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Parenting practices among African immigrant families in North America: A critical literature review

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Abstract

African cultures have rich heritages of values and practices for raising children. Hence, when individuals from African countries—including Nigeria—immigrate to North American countries (e.g., Canada and the United States), they often face dilemmas on integrating their parenting practices with the norms surrounding parenting in North America. Given the limited research on African immigrants in North America, their parenting practices have often been misunderstood and pathologized in the media and social services. This paper therefore aims at providing a critical review of the literature on African immigrants' parenting practices in North America. The discussion will include a summary of research findings examining parents' values about parenting, children's perceptions of parenting styles, and intergenerational relationships among African immigrant families in North America. Implications for future research were discussed.

Keywords: African immigrants, parenting, transitioning, child rearing practices, parenting styles

Introduction

Parenting is a broad spectrum of activities and philosophies with the overarching goal of raising a child to become a mature individual, capable of contributing to society. It is informed by family values, ethnicities, languages, societies, environments, laws, and economics; and it involves specific practices (Bornstein, 2019). Parenting practices are defined by Akintayo (2009) as “specific parental behaviours, such as controlling children’s behaviours and promoting their well-being” (p. 10). Parenting is diverse and dynamic around the world; hence, all African parenting practices cannot be adequately described here. Parenting is a challenging yet rewarding responsibility, which is further complicated by emigration. When families from African countries migrate to North American countries, parents utilize their homeland parenting practices, which are often misunderstood due to their difference from mainstream practices.

African and North American Parenting Practices

Although various African parenting practices are distinct, some common parenting values include respecting individuals in authority, representing one's family well, and contributing meaningfully to society (Alaazi et al., 2018). Also, parenting is considered a communal responsibility, whereby neighbours, relatives, and siblings socialize, supervise, and discipline children (Onwujuba, Marks & Nesteruk, 2015).

In this paper, the term "North America" will only refer to the United States (US) and Canada, the top destination countries in the continent for African immigrants (United Nations, 2017). Parenting in the US and Canada is diverse and is shaped by histories and social demographics. Thus, it is practiced differently depending on the parent's country of residence, immigration status, ethnicity, relationship and marital status, socio-economic status, disability status, religion and so on (Bornstein, 2019). However, standards of effective parenting in the law and social services are largely based on traditional European American values. In this view, parenting is considered the parents' sole responsibility and its goal is to produce an independent, self-sufficient individual (Harkness, Super, & van Tijen, 2000, as cited in Akintayo, 2009). Common European American parenting practices include preparing children for academic and occupational successes, encouraging parent-child communication, providing balanced nutrition, and encouraging consistent sleep (Shenker-Osorio, 2018).

Given the diverse parenting styles in the African and North American continents, it is important to consider the implications for parenting when people move from one continent to the other. Thus, this paper aims to discuss the importance of research in enhancing the understandings of African parenting practices globally, to summarize recent research findings on how African immigrants navigate parenting in North America, to critique the literature, and to suggest future directions.

Scope of the Literature

The reviewed literature included eight journal articles all published between 2015 and 2018, except two articles published in 2009. A systematic review of relevant articles published in 2016 and earlier was completed by Salami, Hirani, Meherali, Amodu, and Chambers (2017). All reviewed articles in this paper used qualitative methods, which were appropriate for the research topic, since they yielded in-depth accounts of parents' parenting experiences. Five studies were conducted in Canada and three in the US. Participants were immigrant parents from Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritria, Somalia, and Kenya, except for one study which focused on young women born to immigrant parents (i.e., second-generation) in Canada. Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews, focus group discussions, and family observations with field notes.

Journal articles were narrowed down based on their research focus on African immigrant parenting experiences in North America. Journal articles already reviewed in Salami et al. (2017) were excluded. The selected literature was reviewed through summarizing each article, identifying common findings across articles, and noting important topics discussed by a single article. Through the literature review, six themes were identified, which are presented below.

Balancing Cultural Values

Parents in various studies expressed varying attitudes towards maintaining their heritage cultural values and integrating new cultural values into their lives. For example, in one study conducted by Onwujuba, Marks and Nesteruk (2015), Nigerian parents in the US stressed that children in Nigeria were forbidden to talk back to elders (i.e., to respond with a body language that suggests disagreement). According to the researchers, this parenting practice stems from the Nigerian philosophy that parents are central to the development of the community and their authority must not be questioned. With the aim to integrate parenting

AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

values from Nigeria with those in the US, Nigerian parents allowed their children to freely communicate with them.

