Can Joy be Racialized? Analyzing how Ghanaians Conceptualize Joy

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Can Joy be Racialized? Analyzing how Ghanaians Conceptualize Joy
by
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgment 2
Table of Contents 3
Abstract 4
Chapter 1 - Introduction 5
   Research Objectives: 6
   Research Questions: 6
   Significance/Justification of Study: 6
   Scope of study: 7
Chapter 2 - Lit review 8
Chapter 3 - Methodologies: 10
   Limitations: 11
   Ethics: 11
Chapter 4 - Findings and Analysis 12
   Defining Joy 12
   Perception of Racial Identity: How is Race and Blackness Perceived? 12
   Application of Race to Joy 15
   Factors that took more precedence 16
   Hobbies/Activities 18
   Photography and Images of Joy 18
V. Chapter 5 - Conclusion 23
Appendix 24
   Childhood joy 24
   Black Joy Resources 25
Works Cited 26
Abstract

The racialization of joy is one’s own experience of joy being tied to their racial, and ethnic identity. Inspired by the concept of Black joy, which is an example of the racialization of joy, this paper aims to understand how Ghanaian university students conceptualize joy and whether they would consider their experience of joy to be influenced by their racial/ethnic identity. 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) and the University of Health and Allied Sciences (UHAS). In addition, photography was used as a methodology to capture images of Black people experiencing joy and provides more of a human connection than what formal academia can offer. It’s necessary to uplift how Ghanaians use joy and laughter as potential forms of resistance against an anti-black world and day to day grievances because there is much research about hardships that Ghanaians experience, whether that’s socially, financially, or politically. I used thematic analysis to analyze the data which is split up into 4 parts: how Ghanaians define joy, perception of racial identity, the application of race to joy, and hobbies/activities. The findings include that the Ghanaian university participants defined joy as synonymous with being happy. The perceptions of Blackness or race included many participants noting that there’s no racism in Ghana and how accepting the country is. It’s important to note that many also addressed the colonization period and how Black people are still viewed as inferior globally. There were mixed opinions on whether race should be applied to joy. Many participants believed race shouldn't be applied to joy because the majority of the country is the same race. However, some participants believed that categorizing joy based on ethnicity was more relevant to uplifting ethnic groups that are often stereotyped. And some participants felt that there was no need to label joy in the first place.

Keywords: Ghana, Race, Ethnicity, Black, Black joy, Racialization, Racialization of joy
I. Chapter 1 - Introduction

“I embraced joy as my birthright. Radical black joy is inherent as a human need and not some special trinket you get after you rise high enough on the social-economic ladder or unlock some special level of desirability or accomplishment. –Tanya Denise Fields, “You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience” (edited by Tarana Burke and Brene Brown)

— Tarana Burke and Brene Brown

This project was initially inspired by the concept of Black joy, an online concept and term most prominent amongst Black media spaces in the U.S. Black joy is aligned closely with #BlackgirlMagic and #Blackboyjoy and is a concept that has expanded especially during the BLM Movement to take a break from the online images of Black trauma by showcasing images of Black people dancing, singing, and making comedic videos, etc. But given the racial demographics of Ghana, does the racialization of joy also extend to Ghanaians? Ghana is “the first black African country south of the Sahara to achieve independence from colonial rule.” (Brittanica). Ghana is home to Pan-Africanism, especially tied to Kwame Nkrumah’s fight for independence and push to unite the African countries. But scholarship and the topic of race and Blackness in Africana studies have been overshadowed by conversations about “national identity formation—impediments such as tribalism or ethnic conflict, or concerns with modernization and regional and continental integration.” (Pierre 2012, 194). This prevents the racialization aspects of post-colonial societies to be acknowledged (Pierre 2012). Given this trend in scholarship, how do Ghanaians themselves talk about race and Blackness?

