent the demographic diversity of each class of students. Therefore if Yale College is made up of 1% African students and 10% international students, each college will have roughly 1% African students and 10% international students.

Every residential college has its own master and dean, both of whom are Yale faculty members. The master and the dean each live in the college with their families, and are meant to provide academic and emotional support, advice, and safety for their students. Specifically, the master is responsible for the physical well-being and safety of the students as well as for fostering and shaping the social, cultural, and educational life and character of the college" (Residential, 2016). The dean serves as the head academic and personal adviser to the students, and advocates for students in the case of academic difficulty (Residential, 2016). Within each college are freshman counselors or "frocos," upperclassmen students that act as peer advisers, each with a caseload of about 15 students. Outside of the residential colleges, each cultural center, including the Office of International Students and Scholars, has several peer liaisons that are also available to support undergraduate students. Yale College is designed to provide layers of social and academic support to each student, and having knowledge of these institutional support systems is necessary context in understanding the international student experience at Yale in a comprehensive way.

Literature Review/Authority for Study

As international student enrollment has continued to increase in the US over the past several decades, the international student experience has become a prevalent topic for scholarly study. A great deal of literature focuses on sociocultural adjustment and integration with domestic students. Ample studies even focus on specific segments of the international student population, including African students, as well as minority segments of the domestic student population. Several scholars have presented development models for ethnic and racial identity, all of which are relevant to the African student experience and necessary to understanding the deeper look at African cultural communities that I will present later in this paper. Existing literature even makes mention of cultural communities and broadly touches upon why they form and how they can fit into broader international student life, but it does not, however, look comprehensively at cultural communities from a student perspective. This literature review will enable me to set a general context for the African student experience, identify my niche amongst the existing literature, and establish a vocabulary of concepts and distinctions that will play a role in my analysis.

While transitioning to university life can be difficult for everyone, research reveals that international students tend to face more obstacles in their adjustment process than domestic students (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen & Van Horn, 2002). Regina Hechanova-Alampay (2002) defines cross-cultural adjustment as "the degree of psychological comfort a sojourner has with the various aspects of a host culture" (p. 462). The added pressure of adjusting to a new culture often creates challenges for international students, such as grappling with new social norms and customs, redefining their identity as internationals, interacting with host nationals and making social contacts, obliviousness by host nationals about the student's home country or culture, issues with verbal and non-verbal communication, and sometimes unexpected racial discrimination (Al-Sharideh et at, 1998; Hechanova-Alampay et al, 2002). France J. Pruitt (1977) specifically looked at the adaptation of

Africans students to American university life in her research. She found that climate, communication with Americans, discrimination, homesickness, depression, irritability, and tiredness were among the top issues affecting African student adjustment (Pruitt, 1977). With less access to resources like friends and family, coping with these issues becomes more difficult.

Models of Acculturation

Several researchers have focused on this sociocultural adjustment process and have proposed various models of acculturation to explain some of the challenges associated with adjusting to a new culture. These models take into account demographic, contextual, and psychological factors as well as the acculturative attitudes of both the international sojourners and people from the host culture (Manguvo, 2013). While these models do not focus solely on international students, they are still relevant because all international sojourners deal with certain universal issues surrounding life in a foreign culture.

John W. Berry's (1992) Psychological Acculturation Model, which has largely been applied to international students, stems from the idea that sojourners are faced with challenges related to deciding whether or not to retain their native culture. This includes the internal question of whether to seek or avoid relations with members of the host culture. With this model, Berry theorizes that sojourners will adopt one of four acculturation strategies: *assimilation*, where the sojourner abandons their own cultural identity in favor of the dominant culture, *separation*, where the sojourner's desire to retain all aspects of their native culture leads them to reject relationships with members of the host culture, *integration*, where the sojourner maintains key features of the native culture while adopting some aspects of the host culture, and *marginalization*, where the sojourner rejects both the native and host cultures. A study done by Ahalya Krishnan and John Berry (1992) involving Indian immigrants in the United States suggests that international sojourners who integrated were less affected by acculturative stress than those who chose marginalization. However, marginalization is often not a choice, and this

model does not take into account the significant effect that host culture members can have on adjustment.

Richard Bourhis's (1997) Interactive Acculturation Model, however, emphasizes the role that host culture members play in cultural adjustment. There are three primary elements to the model: acculturation orientations of the immigrants, acculturation orientations of the host majority, and the outcomes resulting from the interactions between acculturation orientations of the two groups. This model proposes that sojourners choose acculturative strategies based on host culture attitudes about the sojourners and their culture. Sojourners tend to prefer assimilation when host members encourage them to give up their own culture in order to conform to the dominant culture. On the other hand, sojourners segregate when members of the host culture would rather the sojourners fully maintain their cultural identity rather than adopt to the dominant culture. Integration tends to happen when host culture members accept and value the sojourners' culture but appreciate their adoption of certain characteristics of the host cultures. In the case that the host culture members refuse to accept the preservation of the sojourner's culture and the adoption of the host culture, sojourners are likely to become totally excluded, similar to marginalization from the previous model (Bourhis, 1997). While this model is useful in understanding the crucial role that host culture members have in sojourner adjustment, it fails to account for individual characteristics and internal psychological factors.

Marisol Navas's (2007) Relative Acculturation Extended Model incorporates both internal and cultural factors as well as host culture attitudes. This model postulates seven spheres of acculturation: political, work, economic, social, family, religious, and ways of thinking (Navas et al., 2007). Studies associated with this theory suggest that sojourners' acculturative preferences may not be consistent across different spheres of life. For example, a 2007 study reported that sub-Saharan African immigrants in Spain preferred to assimilate or integrate in terms of work and economics, but when it came to the

cultural spheres, the immigrants preferred separation while the hosts preferred assimilation (Navas et al., 2007).

Sociocultural Adjustment

While the acculturation models look at international group preferences for acculturation as a whole, there is evidence that certain socio-demographic factors such as age, marital status, gender, length of residence, and other pre-migration characteristics, also affect the cross-cultural adjustment process. A study by Seda Sumer et al. (2008) which looked at international student adjustment, revealed that older students had a harder time adjusting to the host culture. When it comes to marital status, several studies have shown that married students or students with families report lower levels of adjustment stress due to the concentrated support of immediate family. Research has shown contradictory results on the effects of gender on adjustment, but generally females tend to have higher emotional, physiological, and behavioral reactions to acculturative stressors while they also often have more social provisions. Sumer's study concluded that females tended to identify more with their native culture as an adjustment strategy than did their male counterparts. Most researchers agree that in terms of length of residence, the longer the duration of stay, the better the adjustment by international students to their host culture. Pre-migration characteristics of international students or sojourners can also have a large effect on sociocultural adjustment. For instance, a 2012 study with Ghanaian students in the US found that Ghanaian students' socioeconomic status back home impacted their attitudes, expectations, and adaptation to U.S. culture (Fischer, 2012).

Increasing evidence has shown that the process of sociocultural adjustment varies across different groups of international students. Christine Yeh and Mayuko Inose's (2003) study of acculturative stress of international students reported that region of origin accounted for a statistically significant 11.4% variance in acculturative stress scores. Substantive research suggests that international students from sub-Saharan Africa face a unique set of obstacles and stressors that can potentially thwart

their sociocultural adjustment process. A study by Madonna G. Constantine et al. concluded that black African students experienced the most difficulties in adjusting to the US compared to their counterparts from Europe, Asia and Latin America (Manguvo, 2013). Similarly, F.O. Adelegan and D.J. Parks' study found that black African students faced more difficulties in adjustment to U.S. culture than white African or North African Arabic students (Manguvo, 2013). These added adjustment issues for black African students are no doubt linked to racial dynamics and the "Black-White divide" in the United States (Arthur, 2001). In America, systemically there is no clear distinction made between African ethnic identity and African American racial identity, so African students are considered black, whether or not they personally identify with this imposed label (Manguvo, 2013). Based on the implications of being black in American society, African students are often unexpectedly forced to navigate racial identity and discrimination which can "impede their ability to foster relations that are crucial for sociocultural adjustment" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 24).

Cultural distance is another important factor to consider when it comes to ease of adjustment, especially with regards to African students studying in the United States. Several studies have shown that culture clashes are more common when the culture of the international student is significantly different from the host culture, leading to more transitional challenges for the international student (Manguvo, 2013). This may be another reason that African students tend to face more challenges in cultural adjustment to the US than other groups of students seeing as the cultural distance between sub-Saharan Africa (and even North Africa) and the US is very wide (Manguvo, 2013). This distance manifests itself in many different aspects of day-to-day life. For example, Americans tend to emphasize individualism while many cultures from Africa stress collective responsibility (Manguvo, 2013). Many African students come from cultures where high degrees of hierarchical authority are favored which often means African students keep their transitional issues quiet rather than seeking help from anyone other than peers, further compounding issues of adjustment (Constantine et al., 2005).

