3-28-2014

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Kara Miller
Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

Kirsten Whitsitt
Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Puzzling Identities: Children of African Parents in America’s Growing Diversity

Kara Miller, B.A. and Kirsten Whitsitt, B.A., with Shelly Habecker, Ph.D.

Department of Anthropology, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Introduction

There is a growing body of research illuminating rapid demographic, social, and cultural changes occurring as increasing numbers of non-white immigrants are incorporated into American communities (Waters 1999; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Waters and Ueda 2007). We began this pilot project, originally titled “Redefining African Americans,” with the intent to discover how the immigrant children of African parents in Fort Wayne, Indiana, are identifying with the term African American, which has been used in the U.S. since the 1980s to refer to descendants of the transatlantic slave trade. We based our study on similar research conducted in larger, metropolitan cities which are historical immigration gateways, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami (Singer et al 2006) in an attempt to discover whether a small, Midwestern city with a growing African immigrant population would yield similar responses from participants in this type of ethnographic study.

Our study population is based in the congregation and youth group of a pan-African church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. We interviewed adolescent and adult children of Africans, as well as some of the parents, and conducted participant observation of Sunday services and youth group. We asked about their experiences at home, at school or work, and at church; and whether they felt they fit into the category of African American as it is used in the United States. What we found is that while some said the term “African American” describes them perfectly, most did not feel the term fit them at all because they did not feel connected to other Americans blacks whom they view as culturally different. Most of these young people identify with multiple facets of their life experience, e.g. their parents’ national origin, their religious affiliation, their personal interests, etc. These teens and young adults define themselves in myriad ways, many having nothing to do with race, ethnicity, or nationality, and for most, nothing as broad as their continent of origin.

Methods

The Sample

This project’s sample is taken from St. Augustine’s Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The congregation formed in 1998, and gained an affiliation with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in 2001. The membership is about 75 church members coming from around 16 African countries meeting weekly. Parents and children were invited to participate in the study via introductory meetings after church and at youth group. Throughout this project, our team interviewed 30 children of African parents - adolescents (n=14, age 13-18) and young adults (n=16, age 19-35) – who arrived in the United States before age 18, and 10 parents, all of whom are members of, or affiliated with St. Augustine’s. The method for data collection included a two-fold process of semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Observations took place at church services and youth group meetings to gather a greater frame of reference.

The Interviews

Our team utilized three separate interview protocols – one for parents, one for adolescents, and the other for young adults. We permission, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, then coded and assigned descriptors in qualitative data analysis software.

The protocol for parents included 3 sections:
- Demographics: country of origin, citizenship, occupation, years of education, etc.
- Parenting subjects such as food, language, home country visits and family relationships.
- Feelings about their children’s behavior relating to the issues like use of slang, dress, friendship and dating habits.

The protocol for adolescents and young adults both included 4 sections:
- Age, place of birth, self-identification preferences, views about African immigrants and black and white Americans.
- Home relationships, activities, and behaviors.
- School relationships, activities, and behaviors.
- Extended inquiry regarding professional experiences and changes in identity choices over time for young adults.

The Life Experience Piece

- Related to the age of informant piece, younger participants talked more about the role of parental authority in their lives.
- Adult informants have more life experience on which to base their responses, including college, work, romantic relationships, and in some cases children of their own.

The Church Piece

- Half of the youth and young adults said church helped manage their African and American identities. The teens said that youth group was more helpful than Sunday services (which are very African in style) in this regard. Several noted that St. Augustine’s was so connected to other Africans which helped them.
- Christian faith is a centerpiece to the experiences of many participants, above and beyond any organizational affiliation.

Results

Based on the cross-referencing analysis, we have determined the four main factors influencing how our participants discussed the pieces of their identity puzzles:

1. The Age of Informant Piece
- Younger informants were less forthcoming in general with interviews lasting 30-60 minutes.
- Adult informants were more likely to elaborate on their answers to our questions resulting in interviews that lasted 90 minutes to two hours

2. The Age of Arrival Piece
- Informants who arrived in their teens seemed to be more interested in exploring their American identity.
- Informants who came at a younger age seemed to be more interested in exploring their African roots.

3. The Life Experience Piece
- Related to the age of informant piece, younger participants talked more about the role of parental authority in their lives.

4. The Church Piece
- Half of the youth and young adults said church helped manage their African and American identities. The teens said that youth group was more helpful than Sunday services (which are very African in style) in this regard. Several noted that St. Augustine’s was so connected to other Africans which helped them.
- Christian faith is a centerpiece to the experiences of many participants, above and beyond any organizational affiliation.

Discussion

It is perhaps most important to emphasize that this is a pilot project and to acknowledge our team’s awareness of the limitations of our study. Because we based our research population on a Pan-African Lutheran church congregation, our participants have an established sense of community that emphasizes and reinforces the importance of maintaining an African identity. This is in no way a representative sample of African Americans, but that understanding does not diminish the importance of these informants’ stories and experiences as one facet of that larger population. In the future, we plan to expand our study to the broader African community in Fort Wayne, with hopes of including other faith communities. Perhaps more importantly we would like to speak to those who are not members of a specific Africa-centered group and consequently may not feel a strong sense of African community in their daily lives.

References


Acknowledgements

- RESP Summer Research Grant Program
- IPFW Anthropology Department
- Studio M
- Ruth Van Rienen for her help and inspiration
- Rev. Yared Hatch and Paula Booth of St. Augustine’s Lutheran Church
- Rev. Larry Merino and the Anuka Center at Holy Cross Lutheran Church
- All of our participants for the immense privilege of sharing their stories
- And of course, Dr. Shelly Habecker for her faith, passion, and patience.