Racialization is the process in which a “group of people is defined by their “race.” Processes of racialization begin by attributing racial meaning to people's identity and, in
particular, as they relate to social structures and institutional systems, such as housing, employment, and education … The visible effects of processes of racialization are the racial inequalities embedded within social structures and systems.” (Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society). Therefore, I define the racialization of joy as one’s own experience of joy being tied to their racial and ethnic identity. So what does the racialization of joy look like for Ghanian university students?

Research Objectives:

My research project aims to examine how Black students in Ghana conceptualize happiness and joy and examine whether they consider their experience of happiness/joy to be racialized. It is also to explore what the potential broader political and social implications of this joy may be.

Research Questions:

How are Ghanaian university students defining joy? Will Ghanaian university students consider their experience of happiness/joy to be racialized? What other factors of their identity take precedence over race? What hobbies and activities do Ghanaian university students partake in that provide happiness?

Significance/Justification of Study:

There is much research about hardships that Ghanaians experience, whether that’s socially, financially, or politically so it’s necessary to uplift how Ghanaians use joy and laughter as potential forms of resistance against an anti-black world and day-to-day grievances.
I conducted research in both Kumasi and Ho because they consist of different ethnic groups. I thought looking at the role of ethnicity could be helpful if Ghanaians believe that the application of race to joy couldn't be applied. I chose these two places because Kumasi is considered the cultural hub of Ghana since the Akan ethnicity is very prominent there. I chose Ho because there was previous research about well-being in Ho Municipality and I can focus on a different ethnic group (Ewe).

I also want to acknowledge my bias as an African-American woman who has lived in U.S for all of my life, my perception of Blackness may be vastly different from Ghanaians because of my proximity to racism in the states. Therefore, I find specifying joy as "Black joy" necessary because it's important to highlight how Black people express happiness as a form of resistance. However, I acknowledge that because of this difference in how race can be viewed in Ghana compared to the U.S, I am open-minded about the other factors that can influence how Ghanaians would define their joy and am not automatically assuming that race would be a key factor.

Scope of study:

I conducted 18 interviews at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, Ghana, and the University of Health and Allied Sciences (UHAS), specifically the Trafalgar campus in Ho, Ghana. I was at KNUST for 14 days and conducted 11 interviews and UHAS for 14 days.
II. Chapter 2 - Lit review

To understand the dynamics between race and joy, the following articles and books have helped provide context for understanding how race is perceived in Ghana. Pierre's chapter "Race across the Atlantic . . . and Back: Theorizing Africa and/in the Diaspora" in the book, The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race, analyzes how the racialization aspect of the cultural production in Africa has been overshadowed. Academia on the African continent shifted from focusing on race to culture and failed to address white supremacist practices of colonization (Pierre 2012, 202). Additionally, ethnicity is utilized more in academia to explore African continuities without acknowledging “recourse to how such ethnic identities are racially structured within a global hierarchy” (Pierre 2012, 204). Therefore utilizing Pierre’s argument can help shape how I assess the racialization of Black joy for Ghanaians.

Emotions and their connection to race have already begun to be analyzed. Bonilla-Silva represents this best as racialized emotions which are "emotions related to race that people experience when they engage in interracial interaction,” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 3). “The racial subject emerges because people experience, learn about, and interpret racialized relationships not just practically but emotionally” (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 4). Bonilla-Silva's argument about racialized emotions is insightful because if racialized emotions are based on interracial interaction, what does that mean for Ghanaians who navigate constantly in Black spaces? Because the population is mostly Black, will their interpretation of their emotion be associated with race if there's no direct opponent like whiteness enforcing Ghanaians to be reminded of their Black identity?

The existing literature about the topic of race and joy has also been dedicated to a term already associated with this topic known as "Black joy". As far as using the term Black joy, it
has been mostly utilized in U.S contexts and many scholars have already begun analyzing certain aspects of my research question. Lu and Steele's (2019) article provides a helpful understanding of Black joy because Lu and Steele focus on Black joy's connection to resistance and oral tradition. They focus particularly on African Americans' online presence on Twitter and Vine to analyze how Black people express their joy online. They highlight many examples of popular videos of Black creators and how it relates to African Americans being free to express their humanity and emotion. That act in itself is resistance and how these creators symbolize the art of storytelling. Because Black joy has already begun to be analyzed through the online spaces, my research does not focus on the online aspect that Lu and Steele analyze.