Cultural Communities

According to Vincent Tinto (1982), a leading theorist in student development and adjustment, participating in the university's student culture is a vital piece of healthy adjustment and a key in persisting to graduation. Along these lines, in her study of African students around the country, Pruitt (1977) found that while only a minority of African students were involved in broader community activities around their campuses, and 59% of African students were involved in other student organizations, a whole 67% of African students were involved in some sort of African student association. Current research indicates that the social networks of students at universities have an enormous impact on how first-year students adjust (Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers, 2011). Social support is so important to the adjustment process because close social ties play a large role in validating a person's self-esteem and self-image, both of which are closely linked to mental health. When international students uproot their lives to study in a foreign country, they are often deprived of their social support systems, leading to feelings of loss and homesickness (Hechanova-Alampay et al, 2002). Therefore, establishment of new social support networks can play a vital role in helping international students to successfully adjust to their new environment and feel more in control (Hechanova-Alampay et al, 2002). Bochner's research indicates that having a significant number of friends from the same culture, as well as from the host culture, has a strong influence on an international student's academic integration (1977).

According to William Tierney (1992), American universities tend to "reflect, promote, and reinforce the culture of the dominant society," in other words, the culture of white Americans (p. 53). Therefore some international and minority students may not always feel comfortable on a campus that they feel does not seek to represent their diverse methods of thinking and value systems. Due to this reason, among others, research reveals that international students may consciously choose not to assimilate to American culture and cultivate social ties with Americans (Tierney, 1992, p. 54). This leads

to the subject of my research and an occurrence that numerous researchers have noted, the phenomenon of self-segregation, "whereby international students primarily interact with co-nationals from their home countries" (Rose-Redwood, 2013, p. 416).

In their research, Khalid Al-Sharideh and W. Richard Goe (1998) found that the formation of social relationships with other people of the same cultural background or nationality is a significant strategy used by international students to adjust to their new surroundings. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) call these relationships "ethnic communities, which consist of a network of strong social ties with people of the same cultural background, within the context of the university" (p. 700). For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to these as 'cultural communities.' Viewing self-esteem as an important indicator of mental and emotional health, Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) note that self-esteem "is even more critical in this regard among minority students" (p. 701). Self-esteem is more likely to be effected when navigating a new country and new cultural norms, and forming connections with students from similar cultural backgrounds can be a way to maintain self-esteem (Al Sharideh et al, 1998). Further, Hechanova-Alampay (2002) notes in her research that, "perhaps because of status differentials, ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypes, cultural ignorance, different norms of friendship and fear of rejection, many [international students] gravitate towards being with people of the same nationality" (p. 462). As a matter of fact, research indicates that, when dealing with personal problems, "fellow nationals are the most sought after source of help" (Hechanova-Alampay et al, 2002, p. 462).

Numerous studies show that many international, and specifically African, students participate in culturally based social networks as a "protective factor," a means to cope with the risk factors that often impede cultural adjustment (Manguvo, 2013). According to a study done by Ann Fischer (2012), besides social networks with friends and family back home, support from fellow international students is an important strategy to aiding cultural adjustment. Manguvo's (2013) research reveals that networking between African students is often fostered by affiliation to African student associations, which are

common on U.S. college campuses. Hyoun Kim and Patrick McHenry (1998) assert that "the critical role of these networks lies in facilitating adjustment within mainstream culture" (p. 27). In fact, a study by Colleen Ward et al. (2001) argues that coping strategies such as culturally linked social networks or participation in cultural communities are often more effective to cultural adaptation than institutional support services. This may be in part because students are more likely to listen to information from familiar and trustworthy sources such as other students from similar cultural backgrounds (Manguvo, 2013).

According to multiple studies, cultural communities can have many benefits. They allow international students to more strongly maintain their cultural identities and, further, to "reproduce aspects of their native cultural environments" (Al-Sharideh et al, 1998, p. 704). While contested, evidence has shown that strong identification with one's own cultural identity can actually speed up the adjustment process. Berger-Cardoso and Thompson's (2010) research showed that a strong sense of cultural values and traditions nurtured a sense of emotional protection in light of negative adjustment experiences such as adversity, trauma, isolation, and stress. Bochner (1982) stressed that by limiting the majority of their social interactions to co-nationals, international students gained an increased sense of confidence in their cultural identity. Further, cultural communities can help ameliorate the negative effects of attempted assimilation on self-esteem, whether those effects come from an inability to effectively interact with Americans or general isolation from the host population (Al-Sharideh et al, 1998; Hechanova-Alampay, 2002). In fact, Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) found that the number of strong ties with co-culturals had a strong correlation to an international student's self-esteem. The network of social ties that develops in a cultural community facilitates adjustment and is an important means of social support in coping with unfamiliar situations and resolving problems that arise in the new social context (Al-Sharideh et al, 1998).

Research has also suggested that involvement with cultural communities can be associated with some negative outcomes. Al-Sharideh et al. (1998) found that being too extensively integrated into a cultural community could negatively affect the self-esteem of international students. In addition, living life within two different social contexts, the cultural community and the American university (interacting with host nationals in the academic setting and navigating the American culture to meet basic needs), can become a difficult balancing act for international students (Basu & Ames, 1970). Finally, many educational scholars agree that "positive social interaction with American host nationals increases international students' general level of satisfaction with their educational experiences," yet cultural communities are often viewed by host nationals as social isolation, which in turn can be a barrier to integration and the overall adaptation process at the host university (Rose-Redwood, 2013, p. 416).

Integration

The benefits of integrating into one's host culture have been an extensive topic of academic exploration. A broad body of research indicates that integration into American culture, as well as social contact and interaction with Americans, plays a significant role in the adjustment process of international students to American universities (Al-Sharideh, 1998). Al-Sharideh and Goe's (1998) research revealed that "the establishment of strong ties with Americans has an independent, positive effect in promoting a student's self-esteem, regardless of the number of strong ties developed with other co-culturals" (p. 702). According to this study, by including Americans into their social networks, international students have sources to act as cultural interpreters, which reduces uncertainties and minimizes problems associated with cultural misunderstandings (Al-Sharideh et al, 1998). In fact, international students "who have little contact with Americans report feeling more alienated and less well-adjusted than those who cultivate U.S. student contact" (Hechanova-Alampay, 2002, p. 462). According to Hechanova-Alampay's (2002) research, social contact with host nationals led to less adjustment strain six months after arrival. Conversely, studies have found that international students

who did not socially interact with host nationals frequently reported feelings of anxiety, social isolation, and negative perceptions of American host nationals, whereas international students who commonly interacted with Americans were more likely to express positive attitudes about their overall interactions with the host community (Rose-Redwood, 2013).

Ethnic and Racial Identity Development

While international students are their own unique demographic, they can also fall into the broader category of "minority" students. African students, specifically, are generally racial and ethnic minorities on U.S. college campuses, and this identity plays its own role in the adjustment process. According to a widely accepted definition proposed by Jean Phinney (1992), ethnic identity is "a sense of self as a member of an [in-group] that claims a common ancestry or shares at least a similar culture, race, religion, kinship, language, or place of origin" (p. 26). Language, friendship, political activity, religious affiliation, and different types of cultural activities are all considered subcomponents of ethnic identity (Manguvo, 2013). Identity development in terms of ethnic identity has been understood as both an internal cognitive process as well as an external psychosocial process. Erik Erikson is the psychological father of our modern day conceptualization of the internal development process. He proposes identity development as a core internal process which results in equilibrium for the individual. However, this understanding of ethnic identity development has been criticized as being too narrow because it fails to account for social context. William Penuel and James Wertch (1995), on the other hand, claim that ethnic identity is a combination of other peoples' and one's own self-perceptions. In this view, sociocultural environment is fundamental in understanding ethnic identity. Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory combines aspects of each of these views, asserting that "ethnic identity development should be perceived as a product of active internalization of the existing social and cultural contexts" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 27).

Ethnic Identity Development is an important aspect of cultural adjustment to explore because moving to a new culture with a different ethnic make-up often triggers internal questions and leads individuals to view their own identities differently. Phinney provides a three-stage Model of Ethnic Identity Development which begins with an *unexamined ethnic identity* stage (Manguvo, 2013). In this stage, individuals either lack awareness of their own ethnic identity or may hold negative views about it. In the second stage, *ethnic identity search*, individuals start to consider what it means to be a member of an ethnic group. This stage could be triggered by a major life event, such as moving to a new culture with a different ethnic make-up, or racial discrimination in the case of minority individuals. The final stage of the model is *achieved ethnic identity*. At this point, individuals have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a member of their ethnic group, they have resolved internal issues, and they have internalized their identity (Manguvo, 2013).