As established by previous literature on Ethiopian and Eritrean cultures, female children play an important role in transmitting cultural traditions to the next generation; hence, they are expected to engage in home making and to preserve their cultural heritage (Goitom, 2018). However, in one study by Goitom (2018), second-generation young adult Ethiopian and Eritrean women perceived parents with such traditional beliefs as excessively strict with them compared to their brothers. They reported that their parents' rigidity negatively affected their parent-child relationships and hindered them from developing an integrated identity (Goitom, 2018). Overall, African immigrant parents aimed at integrating their heritage and host culture's parenting values, while their children desired more freedom to explore their new cultures.

Setting Parenting Goals for Children

African immigrant parents set goals for their children based on their cultural values, immigration statuses, and experiences in the host country. Skilled Nigerian professionals desired their children to acquire competitive education and jobs in the US (Onwujuba, Marks & Nesteruk, 2015). East and West African parents in Canada wanted their children to be well informed about racism and to be prepared to respond appropriately (Adjei et al., 2018). Cameroonian parents in the US expected their children to become responsible and respectable members of society (Rombo & Lutomia, 2016). Finally, refugee parents from unspecified West African countries emphasized their children's survival and safety (Dumbrill, 2009). Overall, parents intended to adequately support their children in working towards these goals.

Child Protective Services

Historically, the Child Protective Services (CPS) were established in the US and Canada to promote children's well-being during extreme economic hardships and political unrest (Albert & Herbert, 2006). Currently, they exist to promote children's welfare and to

AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

prevent child abuse. As such, the CPS enforce firm standards of effective parenting; but these standards are mostly developed from Eurocentric perspectives. African immigrants, who rarely share such parenting practices, tend to be disproportionately investigated for child abuse, while their children are disproportionately represented in child welfare systems (Adjei et al., 2018).

Research has shown that African immigrants are largely unaware or lack understanding about CPS childcare standards; concurrently, many CPS service providers lack cultural sensitivity towards African parenting values and practices (Adjei et al., 2018; Onwujuba, Marks & Nesteruk, 2015). For example, one Sierra Leonean–Canadian father reported being accused of child abuse and deprived of his children for serving them rice for breakfast and correcting them through yelling (Adjei et al., 2018). Such misunderstandings perpetuate systemic racism, which feeds into the growing mistrust of the CPS among African immigrant communities in the US and Canada (Adjei et al., 2018).

Disciplining Children

African immigrant parents use varying disciplinary practices to redirect their children's inappropriate behaviours. Alaazi et al. (2018) conducted a study to examine the disciplinary practices of East, West, Southern, and Central African immigrant parents in Alberta, Canada. Parents reported practicing corporal or physical discipline, persuasive discipline, a hybrid of both, and transnational fostering. Corporal discipline was the most commonly used among parents, as they believed that the physical pain from spanking was necessary for young children to understand their parents' disapproval of unacceptable behaviour. They explained that their intention was to correct rather than to harm their children. One social service worker added that the type of corporal punishment used among African immigrants was not physically abusive.

Nevertheless, parents reported being unsupported in their use of corporal discipline (e.g., being reported to the CPS by neighbours, schools, and their children). Consequently, they expressed fear surrounding child discipline and a sense of loss of parental control. The authors

AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

explained that such negative societal attitudes towards spanking stemmed from a legislative dilemma in Canada whereby parents' rights to use a reasonable measure of "corrective force" conflicted with children's rights to physical safety. Therefore, African parents in this study expressed confusion and required more explanation about CPS standards of corporal discipline.

In response to such attitudes towards corporal discipline, some parents adopted persuasive discipline which included the withdrawal of privileges, enforcing of home chores, and assigning of timeouts. Nevertheless, other parents were resistant to this method, as they did not understand its effectiveness or felt pressured to replace their methods with Canadian disciplinary standards. Concurrently, some parents combined persuasive with corporal punishment (e.g., explaining to their children after a spanking). Alternatively, some parents developed transnational fostering, whereby children who were deemed out of control were sent to their relatives in source African countries to learn about their originating culture and acceptable conduct. Overall, as this study suggests, adjusting to child discipline in Canada has been significantly challenging for some African immigrant parents.