Black joy has even been written about in terms of its connection to schooling. Tichavakunda (2021) focuses on Black joy on white campuses. Worsley and Roby (2021) conduct an ethnography to investigate Black joy in two stem maker spaces, Boys and Girls Clubs within the Midwest and Southeast regions in the United States for a year. They aim to address "how do STEM facilitators, counter anti-blackness in/through STEM by fostering space for Black joy with youth in the making?"; Their work is necessary to consider how Black joy can be curated in educational spaces, especially because historically the education curriculum in the states cater to white people. Yet while research about schooling has been prominent, there hasn't been researched focused on how Ghanaian university students curate joy which is what I am looking to explore.

To account for other factors that will influence how Ghanaians will experience happiness, that can be seen through Addai (2014)'s article focuses on predictors of Subjective Well-Being in Ghana. It was important to understand alternative factors to race to consider factors that will take more precedence over. Their methodology consists of conducting interviews in five local
languages and conducting a survey about the respondent's perspectives on various social, political, and economic concepts. They used three analytical tools such as creating a graphical distribution of their well-being measures, using chi-square, and logistic regression equations to estimate factors of SWB while controlling for other factors. Race wasn't a factor in this study which was expected. Ethnicity, religion, class, and location in Ghana (Northern or Southern Region) were factors. The closest factor to analyzing race would be ethnic groups and those considered Akan reported having the highest percentage of happiness. Where the researchers left room for further research is analyzing the relationship between subjective well-being and ethnicity which is something, I would be willing to explore.

III. Chapter 3 - Methodologies:

I used a qualitative research approach by conducting semi-structured interviews either in person or online (based on the participant's choice) with 18 university students. 11 of the students were from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) and 7 students were from the University of Health and Allied Sciences (UHAS) with various majors. Out of the 18 people, I talked to 10 identified as female, and 8 identified as male. While the population of both schools are over 80,000 people, I only talked to a small sample of students because of timing and feasibility so the data represented does not reflect the Ghana population as a whole, but reflects the themes that occur out of the 18 people I interviewed. The interviews were between 15 and 30 minutes long. I recruited interviewees through the snowball technique and through the contacts SIT Ghana connected me with. I used semi-structured interviews as a methodology because joy or happiness is an emotional state and interviews can best capture that
expression. And by the interviews being semi-structured, there is more space to dive deeper into the expressional states of the people that I interviewed. Additionally, by having interviews with Ghanaians I aimed to observe and document how Black joy is curated in the physical day-to-day lifestyles of Black people rather than just in online spaces.

Additionally, I engaged with photography as a form of methodology if consent was provided to capture images of Black people experiencing joy. I created a slideshow/video college. The formality of academic writing hinders analyzing joy fully because the visual aspects of emotion are needed. Images are beneficial because visual mediums can humanize the subject matter, especially when Black lives have often been dehumanized and it is an accessible medium as well.

Limitations:

One limitation of my research was language barriers. While all the interviews were conducted in English, I understand that there could have been some phrases or answers to the questions that could be best answered in the local dialect. Another limitation of the research was that the interviews were much shorter than expected but it was because it was during exam week, and students needed to study. Also, the diversity in terms of ethnic groups is limited.

Ethics:

All the interviewees involved gave their consent. I made aware that the interviewees were voluntarily and that they didn't have to answer any questions if they didn't want to. I informed them that their name will not be involved. For the photography aspect, I asked for consent. All
participants gave their consent to be recorded. They were also compensated with 20 cedis, given at the end of the interview so there was no forced coercion during the interview process.