D.R. Atkinson, G. Morten, and Derald Sue proposed another model specific to ethnic minority groups in the United States: the Minority Identity Development Model (Manguvo, 2013). The model is comprised of five stages: conformity, dissonance, resistance, immersion, and integrative awareness. At the *conformity* stage, individuals hold self-depreciating attitudes. *Dissonance* involves a conflict between self-depreciating and self-appreciating attitudes. In the *resistance and immersion* phases, the individual rejects dominant cultural values and begins to embrace minority-held views. Here people will begin to seek the end of minority group oppression. Introspection happens when the person begins to experience discomfort and dissatisfaction with attitudes and resistance efforts from the immersion group. Finally *integrative awareness* is characterized by an inner sense of security and appreciation of one's culture and ethnic identity. In this final stage, individuals also appreciate aspects of mainstream culture while aspiring to eradicate oppression (Manguvo, 2013).

While race and ethnicity are two separate constructs, they are intricately linked and interdependent (Manguvo, 2013). One commonly referred to model of black racial identity development

is Cross's Model of Psychological Nigrescence. In this four-phase model, individuals begin at the *pre-encounter* stage where they have internalized the values of the dominant culture and therefore have a self and group depreciating attitude. In this stage people may distance themselves from members of their own racial group. The *encounter* phase usually happens as a result of an event that forces the individual to recognize the impact of racism in her own life. The third stage, *immersion*, involves racial group pride where individuals may surround themselves with "visible symbols of Blackness" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 30). Here people tend to venerate black people and disparage white people. During the final stage of internalization-*commitment*, individuals convert their black pride into a "general sense of commitment to the concern of Blacks" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 32).

African Student Identity Development

Generally people from African countries do not think of or refer to themselves as Africans but rather as members of a certain ethnicity, religion, class, nationality, etc. (Manguvo, 2013). The African identity is imposed on people once they leave the continent and enter the West because "Africa is often viewed as one huge 'obscure' place whose inhabitants are simply Africans" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 34). With this African identity, ethnic, linguistic, and even national differences are glossed over or lost (Arthur, 2001). Based on negative perceptions and stereotypes about Africa, the continental identity can bring with it a "badge of inferiority which instills a sense of self-depreciation as some individuals begin to see themselves through the popular eyes of the majority" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 34). However, the African identity can also bring students together through shared experiences and understandings related to this external identifier, as well as through certain cultural experiences that "transcend ethnic and national identities" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 34).

W.E.B. Du Bois articulated a concept called double consciousness which he expressed in reference to African American intellectuals (Manguvo, 2013). According to Nesbitt, this concept is just as applicable to African students in the United States. In terms of African students, the double

consciousness comes about in response to contradictions between a person's isolation from Africa and the need to affirm their African-ness (Manguvo, 2013). Du Bois notes that individuals can resolve this identity crisis in one of three ways. They can become a *compradador intelligentsia* and judge Africa for corruption, tribalism, ineptitude, etc., a *postcolonial critic* who characterizes them self as an expert interpreter of Africa to the West, or a *progressive exile* who strives for a "dignified Pan-African identity by promoting African knowledge" (Manguvo, 2013, p. 35).

This brings up the idea of Pan-African identity. Pan-Africanism was originally a movement of political activism striving for equal rights, self-governance, and unity for people of African descent. It has morphed, over the years, into a cultural and social philosophy (Manguvo, 2013). According to Vasquez, Africans often develop a Pan-African identity when they leave their home countries and travel to the West. This happens in response to collectively dealing with issues of race in a different context where Blackness is systemically condemned. Pan-African identity is associated with feelings of self-worth among Africans in the US (Arthur, 2001).

When thinking about the Pan-African identity, it is important to consider the context of race in most African countries verses race in America. Most African students who study in the US were raised in racially homogenous communities (Manguvo, 2013). Therefore many African students do not understand the racial dynamics in the US upon first entering the country, and many do not even think of themselves as black or brown. The situation is further complicated because African students must navigate being black while not being African American. According to John Arthur (2001), "despite efforts to distance themselves [from racial struggles], African student's construction of racial identity is inextricably interwoven with that of African Americans" (p. 36).

Effects of Ethnic & Racial Identity on Adjustment

Considerable research has also been done on racial or ethnic minority student integration into campus life. First, it is helpful to define the term alienation. Vincent Tinto (1982), an important name in

the field of student attrition at universities, describes alienation as "the outcome of one's holding values highly divergent from those of the social collectivity, and...insufficient personal interaction with members of the collectivity" (p. 689). In Chalsa Loo and Garry Rolison's (1986) research about alienation of ethnic minority students, they found that sociocultural alienation of minority students in predominantly white universities is more common than among white students. This alienation tends to take the form of either ethnic isolation or feelings of cultural domination. Even though many minority students feel alienated from the larger campus community, they can still feel integrated into their own ethnic subgroup (or cultural community) (Loo et al, 1986). Loo and Rolison (1986) also found that, in regards to "ethnic clustering," minority students and white students tended to interpret this phenomenon completely differently. White students called this clustering 'racial segregation' while minority students valued it as "cultural support within a larger unsupportive system" (p. 72).

A common thread in research about student integration and segregation is what Rose-Redwood (2013) refers to as an "institutionalist perspective." From this viewpoint, "the dominant culture of the educational institution is taken as the standard against which to measure the social life of international students on college and university campuses" (Rose-Redwood, 2013, p. 414). Rose-Redwood (2013) challenges the dominant assertions in the field by giving merit to an international student's social capital in and of itself. Rose-Redwood (2013) stresses that an international student's social experiences "are not reducible to the level of adjustment to the dominant institutional culture alone, but also include the social resources and opportunities provided by the international social networks that may offer support both during and after a student's university experience" (p. 414)

After a thorough review of the existing literature, I have realized that the prevailing research generally misses the international and specifically African student perception of their personal participation in cultural communities. The studies dissect what cultural groups are, why they potentially form, their benefits and pitfalls, and the role integration with the host culture plays on international

student experience, but they do not look at the actual experience of involvement in a cultural community. Are students able to balance social networks from home and host cultures? What about friendships with other internationals? How do African students view their participation in cultural communities? I am interested in a more comprehensive examination of how involvement in cultural communities shapes the African student experience, and no research that I have found focuses on this perspective.

Furthermore, in all of the research relating to cultural communities, there is no distinction made between cultural communities made up of one nationality verses cultural communities comprised of students from a region or several regions. In cultural communities such as African student associations, which are common on U.S. university campuses, there is plenty of room for cross cultural interaction because the students that make these groups up are so diverse from one another. This is different from, for example, a Chinese student group made up of one nationality and maybe only a few different ethnicities. The benefits and potential pitfalls of an African student association may be completely different from a more homogenous cultural community, so more research is needed on specific types of informal cultural communities to draw further conclusions and dissect blanket statements such as "being too extensively integrated into a cultural community could negatively affect the self-esteem of international students."

Research Methodology

Methodology

To carry out this research, I used a phenomenological approach that looked at the lived experiences of a small number of people. Phenomenology is based in philosophy, sociology, and psychology. It was an appropriate choice for my study because I was not interested in answering specific questions or testing a hypothesis, but rather in understanding the essence of African student experiences around the phenomenon of cultural communities.

As I have spent the last ten months working in Yale University's Office of International Students and Scholars, my research concentrated on undergraduate African students at Yale College. I wanted to focus on undergraduate students because they tend to be closer in age to each other than graduate or professional students, and most of them have come to Yale College within a few months to two years of high school graduation. Therefore, this university experience is many international students' first time away from home, first time living on their own, and first time living outside of their native country. In finding my research participants, I looked for willing undergraduate African students who were involved in at least one form of informal cultural community.

Data Collection

I employed a hybrid qualitative approach that encompassed a couple different data collection methods. Eleven semi-structured, in-depth interviews with undergraduate African students were my primary source of data for analysis, but I also conducted two focus groups, one prior to and one post interviews.

I chose my focus group and interview subjects through multiple pathways. First, with the assistance of the OISS director, I sent an email to about ten undergraduate African students who were well-connected in the African community at Yale. The email introduced my topic and asked for volunteers for both the focus groups and interviews. From there, I used a snowball approach, meaning I relied on the African students who I originally emailed and a few African students I knew through OISS to spread the word to their peers. The Yale African Students Association (YASA), which the majority of undergraduate African students at Yale are a part of, also posted information about my research and asked for volunteers in their newsletter and on their bulletin board.

The first step in my data collection process was conducting a focus group with three undergraduate students from different countries in Africa. This group served to provide some context for my interviews by testing the waters as to what sorts of social structures existed among

undergraduate African students. It allowed me to validate the lay of the land, get a better understanding of the broader context of Yale College (as opposed to Yale University, which includes all students and scholars), and better understand both the formal and informal roles of YASA in the African community. This initial focus group also helped to inform my interview questions. By gathering outside perspectives before my phenomenological interviews, I was able to get a better sense of how to shape my interview questions in a less biased way. I also gained insight into topical areas to explore during my interviews that I otherwise would have been oblivious to.