Teaching Children about Racism

Racism is deeply embedded in the social structures of the US and Canada, and recent African immigrants encounter racial discrimination in the economic sectors. Their academic credentials and occupational experiences are unrecognized, and many remain underemployed or unemployed (Adekoya, 2018). These experiences adversely impact their family lives. Okeke-Ihejirika and Salami (2018) conducted a study with immigrant men from East, West, and Central Africa living in Alberta, Canada. Participants explained that having an unstable income hindered them from fulfilling their traditional roles as family providers, which led to marital conflicts. Since mothers now worked more frequently outside the home to earn a living, fathers reported having to share more child-care responsibilities, which was unfamiliar in their

AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

origin countries. Also, fathers narrated how longer work hours limited their opportunities to socialize their children, which resulted in strained parent-child relationships.

Beyond racism in the economic sectors, Black communities experience police brutality in North America. Consequently, African immigrant parents were concerned for the safety of their children (Dumbrill, 2009). They shared mixed views about sensitizing their children and preparing them to respond appropriately to racial discrimination. In a Canadian study involving African and Caribbean immigrant parents, a Nigerian parent felt obligated to teach her child how to behave when stopped by a police officer. Conversely, a Kenyan parent in a US study deemed it developmentally inappropriate to debrief her child who she felt had experienced covert racism in primary school (Rombo & Lutomia, 2016). Overall, based on the situation, background, and country of residence, parents responded differently to discussing racism with their children.

Religious Influences on Parenting

Across Africa, there is a diversity of religious and spiritual practices, including Christianity, Islam, and various traditional religions (Akintayo, 2009). North America also has a range of religious traditions, with Christianity being the predominant religion (Pew Research Centre, 2013, 2019). Religion is known to significantly influence parenting in African countries. However, little is known about the unique parenting experiences of religious African immigrant families in North America. In one American study by Akintayo (2009), Pentecostal Nigerian Yoruba parents endeavoured to raise their young adult children in a godly way, through reading the Bible, praying, and encouraging moral and ethical living. According to the parents, mainstream American culture did not promote high morals but offered children excessive freedom, which they felt compromised appropriate child training (Akintayo, 2009).

Critique of Literature

AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

The reviewed research articles covered relevant topics and diverse perspectives yet omitted some aspects and viewpoints. First, most participants were parents and the voices of children and young-adults were largely underrepresented. Second, the reviewed literature rarely discussed the strong internal supports that exist in African immigrant communities to cater for parenting needs. Third, recent research studies neglected the nuanced parenting experiences of families practicing other religions than Christianity. Also, although parents' demographic characteristics were well described, the influences of intersecting backgrounds on parenting experiences were hardly addressed. For example, children's place of birth and the family's socio-economic status may jointly impact the family's parenting experiences. Fourth, many articles represented African immigrants' parenting practices used Eurocentric constructs (e.g., Baumrind's parenting styles), except one article that used Afro-centric constructs (e.g., tough love). Hence, some patterns of parenting practices remain unexplained in culturally appropriate ways. Finally, given that only eight journal articles were reviewed, the current literature review cannot be generalizable to all African immigrant parents' experiences in North America.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations could benefit future research in this area. First, it may be beneficial to engage African immigrant children and young adults in research, as so doing may yield insight to intergenerational relationships. Second, an examination of the existing strengths and mutual supports for parenting in African immigrant communities is warranted to tell a more cohesive story of their parenting experiences. For example, researchers could use Participatory Action Research (PAR) to evaluate and enhance existing parenting programs. PAR engages community members in a collaborative, non-hierarchical research study with subsequent tangible applications within the community (Ruglis, 2019). Third, taking an intersectional perspective in examining parenting needs could produce a more nuanced

AFRICAN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

understanding of the experiences of African parents. Fourth, research could focus on the parenting experiences of African Muslim and religious traditionalist families in North America. Finally, future studies could describe parenting practices and styles using culturally appropriate categories that come from participants' own descriptions and that reflect parenting in African and African immigrant contexts. In conclusion, further research in this area will result in enhanced societal understandings of African immigrants' parenting practices in North America.

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