IV. Chapter 4 - Findings and Analysis

To discuss the relationship between joy, race, and Ghanaians, I used thematic analysis (Attride 2001). I structured the findings by grouping them into categories and establishing themes that align with my research objectives. The themes that will be discussed are how Ghanaians define joy, perception of racial identity, the application of race to joy, and hobbies/activities. I also incorporated the visual mediums.

Defining Joy

For the Ghanaian university students that were interviewed, many of them associated joy with the term happiness. One participant defined "joy [as] relative. A connection from within. A way of appreciating the emotional state that makes you feel human. If I'm in a joyous state, I'm in the mood to accept people and be open." By asking how Ghanaian university students define joy, I was able to center and understand aspects of their life and the experiences that they would consider joyous.

Perception of Racial Identity: How are Race and Blackness Perceived?

When analyzing if the concept of race can be applied to joy for these Ghanaian participants there was much variety in answers. It's important to highlight how participants answered questions related to Blackness and racial identity on their terms and how the
interviewees answered questions related to the application of racial/ethnic identity to joy. Both of these responses are intertwined because racializing joy is dependent on understanding how Ghanaians understand their racial identity. I will be using Bonilla-Silva's concept of racialized emotions and Jasmine Pierre's critique on academia about racialization in Ghana to help analyze the perception of race and application of race to joy. It is also important to note that these findings are based on small sample size, so the analysis is based only on this group and generalizations cannot be made about the larger student body of KNUST and UHAS.

Surprisingly, there was not much difference in how students from KNUST and UHAS answered the questions. The most common answers when asking about how race and Blackness are perceived in Ghana consisted of many people laughing or providing a confused expression, following the phrase that "We are all Black and there's no racism here because everyone accepts each other." I hypothesized that that would be a common answer because of the racial demographic of Ghana but what was most interesting was a few participants' responses to how history has played a role in how Blackness is perceived. One of my participants notes, "Ghana has a history of colonization and everything but we still get to know that it has helped us in some way because they helped us to start our civilization and all that. We were enslaved and all that but it's still good after all those things". His comment about the colonizers helping to start civilization and everything being fine glosses over the history of racism and confronts it as a past issue. It also minimizes the extent to which colonization has shaped Ghanaian history and Black identity.

But some participants acknowledge and criticize the colonization period, emphasizing the hardship their ancestors had to go through in the fight for independence from British rule. Some participants, while acknowledging that everyone is of the same racial group in Ghana, referred to
Overall, how Black people are seen as inferior and how there's still prejudice in the country. One participant noted that within her community, she has heard countless times how people will comment "The whites wouldn't do this but us Blacks and Ghanaians do it." She notes that "we look down on ourselves [and] racism is still living amongst us." Addressing that there is still racism in contrast to the previous statement highlights the nuance in how Ghanaian university students are conceptualizing race.

Another interesting take on the question is when a participant responded that "the perception of race is adorable. We embrace our race because we are proud. We know what we are. but we don't know what we stand for." Calling the perception of race "adorable" is an interesting diction to use but suggests that the nature of the question is silly, or something that shouldn't be taken as seriously. "We don't know what we stand for" is similar to another participant's response which emphasized that "one thing that keeps dragging us back is our mindset." These responses suggest that there's almost a sense of hopelessness when it comes to the positionality of Blacks globally.

Yet with a few follow-up questions about ethnicity, there was more range of answers discussing the relations between the different ethnic groups in Ghana. There are six major ethnic groups: The Akan, Gurma, Ewe, Ga-Adangbe, Mole-Dagbane, and Guan (Abwao). Some participants noted that while there is still some tribalism, it was for the most part a past issue because everyone sees each other as equal. On the other hand, some participants highlighted the different stereotypes associated with the different ethnic groups and while they didn't specify the ethnic group in general, they labeled how the ethnic groups in the North always receive the short end of the stick.

This range of answers highlights the complexity of understanding the ethnic dynamics,
especially as an outsider. There's a ton of literature written about ethnic groups and their relationships with one another. So my focus is to acknowledge that understanding these racial dynamics is imperative to understand how they can connect to joy.