The meat of my research came from eleven phenomenological interviews with African undergraduate students at Yale College. The interviewees represented the following eight countries: Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Rwanda, South Sudan, Swaziland, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe, and ranged from 18 to 24 years old. The purpose of the interviews was explained in detail to students, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The interviews took place at various locations on campus, depending on the respondents' preferences. The interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to one hour. They were all recorded and transcribed. In line with the phenomenological approach, these were in-depth interviews with the goal of following each interviewee's train of thought. In order to maintain some consistency with this flexible style of interview, I approached each interview in the same way, with a list of nine open-ended questions to use as guidelines, which were informed by my own observation, my literature review, and my focus group *(see Appendix B for interview questions).* Most of the interviews were ordered differently because answers to many of my questions ended up coming about naturally in the midst of the students' own reflections.

I conducted my second focus group after all of my interviews were complete. This focus group had six participants, and served as a platform to test some of my original findings and key themes I hoped to further dissect. It was also a small measure to reduce my bias in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

In analyzing my data, again, I took a phenomenological approach. I transcribed and coded my interviews, looking for recurring themes, meanings, and general descriptions of the students' experiences with cultural communities. My end goal was to write a description of the essence of my interviewees' experiences in the data presentation and analysis section.

Phenomenology is the study of experience, and is meant to be more descriptive than prescriptive. Based on the objectives of phenomenology, I did not intend to present recommendations for policy changes in my conclusions unless these recommendations came from interviewees as related to their personal experiences. Rather, my conclusions are based around drawing awareness to various aspects of the African student experience at Yale as it relates to cultural communities. Whereas the presentation and analysis of data section largely answers my research question, the conclusions are important take-aways for outsiders (non-African students) based on these responses. I drew conclusions by finding recurring themes from my coding that have important implications for international educators. In order to limit my personal bias, I presented these themes to my second focus group to ensure their validity. I intend for my findings and conclusions to be primarily used for awareness-raising, mind-opening, and empathy-building among international educators and higher education administrators.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Background Information

I interviewed 11 Yale undergraduate students from continental Africa; four women and seven men. They represented the following countries: Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Rwanda, South Sudan, Swaziland, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe. The students ranged in age from 18 to 24 and from first year to fifth year senior. Of the eleven interviewees, six had lived abroad before—one for two years of high school in India, four to attend the same Pan-African high school in South Africa, and one in multiple countries including the UK and Hong Kong as a result of her parents' jobs. The semi-structured, phenomenological

interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each. In order to analyze and draw meaning from the interviews, I coded them, and will present the data as a series of recurring themes I gleaned from the 11 interviews.

Reasons for Studying in US

Most of the interviewees had similar reasons for choosing to study in the United States at Yale University. Several students were not happy with the options for higher education in their own countries, and were looking to go abroad for college. Almost all of the students interviewed liked the freedom that liberal arts education provides. They were looking for opportunities to explore different subjects and study multiple, seemingly unrelated disciplines. Therefore they were drawn to U.S. universities. Many European school systems, and due to colonialism, many school systems in African countries, tend to funnel students down a career trajectory based on grades early on or choices the students made when they were young. They do not always allow for much flexibility to explore or change paths. Yale is a world-class university, and many students were also interested in it for the merits of the education they would receive.

Only one student mentioned learning about a new culture and cultural exchange as a reason for studying abroad in college. Most of the students interviewed said cross-cultural exchange was not among their reasons for choosing to study in the US or at Yale.

Adjustment Issues

Several students remembered feeling socially awkward during their first year at Yale. Although these students considered themselves social beings, and had never struggled interacting with others before, they found themselves confused about social cues and overwhelmed by encountering many different value systems. One student said encountering all of these differences led to her "very much retreating away from them because I just didn't know how to navigate it."

A significant number of interviewees also talked about coming from somewhat homogenous backgrounds in terms of religion, race, and values, and therefore having to adjust to a new type of diversity that America embodies. One student said that after coming from six years in an all-boy's Catholic school where most people had similar values, he struggled because in addition to studying in a co-ed environment for the first time in years, he felt that in the US, "Religion is all over the place. There are just so many opinions flying around."

Identity issues were the largest cause of adjustment struggles among the interviewees. Each student interviewed was forced to navigate their internal understanding of them self and somehow find balance between the way they have always been understood at home to the new ways they are being understood in a different cultural context based on external identifiers. This transition from one culture to another brought about an examination of personal identities among many students. Several male students both in the interviews and the focus groups mentioned having to re-examine their understanding of gender differences and learn to interact more closely with females. One student was able to admit to and explore her bisexual identity in the US where people tend to be more open about gender and sexuality.

Identity

But besides these internal shifts, all of the interviewees talked about having to cope with the external identities that were automatically attached to them upon arrival in the US. One student talked about coming to Yale as a "shift from a very homogenous [situation] in terms of skin color and race to a situation where I'm part of very many minorities at the same time." Another student said, "I thought people would focus more on what they found similar rather than different." Yet another student recalled that, "when I got to Yale, I remember I was literally assigned to be in three groups without giving any consensus: Yale African Student Association (YASA), Muslim Student Association (MSA), and Arab Student Association (ASA)."

Many of the students found that identities play a different role in the US than they do elsewhere. All of the interviewees recognized that in the US, people attach a lot of meaning to external identifiers such as race and nationality, and therefore draw conclusions based on these identifiers. One student observed that, "In the US, you really need to understand your labels. That's something I never had to deal with back home." Different identities are considered significant here. For instance, most of the students came from racially homogenous countries, and were therefore surprised to experience the enormous role that race plays in America. Other identities, however, are glossed over in the US. Many students identified most strongly with their tribal or ethnic identity, yet outside of their home countries, these identities lose some of their context and therefore get overlooked. One student noted that, "In Zimbabwe, my identities were a whole lot more complicated. I think coming to the US, divisions among Zimbabweans just disappear."

Among the most significant identities discussed in terms of the American experience at Yale were economic background, race, international student, and African student. All of these identities are interconnected. Economic background became an important distinguishing factor for many of the students I interviewed because Yale is an extremely privileged place, and many of the interviewees came from low income to modest economic backgrounds. This means that money is constantly a factor in their decision-making at Yale, and this can seep into relationships and social hierarchies on campus. As I will mention later, it also plays a role in the international community.

Racial Identity

Race is a hugely significant identity that all of the interviewees talked about. In the US, systemic racism undeniably exists, and therefore race plays a critical and negative role in the way that people understand and relate to each other. However, race is not viewed the same way everywhere. It can be a challenging identity to come to terms with for students of color who did not grow up in the US.

According to one student, "We're black on the outside but African on the inside, but we're existing here in the banner of the African American category or the black category."

Many interviewees expressed similar sentiments, especially during a time like this past fall 2015 when Yale's campus was fraught with racial tension. Several students struggled to understand their role in the events as non-American students of color. But like one interviewee said, no matter how he views his own race or the implications for race back home, "Being at Yale requires me to be a black male."

Yale's 2015 racially charged student protests and widespread conversations about race happened at a time when student protests were breaking out at universities across the country in response to various forms of discrimination, lack of institutional support and representation, and in the post Mike Brown era (Mike Brown was an unarmed black man who was killed by a white police officer; the first in a series of widely publicized police killings of unarmed black civilians) where nationwide racism has become a more visible issue both domestically and internationally. These events pushed many international students of color to understand their race in a different way, especially for the younger students who had not been around long enough to fully grip the role that race plays in American society. One student noted, "I really struggled as a freshman to make sense alongside everything else that was happening on campus." Another student recalled how she felt after the killing of Mike Brown: "As someone from South Sudan, black was always an insult, and so I didn't identify with being black. One thing I learned from this country is no one will look at me and say I'm African. They'll look at me and say I'm black. And it hit me, whether I like it or not, that is applicable to me."

African Identity

The label of African student at Yale is another complex identity. Every student I interviewed agreed that they did not think of themselves as African back home. Six of the eleven students were abroad for at least one year of high school—four students attended the same Pan-African school in South Africa, one student studied on a unique two-year intercultural program in India, and another had

been living abroad for several years in various locations and attended high school in the UK— and each

of those students began to think of themselves as African while abroad. As for the other students who

had not lived abroad, most of them started to feel African in some way or other within the first few days

or weeks of being at Yale. In keeping with this finding, one student explained,

> To be African is really constructed once you leave. I think if you go back
> in history and you look at Pan-African leaders, they all lived abroad. And
> the reason for that is once you live abroad, the complexity and context
> in which you identify nationally kind of gets stripped away because
> people don't think of Africa in its 54 parts, they think of it as a whole
> mass—that's the disadvantage of the land mass. And it becomes
> constructed around this existence of the land mass that is connected
> but different but similar. I think the African identity's useful, and I think
> it's valuable, but I think it's a very controversial question for a lot of our
> African students

Whether or not African students choose to embrace an African identity, it is one they must

address because, as one student notes, "Africa as a continent is homogenized by a lot of Americans." It

is a complicated identity, and many students expressed mixed feelings towards it because in many ways

it is uniting when used internally by its members, but it can be extremely discriminatory when imposed

from the outside population. In line with the views of several of her fellow interviewees, one student

revealed, "I can't just be African. I must make it clear that I am Zimbabwean, and so that experiences of

someone from Ghana and Nigeria cannot be compared to my experience as a Zimbabwean African."

Another student said, "It's easier when talking to outsiders to say we're African. It's weird because I

have a problem when someone is like, 'oh I went to Africa,' and I'm like, 'mm mm [no]'. I have a problem

with that, but I don't have a problem defining myself as African." Again, she felt that African was an

appropriate label to be used internally by Africans, but not as a homogenizer imposed by non-Africans.

Someone else said he felt that the African identity made him feel part of a community, but "you sort of

start noticing how being labeled just by a few superficial features such as skin color, place of birth, how

they sort of remove you from your individuality. The moment you start grouping with African, there are

certain assumptions that people hold because of that, and they will expect you to act like that." Several

other students I interviewed had similar internal struggles with the African identity.

Additionally, what does African even mean? It does not necessarily mean the same thing to

everyone. For instance, "African" for many invokes images of Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the two North

African interviewees from Tunisia and Morocco did not really consider themselves "Africans" until they

attended their Pan-African high school in South Africa, but once there, they really embraced this

identity. They both mentioned that they thought their high school played a large role in this because the

majority of their North African peers at Yale do not consider themselves "African," per se, even after

leaving the continent.

International Identity

While most interviewed students identified in some way or other with the African label, many

interviewees did not identify as strongly or at all with being part of the international student community

at Yale. During my first focus group, we talked about the terms "foreign" vs. "international." To the

students at the focus group and many of my interviewees, 'international' elicits the idea of white,

Western, often financially well-off students, whereas foreign is a term that they felt encompassed their

own non-western identities better. During an interview, one student responded to this by saying, "the

interesting dynamic between foreign and international, what you're seeing is people who can physically

identify as different. So African students probably least identify as international, and more as African

and foreign than international. Because the problem with international as a term is it culls up images of

white foreigners for a lot of people. Immigrant is what culls up colored versions of that story." Another

student said, "I'm international by definition, not by affiliation." While most of the interviewees said

they considered themselves international students and had friends from the international student

community, several of them said they did not identify with the International Student Organization (ISO)

on campus. They felt that lower average socioeconomic status and the 'othering' of African students

played the largest role in this. ISO tends to homogenize the experience of international students, but many African students deal with issues beyond the scope of the average international student that are more related to the fact that they come from Africa rather than the fact that they are international.

Cultural Groups

Almost all of the students I interviewed were involved in some form of extracurricular activity including dance and singing groups, religious communities, major-related clubs, the Black Man's Union, and mentorship roles. Most of the interviewees also had friends that they met through a range of networks from their residential colleges and the International Student Orientation—a week long orientation that most international students attend prior to freshmen orientation—to their activities and through mutual friends. Interestingly, many of the interviewees noted that many of their close friends outside of their own cultural groups were minority students, students of color, and other international students.

However, by and large cultural communities made up the largest portion of the interviewees' social circles. These cultural communities include small, informal communities made up of students of the same nationality, specifically students from Zimbabwe and Kenya as each of those countries have relatively larger student populations (six to fifteen students) than many other African countries with only one to three students, larger formal organizations like the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and the Arab Students Association (ASA), and the Yale African Students Association (YASA). Every student that I interviewed or talked to as a part of a focus group was affiliated with YASA. As discussed in the introduction, YASA is both a formal and informal cultural community with a huge presence in the undergraduate African student population at Yale. The formal YASA meets Wednesday nights and holds official events, and the informal YASA is a larger, more fluid community that interacts and hangs out constantly. The most important cultural community for all students I interviewed was either YASA or, for a few Zimbabweans and a Kenyan, a more specific community based on nationality. However, these

groups are informally housed within the informal YASA community, so when I talk about YASA below, I

am talking about both YASA and the smaller, more culturally specific groups that it encompasses.

Factors that Unite African Students at Yale

Because YASA plays such a vital role for the students I interviewed and is the primary cultural

community for many African students at Yale, it is important to recognize and understand the factors

that unite African students. One reason many students from continental Africa do not think of

themselves as Africans while back home is because there is much less reason to draw connections

across a continent of cultures when there are plenty of people all around from the student's exact tribe,

ethnicity, nationality, etc. However, as soon as these students enter a new cultural context, there is

more reason to search for parallels in experience. This is when certain similarities, both internal and

external, become apparent between African students. While problematic when the African identity is

used from the outside to oversimplify, commonalities between African students and their experiences at

Yale emerged as a major theme from my interviews. In fact, every student I interviewed shared several

unifying factors between African students.

Certain unifying factors came from cultural experiences and values back home. There are similar

systems of governance in many African countries that are relatable to fellow Africans. Therefore when

something big in terms of politics happens back home, other African students can often understand and

discuss the implications. A few students noted that parents act similarly in African homes. They tend to

have similar expectations and parenting styles as compared to Western parents. Several students also

talked about coming from a shared context that involves similar humor, similar reiterations of stories,

following the same social cues, and enjoying similar things.

Still other unifying factors came from lived experiences once in the US. African students are

coming to Yale from thousands of miles away and dealing with similar adjustment issues. Every

interviewee mentioned that African students at Yale deal with a lot of negative pre-conceptions and

ignorance from Americans as well as the burden of educating peers and even Yale faculty and administration at times. One student said, "It can be hard to cope with the ways some Americans treat Africans. When you talk to an African, you feel that both of you are different." Another student said, "[We have a] shared identity, shared feeling of being sort of outsiders to the US. We are all part of a minority group, and we are a minority within a minority so I think that shared identity has certainly helped us comfort each other." Many students expressed this ability for African students to understand the daily struggles of fellow Africans and the tendency to form a solidarity against ignorance relating to place of origin or race.

The many similarities in background and Yale experience tend to lead to another similarity; a lot of African students at Yale are headed down similar paths. Several interviewees mentioned that a lot of African students plan to have careers that will move the continent forward or benefit their home countries. One student noted that, "We have really similar goals. We may have differe2nt paths, but to some degree, I feel like our end goals in life tend to be the same because of how we were raised, the background that we have."

Purpose of Cultural Communities

In exploring why YASA and other cultural communities come to be, I found two very broad explanations that encompass most of the smaller reasons. The first is because they assist with the difficult cultural adjustment process by acting as a bridge between home and university. When students arrive at Yale, they are often looking for familiarity and comfort to give them the confidence to further integrate into campus life. One girl noted that, "When you go to a new place, there's a sense to want to find your own." Many students described YASA and their smaller cultural communities within YASA as the first places they felt comfortable at Yale. During awkward and painful adjustment experiences early on, several students called YASA their first home. One student said that when she was having trouble making friends and navigating cultural differences, "That's where YASA came in. That's where I retreated

back into." Another student said that YASA "made freshman year worth going through." Most interviewees had similar experiences with YASA early on.

YASA and cultural communities in general continue to provide a home-base for students—a place where they are understood, that they enjoy being, and that they know they can turn to for support in difficult times. One student described YASA in the following terms:

> It's more of my oasis, basically a place where I feel the most unregulated. Where whichever side of me I would like to embody, I have no hesitation to because of whatever cultural factors that I need to be aware of. So a place where I can be completely comfortable around other people, and that's what YASA is. It's like my home at Yale.

This explanation embodies the spirit of most of my interviewees in regards to the role YASA plays in their lives. YASA and other cultural communities are support networks. Many students noted being able to be themselves and feel understood in YASA. Along these lines, one interviewee said, "in that space, I don't need to explain, I just need to be." Another student said, "I don't really have to adhere to any protocol or some way of talking or behaving with people. I feel like I can just be myself when I'm with those people." Yale is a pressure-cooker environment, and all students need a place where they can be totally free from judgment and explanation. One girl said that YASA is a place

> you can turn to sometimes and you can just be yourself. Be yourself emotionally and just acknowledge the fact that you are not OK which sometimes you're not. But you can also be who you are at home. I don't have to explain myself. I can drop the accent.

YASA and other cultural communities provide support to students especially in the most difficult times. According to one student, "I think when you're feeling down, the best people to help you are those that know you and can identify with your culture. Because some things really Americans cannot understand or people from other backgrounds cannot understand."

A person's culture will always be a key part of their make-up, thus there are some voids that only someone from a similar cultural background can fill. It seems without some sort of cultural

grounding in a community or at least with a few people, there will always be a longing for one's native culture. By acting as this bridge between home and host culture, YASA and other cultural communities provide students with confidence and validation in their culture and identity. As one student noted, "you can drop those masks and just be yourself." Similarly, another said, "I feel like I can just be myself when I'm with those people." A few students mentioned enjoying similar types of food and eating together. Several students talked about getting to discuss common interests, politics, and popular culture that were not as relatable outside of their community. But it is not always about the content of a discussion as much as the style of interaction. Four students mentioned "dropping the accent" when they are in YASA. They explained that consciously and/or subconsciously, a lot of African students tend to speak more freely, loudly, and with less of an American accent when they are around African peers, often throwing in words from other languages. This ability to replicate one's home culture in another country helps students to maintain aspects of their cultural identity.