When analyzing racialization, I was motivated by Pierre's critique on scholarship in discussing African countries to emphasize how ethnicity and race are talked about on the African continent. Pierre notes, "the specificity of the effects of global White supremacy—both on local communities and in knowledge production—are usually not part of the scholarly treatment of Africa. Consequently, with few exceptions the general trend in the study of Africa is to leave the structures of global race and power intact, allowing, by implication, the ongoing particularization (and negative racialization) of Africans." (Pierre, 2002). Thus, while the interviews provide insight on how they perceive Blackness whether they think about their Black identity or not, racialization is still shaped by global structures, even if it is not affecting them directly.

Application of Race to Joy

When asking if the concept of race can be applied to joy, given “black joy” as an example, while there were a few who noted that Black joy can be applied, the overwhelming majority of Ghanaians in the study said that it didn’t apply as much. One participant noted that, because “most people are black, the concept of Black joy wouldn’t make much of an impact.” Thus, it relates back to Bonilla-Silva’s concept of racialized emotions. By having a majority Black population and no direct encounters with whiteness, although whiteness is still a threat because of imperialism and past colonization of Ghana, there’s no reminder for Ghanaians to think about their racial identity to an extent where putting a label or specifying that the joy is Black or part of a racial concept is needed.
When asked if the concept of the racialization of joy can apply to ethnic groups instead of race, there was also a range of answers. Some participants believed that categorizing joy based on ethnicity was more relevant to uplifting ethnic groups that are often stereotyped.

One participant answered, "Yes. There's a perception locally about how different ethnic groups present themselves. When you go to the northern region, you are regarded as someone who isn't part of a civilization. Also, Ga in Accra is also regarded as someone who is not civilized. So, if the concept is now fused, it brings out the symbol and clears the perception of the uncivilized. It can help unify." The participant acknowledgment of the joy aspect of ethnicity was to highlight that there are many stereotypes regarding different ethnic groups. The comments about "uncivilized" is a damaging and problematic stereotype that has many negative impacts. Therefore, some people believed that it could be beneficial to label the joy of the North through their traditional festivals. If I was to expand on this project, I would have done further analysis into the festivals that occur. It is also important to note that while mentions of the North came up a lot, I was unable to have someone from the Northern regions of Ghana include their viewpoints.

Additionally, some even suggested that there was no need to put a label on the joy for Ghanaians. Many suggested that race and ethnicity would not be major factors because there isn't as much separation as there was in the past.

Factors That Took More Precedence

During the interview process, I asked participants if there were any other factors either from society or their identity that plays a role in how they partake in joy. The purpose of
inquiring about other influences was to consider why these influences will have a greater or lesser impact than race and ethnicity. Three most common factors were religion, economic stability, and family.

Religion was a common factor that was shown to bring many participants happiness. Given that majority of the country is affiliated with a deity, whether it's Christian, Muslim, or Traditional and religion is an essential part of Ghanaian culture, it is not surprising to hear phrases such as "it brings me joy that I am connected to God and the Holy Spirit". Thus, it would be expected that religion will play more of a role in how Ghanaian conceptualize joy.

Participants noted that financial stability plays a role in joy. One participant answered that simply having an income will provide some sort of comfortability. Another participant gave an interesting quote; "If you are stressed count money. It will reduce your pressure." Another participant answered pessimistically noting, "The factors that determine the actions we take are financial. Being in a slum will shape you." While the last participant did not necessarily answer the question, his comment gives insight into how his thought process automatically associated joy with financial responsibilities and living accommodations. These responses illustrate that finances play a major role in the happiness of course because it is the fundamental block of survival. There have been previous studies that go further into depth about these factors\(^1\) thus I will not go further into detail but it is important to acknowledge that finances play a role.

Family was another major factor as participants shared many anecdotes about the joy associated with their family either in their early childhood days or now. There were countless

stories about being reunited with their parents after living with extended family members. One participant noted, "My family is my everything so once I'm with them, I'm okay."

Hobbies/Activities

A part of the research was to also analyze the hobbies/activities that Ghanaian university students engage in that bring them happiness. It was also to examine the ways that they distract themselves from the problems of university and larger structural problems in Ghana. Recurring problems that kept coming up in conversation were related to the financial status of the country in regard to inflation rates and how the university can be stressful because of course loads. The hobbies and activities that many participants took part in to distract themselves from thinking about obstacles involved singing in the choir, hanging out with friends, modeling, sewing, jamas,$^2$ and playing football. It was important to emphasize the outlet's Ghanaian university students are utilizing to express their joy and how it is used beneficially as a way to distract themselves from external problems.

Photography and Images of Joy

I created a quick slideshow of all the interviewees who chose to send images. The interface I am using doesn't allow for the video college so I will share the link in this section:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VzvYE1yElThKSEOlk0xD1SrzqdpBlmM7/view?usp=sharing

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$^2$ "a place or an occasion where jama songs and other jama activity occurs; "a jama session"*, a "jama competition", a "jama celebration" (Azizi)
V. Chapter 5 - Conclusion

To conclude, many of the initial research questions were answered. The Ghanaian university students who partook in this project defined joy as closely associated with the term happiness. There was not a significant difference in how UHAS and KNUST students answered the questions. As far as the racialization of joy, while initially, I would assume that all Black people would partake in this concept, and while I still believe it can, it is not necessary to label joy or racialize joy, if there are no factors that uplift the need to emphasize Blackness. For these Ghanaian students, linking their joy to their race was not necessarily because they are living in a country where the demographic is Black. Therefore, there was no need for them to identify their joy as "Black joy". Some participants believed that categorizing joy based on ethnicity was more relevant to uplifting ethnic groups that are often stereotyped and joy could be showcased through traditional festivals. Factors other than race and ethnicity that kept occurring in interviews were related to religion, financial stability, and family. These factors have previously been researched; therefore I don't feel the need to go into specific detail.

For recommendations on how to improve the study, an ethnography of how Ghanaian university students navigate online spaces like Ghanaian Twitter or TikTok can advance the section about hobbies and activities utilized to counter problems. Another recommendation and improvement for the study were to get more people from a range of ethnic groups.
Appendix

Childhood Joy

“The Black child must learn early to allow laughter to fill his mouth or the million small cruelties he encounters will congeal and clog his throat.”
— Maya Angelou, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes

Due to time constraints, I wasn't able to analyze childhood joy to the extent that I would have liked. This section will highlight anecdotes and stories that participants highlight as moments of joy from their childhood. I include this section because it can not only lead towards themes of nostalgia, memory, and storytelling but can pay homage to Black people's childhood which is often analyzed with expression of hardship.

Here are some anecdotes:

"So I had a lot of experience a lot of bad influence and stuff but what made us happy was teasing. See when you tease people, people become angry and that would make you laugh. Teasing, that's what Ghanaians wanted. Teasing. The comedy. We spent most of our time teasing and having fun."

“One thing I would like to talk about my childhood is the side of my father. He was very passionate about us and we were very young. He provided everything for us in terms of putting us in good situations, in terms of school, all that for us to be okay. So as a kid, I always had what I wanted. And he was always trying his possible best to always provide us with. So I felt that kind of father love very much and as I was growing I was very happy because I was able to get that kind of love from my dad's side."
“I can say that every time I seen my family together and my siblings, my dad and my mom playing together, I will enjoy. So anytime I see them together, it's joyful.”

Black Joy Resources

To emphasize Black joy, here are some resources, poems, songs, and curated Spotify Playlist of Black joy:

1. [DEAR BLACK CHILD…. A LOVE LETTER FROM YOUR PARENTS](#)
2. Song: Black by Buddy
3. Song: Black folks by Tank and the Bangas ft. Alex Isley and Masego
4. [Black Joy Playlist](#)
5. [Jamas](#)