By allowing students to maintain some of their cultural identity in the midst of adjusting to a new context, cultural communities give students the confidence and grounding to branch out beyond their cultural group. One student talked about the pain of branching out beyond one's cultural community. He said when you hit that pain, "you go back to your support structures within the community and you get refueled and you go back out there charging, then you get shot down even more, then you come back and refuel with your people. Damn, hey, we've been through a lot." Another student remembered feeling lost her freshman year and unable to connect with Americans. She said that by sophomore year she was able to branch out from YASA with her restored confidence and support with the attitude of "let's do this Yale thing again." Depending on individual personalities and experiences, people may want to spend more or less of their time at this comfortable home base.

The second umbrella reason that cultural communities come to be is that in dealing with similar issues of discrimination and ignorance, African students at Yale need to feel solidarity with their own in

order to let out frustration, comfort each other, and strategize on how to move forward as a community. Two years ago when the Ebola crisis happened, many African students recalled dealing with nasty comments and outright discrimination on campus. About the crisis, one student said, "That externality forced us to come in. We needed that space where we could just rant." This past fall when certain events led to widespread racial tension on campus, one student said, "It was such a relief knowing that I have other Africans that felt the pain I was feeling." Besides major campus, national, and international events, discrimination and 'othering' occurs regularly in the lives of the African students I spoke to. They all recalled several instances of outright ignorance related to stereotypes about the homogenization of Africa, both inside and outside the classroom. In response to the ignorance, one student said, "I think that that's a dynamic people don't think about is how does the way you present things actually force African students back into their cultural communities." Another student reflected,

> I think the negative things people go through play a part in bringing them together. A big portion of what we as the African community go through is having to educate other people regularly. Having to open peoples' eyes to the realization that we are not an 'other,' we are just people. We just happen to come from a different place, not a worse place, just a different place. And a place that is very complex in nature and that is evolving at its own pace and that is beautiful in its own way and ugly in its own way, just like the US.

Many students reflected on what their Yale experiences would have been like without YASA. Students said things like, "I would have felt like a lone wolf at times," "Part of me thinks I would be miserable," "It would've been significantly harder for me to just be a Yale student," and "I think my experience would've been significantly worse." No student thought their Yale experience would have been better or even the same without their cultural community. A couple of students even thought YASA was a major reason they stayed at Yale. One first year student said he would have taken at least a semester off had it not been for YASA. Another person said that without YASA,

there almost wouldn't have been a Yale experience. I was very depressed and very overwhelmed. And if I felt as though I did not have a support system that included people I felt a sense of familiarity with, I probably wouldn't have come back. Because what overwhelmed me was just how foreign everything seemed, and how very much I just did not fit into all of it.

YASA gave people the tools to carry on in their Yale experiences in a healthy and supported way.

Potential Negative Aspects of Cultural Communities

In the interviews, we also talked about potential negative aspects of cultural communities. All but one of the interviewees acknowledged the potential for negative consequences of cultural communities, and a few possible negatives came out. First, spending a lot of time in a cultural community could prevent people from branching out and meeting other types of people on Yale's diverse campus. Many students shared the sentiment that they 'did not come all the way to Yale to hang out with only Africans.' While none of the students I interviewed hung out exclusively with Africans, several noted that there is a tendency for some within YASA to spend all or most of their free time with the African community. One person said, "There's a slight isolationist inclination of these self-selecting cultural communities, simply because I understand it is the path of least resistance in one's social life...I could see how these communities can also be slightly self-limiting." Several interviewees shared this sentiment. Another student said, "I feel like we've become very much stuck within ourselves." While most of the interviewees felt that it would be beneficial to expand social circles beyond cultural community, many thought that YASA had become so comfortable that some members do not venture out.

Second, a few people said that YASA can perpetuate certain conservative values that result in the judgment of others. According to several interviewees, when it comes to sexuality, many people in YASA can be closed-minded. A woman who came out as bisexual during her time at Yale described the internal battle between relying on YASA for cultural support, but also not always feeling comfortable in

YASA based on negatives views of anything other than heterosexuality. Another woman said, "When I'm around people I have similar cultural backgrounds to and when it's just us, people feel free to express their dissatisfaction with how other people identify or express themselves, or with women being able to do the things they can here in the US. I really don't appreciate that." Once students start to explore their own individual identities and viewpoints in a different cultural context, they sometimes find that their views are no longer shared by the people in their cultural communities.

Third, a couple of people worried about the extent of the ranting that can take place in YASA. As mentioned earlier, YASA is often a place where people digest various forms of discrimination and acts of ignorance and let out frustrations based on these events. One woman admitted that her "fear is when that negativity stays. When the ranting just stays there and you don't want to engage with the outside. And that's what I'm tending to see a lot. And that bothers me because I think it's important to engage with the outside too." Another woman recalled spending six months entirely with Africans during the time of the Ebola crisis. She was so exhausted by the hate and discrimination that the crisis encouraged that she decided to completely shut out her non-African social ties. While all of the interviewees agreed that cultural communities are a necessity, they also generally thought that these communities could prevent participation in the broader Yale community, integration that would be beneficial to students.

External Pushback Against Cultural Communities

Another subject that came up was external pushback about participation in cultural communities. While five interviewees said that they had definitely experienced pushback, several interviewees said they had not experienced any pushback from the outside Yale community about their participation in YASA. However, one woman hypothesized that, "I think you probably find that the more involved a person is in the African community, perhaps the less aware they are of the pushback, or the less willing they are to hear the pushback." People have often made comments to this woman such as, "don't you think it's a little weird that you all hang out together all the time" or "you're with your

Africans again." She said to me, "well yeah, do you want me to say you're hanging out with your white friends again? No, that would be a weird statement for me to make." Another woman described her experiences in the dining hall sitting with other Africans. She noted that Africans are loud by nature, and they tend to draw a lot of attention from others. "You can see people staring or giving very disapproving looks." However, she says, "You'll find on campus, for example, people are used to the football team making a lot of noise in the dining halls because they are young, white, attractive, American men. People are not used to a bunch of brown skinned students that don't even have American accents making a lot of noise in a public space."

Cross-Cultural Exchange

When the topic of cross-cultural exchange came up at various points during the interviews, all of the interviewees agreed that they valued intercultural interaction and exchange. Many stated that this form of exchange is a way to combat ignorance. One student said, "I think it's crucial. It's what keeps your mind open." Another said, "I feel like there's so much beauty in cultural exchange." And yet another said, "It's very very important. I'm one person who believes that people from everywhere just need to come together especially when we're given an opportunity to all be in the same place on a campus like this." In talking about the Ebola crisis, one student described it as "this failure to desegregate, this sort of general 'othering.' The biggest problems seem to stem from not understanding. That, for me, is where the greatest capacity for things to go wrong is—when people just stick to their groups, which I do agree is a natural thing to do."

Most interviewees thought it could be possible to have a balance between cultural community and cross cultural exchange, but there were two distinct ideas about how this might happen. Several students thought that the desire to integrate with others outside of a cultural community has to come from within. Based on my interviews, focus groups, and informal conversations with various international students, at this point on Yale's campus, the culture at the university is not conducive to

most students wanting to or feeling comfortable enough to integrate with the broader student body due to the recurrence of ignorance and discrimination. One interviewee said that balance cannot happen "Unless you eliminate ignorance or make the students in cultural communities feel like there are active steps being taken to eliminate ignorance. Because I think what you find at Yale is that freshman often start out very open, and as time goes on they are tracked further and further into the community and become less willing because they get a greater sense that other people are not willing to let go of their ignorance and so why should they be willing to interact with that ignorance?" Similarly, another student said, "It goes beyond institutional policy and into the culture of the people that comprise the institution."

Others thought that the university has to introduce structures that promote cross cultural exchange. Many students felt that while Yale has a lot of policies in place that attempt to encourage this type of exchange such as the residential colleges and the cultural centers on campus, there is not enough follow through. Most students agreed that the residential colleges were a nice idea, and several met friends through the system, but several also noted the artificial nature of the residential colleges and the idea that the residential college system seems to work better for American students from the dominant culture. A few students noted that once in the diverse residential colleges that are supposed to be idyllic microcosms of the university, there is no highlighting of the diversity, the many countries represented, or any of the differences in backgrounds. One woman agreed that the university must do more, and said, "I think it's just assumed that because there are cultural centers that people can affiliate with, that's enough. I don't think the school makes enough of an effort. For me one way this would happen is dedicating some time of the year to each individual cultural center, or bringing them together in some way. Or having the residential college deans interact with cultural centers in some way." Many students felt that there are internal and external factors that play a role in promoting more cross cultural exchange. The institution must heavily promote exchange throughout the Yale experience, not

just during admissions, and African, international, and minority individuals must feel comfortable and included in the student culture.

Discussion

Conclusions

In presenting and analyzing the data, I have come to several important conclusions. As previously discussed, cultural labels and identities can be extremely nuanced. While identifiers can have benefits such as creating a sense of community, there are dangers when cultural labels are imposed from people outside of these communities. These labels really need to be owned by people on the inside or used carefully by people on the outside to understand and anticipate broad needs of a group rather than used as a tool to homogenize and stereotype. As one fifth year woman from Zimbabwe said about identifiers,

> I think they serve a really important purpose at times. In the context of bringing people together, yes, I think identifiers are very important. I think they then become harmful when used under the wrong context. When someone says, 'you're from Africa. Do you ride an animal to school?' That's when my identifier as an African has been used in a harmful way by someone who chooses to remain ignorant.

When the continent of Africa is homogenized or treated as a backwards place to pity; when African students feel targeted by hateful language and fear of Ebola; when African students feel they are treated differently or especially worse by fellow students, faculty, and administration based on their place of origin—that is when Africans lose their ownership over one of their identifiers, and the label in turn becomes harmful.

My findings also have important implications for how international educators and the university community at large view and understand cultural communities. It is important to recognize that there are both push and pull factors that lead to the creation of cultural communities. The pull factors are

internal and include a sense of familiarity, common ground, maintaining cultural identity and ties to home, support in the adjustment process, bridging the gap between new and comfortable, and general enjoyment. The push factors are those external dynamics that drive students together by necessity rather than by choice. They involve dealing with similar types of ignorance from the outside Yale community based on pre-conceived notions about peoples' various identities and a general refusal of the dominant culture to meet people in cultural communities halfway for meaningful interactions. This, of course, is not true of all individuals by any means, but it is true on a systemic level on Yale's campus. Cultural groups serve important roles on university campuses, but we as international educators and university administrators should strive to eliminate the push factors so that peoples' social affiliations are purely by choice and not force.

Based on my observations, experiences, and conversations with different types of people, I know that many people from the outside population view cultural communities as pure segregation, the antithesis to cross cultural interaction. However, cultural communities can actually play an essential role in healthy campus dynamics and global engagement at Yale University. For many students, cultural communities provide the foundation that allows them to feel safe and find their footing so that they are ready to engage beyond their comfort zones and make social ties in the broader community. They offer confidence and support to their members, two keys which allow students to persist in broadening their social circles beyond cultural community. As mentioned earlier, one student talked about having initial difficulties integrating with the broader community but then making strong connections during her second year after she gained support and a social safety net through YASA. Another interviewee said that without YASA, he "might have struggled more with actually integrating." These communities also provide the home base people need after discouraging integration efforts, the haven that gives many people strength to persist in their integration efforts. As one student noted earlier, when you get shot down socially, you come back and "refuel with your people", then "you go back out charging."

Cultural communities play a crucial role as support networks. Although unintentional, institutions do not always provide comprehensive and effective support services for minority students as evidenced by the widespread student protests at universities across the country during 2015 and 2016. Yale University is perceived no differently by its students. During my ten months at the university, I have sat in on numerous international student meetings and panels, witnessed several minority student protests, and read countless articles written by students about the gaps in institutional support. In the case of African students at Yale, most of my interviewees believed Yale did not do enough to support them. YASA helps fill in the gaps where institutional support services fail. YASA is a primary reason that one of my interviewees did not take a semester off and that another decided to persist through to graduation. This added informal support helps to retain a lot of students and therefore make cross-cultural exchange even an option.

Finally, cultural communities allow students to retain some of their cultural identity while trying to navigate a new culture. At such a vulnerable and impressionable age, it could be easy for undergraduate students to lose themselves and important aspects of their heritage if they did not have the community behind them. Part of what makes diversity so great is that it provides an opportunity for cross cultural exchange, but that opportunity disappears if everyone immediately assimilates to the dominant culture. What is cultural exchange if everyone has completely adopted the same culture?

Cultural communities can also become a means to avoid interacting with others outside of the group. This is a phenomenon that many outsiders comment on as a negative aspect of cultural communities. However, based on my interviews, I would argue that this isolation is in major part a symptom of a larger problem rooted in ignorance and ethnocentrism by the dominant culture in the US. When people decide to use their cultural community as a means to avoid meaningful interaction with the outside world, they are often doing so as a defense mechanism or as a result of exhaustion from constantly dealing with ignorance. For instance, several interviewees alluded to an instance that

happened during the talent show a few years ago at the international student orientation. Every year at

this talent show, students give various performances, and according to the students I interviewed, the

African students always perform an act together that is generally one of the most popular at the show.

During this talent show, several African students did an act together as usual, but this year they received

some very hurtful and discriminatory comments from fellow students related to stereotypes about

Africa and Africans. According to several interviewees, after this painful experience, a lot of the YASA

members who were involved in this formative incident have not attempted much interaction with

others outside of YASA as a result of the occurrence. Another interviewee said that she did not hang out

with anyone outside of her cultural communities for six months around the time of the Ebola crisis

because she was so exhausted by the need to educate fellow students against ignorance and

fundamental misunderstandings about geography.

In order for there to be a balance between cross cultural exchange and cultural communities,

communication between members of the dominant culture and of various cultural communities must be

a two-way street, a give and take. As my interviewees all agreed, there is a subconscious expectation

now on Yale's campus that African students and other minorities must assimilate into the dominant

culture, and then the cross cultural exchange can happen. However, as one student said, "it's no longer

cross cultural communication. It's, I'm educating you about my culture. There's no duel engagement."

Dominant culture American students must meet African students halfway in order to achieve real

intercultural exchange. According to another interviewee, this doesn't happen because, "a white

American is raised to think that there is America then there's the rest of the world. And so because of

that I think it would be natural to then expect people who come to your country to assimilate into your

culture and then you would pick and choose which aspects of their culture you want to get to know

more of." Another fourth year student said,

> Naturally how I think it happens, it's the smaller group that has to tell
> the larger group we're here. It shouldn't be that way, but I see that's

what happens a lot. So I think there are very few people who actually want to engage with African issues. We're expected to adapt to the majority, and we find ourselves doing it. Very rarely do we question whether the majority is inviting or welcoming to the minority. So naturally what happens, it's the minority that has to step into the majority's space.

Even when there seems to be a lack of cross-cultural interaction, it is time that we stop viewing cultural clustering as the primary culprit. Cultural communities provide the same sense of home, familiarity, and safety that many Americans are afforded just by being a part of the dominant culture in the US and at Yale. If we notice segregation on campuses, we should ask ourselves what is at the root of it. What support are students lacking? Is the campus culture comfortable for everyone?

About half of my interviewees had lived abroad or had lengthy international experiences before, and several of those had studied in intentionally cross-cultural environments. One student from Kenya did a two-year program in India that prioritized intercultural exchange. Similarly, one student from Swaziland attended an international high school in his own country with more than fifty nationalities represented. Four other students attended the same Pan-African high school in South Africa. All of the students involved described these educational experiences as extremely valuable and successful attempts at cross-cultural exchange. None of these students thought that cross-cultural exchange was successful to nearly the same degree at Yale. I think that is partially because cross cultural exchange is not a top priority from an institutional level. Achieving diversity is important, but once that diversity is there, not enough is done to nurture and highlight it. While most of these internationally-focused programs probably had the help of self-selecting participants who were already interested in cultural exchange, institutions undeniably play a role in highlighting diversity and promoting interaction between different groups of people. Yale has a lot of policies that attempt this sort of interaction, but they do not seem to go far enough. For instance, many students noted that the residential college model is a good

idea to foster cross-cultural interaction, but there is not enough intention behind highlighting diversity once students are actually in their residential colleges.

Recommendations

While the primary purpose of my research was to better understand the phenomenon of cultural communities and to draw awareness to the reasons behind the creation of cultural communities and the roles they play on Yale's diverse campus, my research does have some more tangible implications for policy at Yale University.

Recommendation 1: Administrators and Campus Policy Makers should work with representatives from the affected student populations to develop sustainable solutions that allow all students to feel included, respected, and important on Yale's campus

Many interviewees felt that the residential colleges were unintentionally set up to benefit dominant culture Americans more-so than students from other backgrounds. Furthermore, there are multiple cultural centers on campus, but many students feel there is not enough interaction amongst the cultural centers or between the centers and the residential colleges. One student suggested dedicating some time out of every school year to each cultural center or having residential deans interact with the cultural centers in some way throughout the year. Generally in order to solve the problem of students not feeling included or important on Yale's campus, these students' voices need to be heard by administrators. The best solutions will be those that come from the affected students themselves.

Recommendation 2: Provide consistent cultural awareness and social identity trainings for administrators who work closely with international students

Based on what I have heard from several students and even from administrators at Yale and elsewhere, I know that cultural communities still stir up negative images for many people who are not involved in them. At an administrative level, especially at international centers, the residential colleges, and offices that work closely with international students, it would be beneficial to have trainings every

few years that go into the roots of the push factors behind the creation of cultural communities. If people understood the role of their own communities in creating cultural separation, there would be more empathy, less ignorance, and more room for cultural exchange on campus.

Recommendation 3: If we notice segregation on campuses, we should ask ourselves what is at the root of it. What support are students lacking? Is the campus culture comfortable for everyone?

As students, educators, members of the dominant culture, we must all recognize our role in creating the existing campus climate. Only after acknowledging our individual and systemic roles can we seek to create a more inclusive campus environment for all students.

Implications for Future Research

There is plenty of room for further research in this area. It would be valuable to compare the nature of cultural communities amongst other groups of international students beyond the African student community. Cultural communities may play different roles with other groups of students, and the groupings may happen in different ways depending on how many students are represented from different areas. For instance, there are more Chinese students than there are total students from the continent of Africa. It is possible that one reason African students have come together at Yale is because they are less represented as a continent than other students from single countries.

It could also be constructive to look at cultural communities at multiple types of schools. I would imagine that cultural communities look a lot different at schools with larger international student populations such as New York University and Northeastern University. Cultural communities may serve a very different purpose at those types of institutions. Furthermore, by comparing African student organizations at various types of universities and understanding the formal and informal roles these organizations play, international educators might be able to gain a better sense at where institutional support structures tend to be failing.

Some schools do not have large enough international or African student populations to have various cultural groups like an African student association. By comparing the mental health of African students who participate in an African student association with students who do not have an opportunity to do so, we could learn more about the potential benefits of informal and formal cultural support networks.

Finally, in order to open minds where necessary and promote cross-cultural exchange and empathy, international educators must first understand all sectors of the student constituency. It would be worthwhile to talk to domestic students about their impressions of cultural communities, their biases, the make-up of their social circles, and the extent to which they value cross-cultural exchange.

Limitations

There are several limitations to my research. I used a hybrid research approach based off of phenomenology, but by using a hybrid approach, some of the intentionality of phenomenology and other approaches gets diluted. Furthermore, while phenomenology is, by design, small in scope, the low number of interviews gives less weight to any generalizations that come from this research. Surveying the undergraduate African student population at Yale would have helped to back up some of my findings.

Additionally, as a white American coming into a community that is not my own, there are potential detrimental power dynamics that could have come into play during my interviews and analysis. There was not enough time to return to interviewees for clarifications or further questions, or to run any of my theories or conclusions by the interviewees to ensure that I did not change the intention of their words. As an outsider, it is difficult to ensure that I captured the true essence of cultural communities for African undergraduate students at Yale, an experience that I will never live through and will never truly be able to understand.

The small scope of interviewees also limits my findings. I did not interview students from the broader undergraduate community at Yale to get their perspectives on cultural communities. Therefore when I discuss outside perspectives of cultural communities, I am relying on my own experiences and conversations with fellow students, administrators, and general community members. Understanding perspectives of actual Yale students firsthand would have set a better context for my findings and been more relevant to the experiences of my African student interviewees.

Finally, my research and analysis involved a fair amount of generalization. I often used YASA and other cultural communities within the African student population interchangeably. As I explained earlier in the paper, YASA tends to be an umbrella community for a lot of smaller cultural communities—especially those based on nationality. However, some African students are involved in outside communities like the Muslim Students Association or the Arab Student Association, and those may have completely different dynamics or serve entirely different roles than YASA. Furthermore, I wrote as if all African students are involved in YASA. According to several sources, the grand majority of non-North African African students at Yale are involved in YASA, but due to YASA's informal nature, it is impossible to get a hard number or percentage of student involvement. Therefore, my research excludes most North African students and any other African students who do not identify with YASA.

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Appendix A

AFRICA: Student Enrollment by Country, Fall 2015
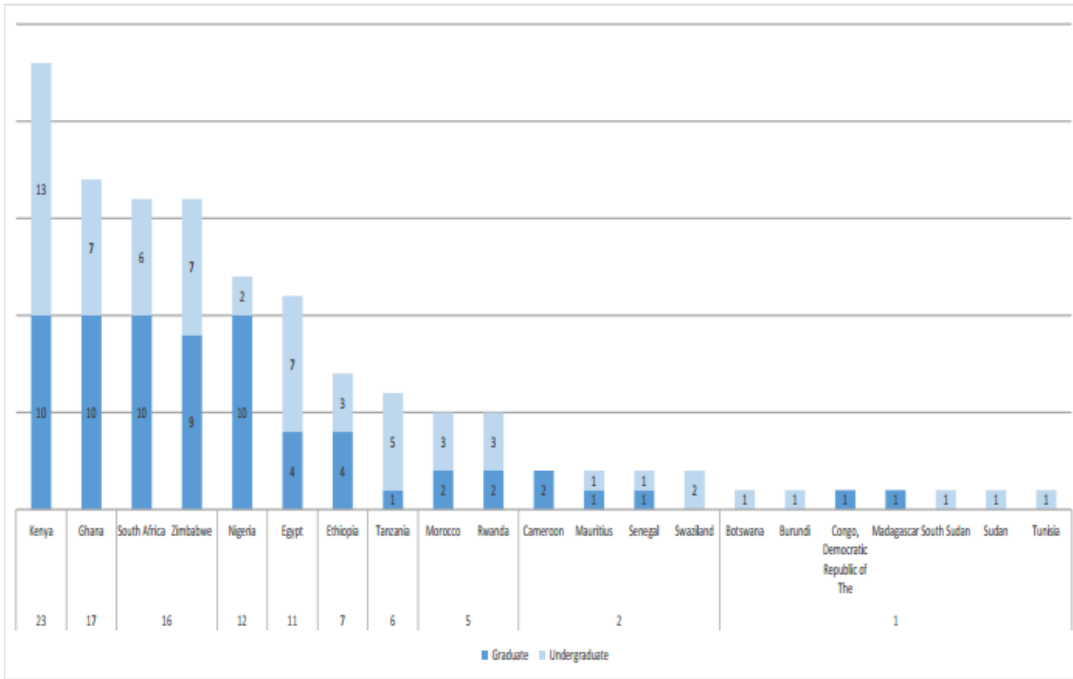
AFRICA: Regional Trends 2005 - 2015
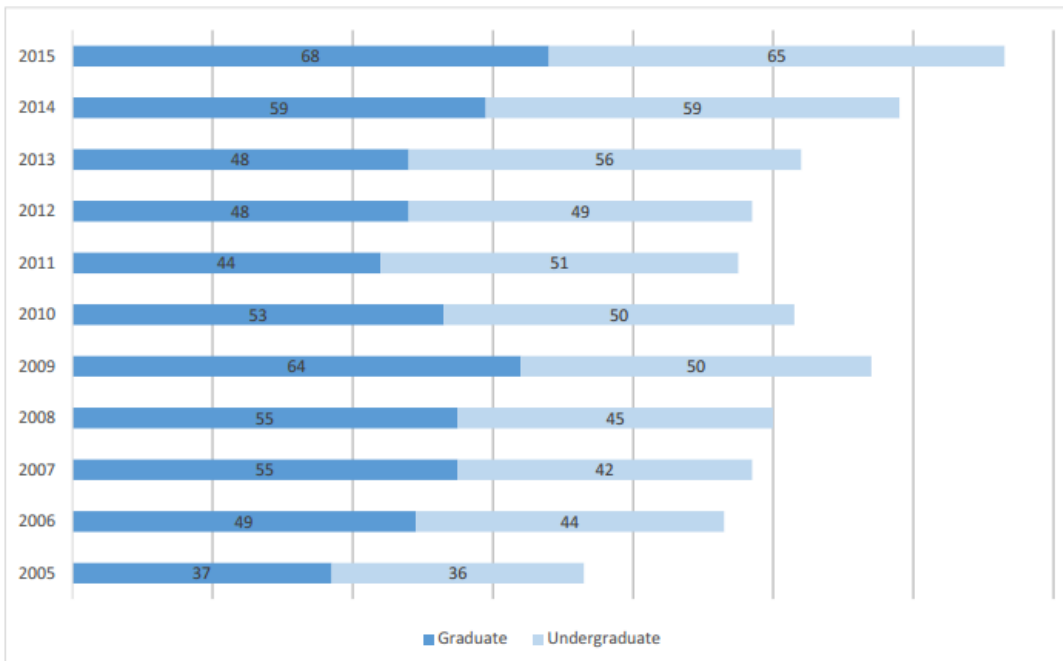
(Gustafson, 2015)

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose to study in the US?
2. How was your experience adjusting to the US and to Yale?
3. Can you talk a little about your personal identities?
4. Please give a break-down of your social circles. Who do you spend your free time with?
5. Do you spend any of your time in cultural communities? If so, can you describe your involvement with this group(s)?
6. Why is spending time in cultural community important to you?
7. In your opinion, what are the benefits and potential negative aspects of spending time in a cultural community?
8. Do you ever get any external pushback or negative feedback about your own involvement in a cultural community?
9. Do you feel it is important for people to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds?