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ABSTRACT

This article shares the findings from a qualitative study researching the lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrant women in the Washington, DC area. It examines the women's immigration experiences after their arrival in the United States as they navigate finding a sense of community in their new home. The findings underscore the importance of church communities in the lives of Ethiopian immigrant women. Implications for social work practitioners and educators, as well as future research, are discussed.

Immigration is arguably among the most pressing social issues in society today. The journey immigrants make from their homeland, the manner they are received in a new country, and the ways they attempt to integrate into new communities all significantly impact not only their personal well-being, but have global and local ramifications. For social workers, understanding the lived immigration experiences of immigrants offers important perspectives to inform their clinical and community-based interventions.

This article shares the findings from a qualitative study researching the lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrant women. The present study uses social capital as a theoretical framework to ask questions about social networks, relationships, and community. It builds on the work of Oliphant (2019), which explored the first phase of immigration for women from Ethiopia. In this article, the author examines the phase of the women's immigration experience after their arrival in the United States as they navigate finding a sense of community in their new home. The findings underscore the importance of church communities in the lives of Ethiopian immigrant women.

This article will first review the literature on social capital theory, with an emphasis on immigration and the role of religion and spirituality. Next, the article will explain the methodology of this qualitative study and report findings. Finally, there will be a discussion of the findings, how they illustrate

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the efficacy of social capital theory, and how they inform social work practitioners and educators.

Literature review

Social capital is the real or potential resources that are linked to membership in a group (Bourdieu, 1986), or "the degree of connectedness and the quality and quantity of social relations in a given population" (Harpham et al., 2002, p. 106). Similar to traditional economic capital, social capital requires an initial investment and continued contributions. These inputs are social in nature (e.g., social interactions, trustworthy behavior) and take time to build or accumulate (Bourdieu, 1986; Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2002). Social capital theory purports that social relationships, including formal and informal networks, are influential in the lives of human beings. Furthermore, certain products or results can be reached that would be impossible without social capital (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Indeed, Bourdieu (1986) likened the forms of capital, including social capital, to power. This power in social capital lies within the context of social relationships: "To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is those others, not himself, who are the actual sources of his or her advantage" (Portes, 1998, p. 7). Although social capital is intangible because of its existence within relationships, its products can be concrete and converted into tangible economic benefits (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988).

The literature reflects an abundance of discussion and theoretical debate where various scholars have emphasized differing aspects of social capital. For example, Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) emphasize the economic implications of social capital and define social capital as "collective expectations affecting individual economic behavior" (p. 1326). Putnam (1993, 2000) focuses on social capital as civic engagement, defining social capital as "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and collectively" (p. 226). This definition designates the community as the primary unit of analysis, but it still recognizes the role of individuals, households, and the state. And finally, Schneider (2010) defines social capital as "the social relationships and patterns of reciprocal, enforceable trust that enable people and institutions to access resources … " (p. 5), and she includes both individuals and institutions in her definition.

In this study, social capital refers to a broader definition suggested by Harpham et al. (2002): "the degree of connectedness and the quality and quantity of social relations in a given population" (p. 106). This definition is ideal for the current study because of the definition's breadth. This definition allows social capital to include economic behaviors in the Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) definition, the social organization aspects that

Putnam (1993, 2000) discusses, as well as the actions of both people and institutions (Schneider, 2010).

Social capital theory has been used extensively to discuss immigration and immigrant enclave communities. Li (2004) argues that social capital should not be considered universally virtuous, but it does enable "a better understanding of immigrant and minority communities in terms of how individuals and groups take advantage of social relations and bear differential costs in achieving their economic goals" (p. 187). Specifically, social capital has been used to explain why immigrants gather to become a "magnet community" with others from their same ethnic heritage and specifically how social capital has influenced immigrant employment (Garcia, 2005; Massey, 1990; Nee & Sanders, 2001; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) state that the solidarity of immigrant groups develops in response to the difficult experience of immigration, including ongoing confrontations with the host country. The political movement to make English the official language is one example of the confrontations immigrants face in the United States. Solidarity among immigrant groups can help them recognize they are not alone in facing the challenge of learning English and in feeling persecuted because their host country is trying to make laws that prohibit them from accessing services in their native languages. Palmer (2010) discusses other challenges, such as isolation and disadvantage faced by immigrants, and argues that the bunna coffee ceremony among Ethiopian immigrants is a way to use relationships and ritual to overcome these challenges.

Social capital theory has been used to understand various types of social networks and their impact on immigrants. Nee and Sanders (2001) posit that the strongest social networks for immigrants are the extended family ties, which are not dependent on a continued sense of tension with a receiving/ host community. The solidarity of a nuclear and extended family offers the basis needed for the sacrifices, trust, and cooperation that comprise the essence of a social capital network. Immigrants rely on family members to garner information about job openings, make introductions to employers, or provide housing during an initial transition period (Nee & Sanders, 2001). Ebaugh and Curry (2000) argue that fictive-kin also serves as a powerful form of social capital among immigrants. Fictive-kin refers to a non-familial relationship based on religious rituals or close friendships, which function similarly to a family relationship, especially in terms of expected obligations and benefits. Their exploratory research on immigrants in Brooklyn, New York, and Houston, Texas, suggests that family units are often disrupted during the immigration process and that fictive kin can provide an alternative social capital network through functions of financial support, social support, spiritual development, maintenance of cultural values, and normative social controls.

Social capital explains social networks that play roles in various aspects of daily life – economic, social, spiritual, and cultural. A study by Mbanaso and Crewe (2011) that specifically addresses elderly immigrants from all over Africa finds that two major sources of social support are an affiliation with an ethnic-oriented association, which often organizes cultural activities and holiday celebration from the home country, and a religious affiliation with a church that has formed to meet the needs of new African immigrants. Garcia (2005) posits that immigrant networks are multi-dimensional. Based on his study of Mexican immigrants to rural Oklahoma, he reports on the process and extent of immigrant social networks: a traditional network based on family and friend relationships, a church network based on local church membership, and a contract network that relied on a local industry that recruited people from US-Mexico border towns and provided opportunities in the form of jobs and resources, such as food and housing to new immigrants/employees. These networks overlap as individuals play roles in more than one of the distinct networks.

Ley (2008) reported that Korean, Chinese, and, historically, German immigrant populations find their co-ethnic church communities to be a primary source of bonding social capital and a critical support for their successful resettlement. Son (2018) found the same to be true for immigrants living in diverse and multiethnic neighborhoods, with their co-ethnic church community being one of respite from the feelings of uncertainty and displacement they feel among their neighbors. The common biographies shared among co-ethnic church members – including language spoken, place of origin, culture, and experiences – allowed for an almost immediate bonding, sense of belonging, and willingness to care for and support one another (Ley, 2008; Son, 2018).

The supports provided to members of these co-ethnic congregations can be quite extensive. These communities may provide English and music classes, housing, employment assistance, food, referrals, translation services, cultural education, transportation, counseling, banking assistance, mentorship, painting and sewing classes, driving lessons, help with taxes, clothes, etc. (Ley, 2008). Therefore, faith communities are often sources of emotional and instrumental support to immigrants (Ley, 2008; Son, 2018). Agyekum and Newbold (2016) additionally identified emotional and symbolic benefits of belonging to a faith community and spending time in their places of worship for African immigrants in Canada. Respondents reported that seeing familiar symbols of faith, such as the baptistery, was comforting and therapeutic for them (Agyekum & Newbold, 2016).

The literature on social capital theory and religion within immigrant communities offers a potential framework for understanding the lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrant women. How they navigate using the currency of relationships and social connectedness as resources in a new

land, particularly within the context of church and religious communities, is the focus of this article.

Methodology

The ontology – or nature of the knowable – for this study is constructivism (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain that the basis of constructivism is that "concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves" (p. 10). Knowledge, then, is a construct based out of the understandings of the researcher and the participant (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This particular study seeks to capture the "lived experience" and to develop a deep understanding from the insider point of view (Padgett, 2008) of Ethiopian immigrant women. The purpose of this study was to explore the process of Ethiopian women immigrating to the United States and to understand the impact of social networks on this experience. The research question was *"How do informal and formal social networks affect the lived experience of Ethiopian women who immigrate to the Washington, DC metropolitan area?"*

Sample

A nonrandom, purposive sample was recruited over the course of one year. The study's final sample included 14 participants who emigrated from Ethiopia and currently live in the Washington, DC metro area. One of the participants was actually born in Eritrea, but she was included in the study because she spent the majority of her adult life in Ethiopia and self-identified as Ethiopian.

There were a range of ages included in the study sample, from 64 to 23 years of age (six participants in their 20s, three in their 30s, three participants in their 40s, one in her 50s, and one in her 60s). There also was an expanse in the number of years the participants had lived in the US. The participant who was the most recent immigrant had been in the US for approximately one year; the participant who had been in the US the longest immigrated 27 years ago.

Religious affiliation was another important demographic. Two participants stated their religious affiliation as Evangelical Christian; four stated Ethiopian Orthodox Church; three gave no indication they attended religious services and stated no specific religious denomination; two stated they attended church occasionally, but did not specify denomination; and one identified the Ethiopian Catholic Church as her denomination. Two participants stated their affiliation with a more generalized term of "Ethiopian Church" and one of these reported that she also attended "American Church." Of note, and a limitation to

the study, was the absence of Muslim participants in this study. Despite the range of recruiting methods, no Muslim women volunteered to participate.

Data collection

The researcher conducted and recorded 14 individual, face-to-face interviews with a hand-held digital recorder before verbatim transcription. The interviews were conducted in English by the researcher in locations throughout the Washington, DC metro area (District of Columbia, Virginia, and Maryland) based on the preference of the participant. Examples of locations included public libraries, restaurants, and sitting in the researcher's car. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by an interview guide compiled by the researcher for this study. Some questions in the interview guide were cited directly from the Social Capital Assessment Tool (SOCAT) (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2002); others were constructed by the researcher based on the social capital literature. The interview guide and recruitment flyer were reviewed by a panel of three native Ethiopian speakers in order to ensure their English language appropriateness for the sample population. Social capital theory was used to inform the interview guide and the direction of the interviews and then bracketed for the coding and analysis portion to allow themes to emerge.

Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed with qualitative content analysis, defined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). In particular, there was a focus on conventional content analysis, which treats the interview transcript, entered into Atlas.ti scientific software, as a text to be analyzed through open coding of transcript texts, theme identification, and analysis of themes compared to existing theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Teater, 2011).

Through initial coding, creating code families, and identifying emerging themes, the researcher organized the interview data into three chronological phases, each with an overarching theme. The phases were: 1) beginning a new life, 2) finding a place in a new community, and 3) seeking belonging and a sense of home (Oliphant, 2019, p. 7). This article focuses on the second chronological phase in which the women journeyed toward finding their place in a new community.

Findings

The subjects of this study reported participating in a variety of social groups and organizations such as the African Student Union [P14],[1] Ethiopian Student Association [P10], African Working Group [P10], Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) [P7], and soccer leagues for their children [P7], but church was the organization that almost all participants were involved with in some way. Eleven of the 14 participants reported some kind of involvement in church [P1,2,5,6,7,9,10,11,12,13,14]. The reasons for attending church varied among the participants. There was a deeply religious component for some, others appreciated the social life and friendships, and still others valued it for the connection their Ethiopian church gave them with their former Ethiopian life. Finally, some participants utilized church congregations in dealing with the personal and familial challenges of daily living in a new country.

Some of the participants talked of a passionate belief in their religion, as it guided and grounded their life: "I don't see it as part of my social needs, but rather it's Christ first and then sort of my second. Of course, I'm benefited, but it's part of my Christian life" [P2]. It also provided an opportunity for close relationships: "It's really good to have sisters and brothers whom you are really close to and whom you spend most of the time …. Our church is a small church, we're like family … It is a big part in my life … " [P2]. Interestingly, Participant 2 talked of how she had not been part of this religious group in Ethiopia, but that in the United States, it had become the focus of her life. Participant 7 talked about moving to DC from Seattle and the role the church played in her DC experience: "Ethiopian Orthodox Church was on … 16th Street. For me to see that, it was joyful. I will be able to go and cry and tell everything to God … .I said, 'You know what, this is the place I need to stay'" [P7]. For her, the church provided a representation of home and comfort and an avenue to communicating with God in a familiar context.

Others talked about how church served as a connection to Ethiopia and their culture and life back "home." "Even when I was in my country, you know, I was participating in the church group like singing a song and things like that. So when I came here, there is a similar church here in DC" [P11]. She continued on to tell about how she found her place there: "So I started to participate there. I registered. I'm a member there. They gave me some assignments here like teaching Ethiopian children. I'm teaching Amharic and also participating in the choir" [P11]. Church served as a link of continuity from her past and current lives and offered a sense of purpose.

Participant 10 emphasized the value of church attendance as an Ethiopian social experience:

> I occasionally go to church … they have churches everywhere in DC … Sometimes, I would go for the coffee, which is bad, but it is … the whole thing after the mass and everything. That is when … you feel like you are back in Ethiopia, you know, and everyone is … running for the special bread they make and then the coffee. That is where you socialize after. [P10]

The coffee, the food, the mingling with friends after the church service – all of this served as a connection with her Ethiopian roots more than any actual religious experiences.

Some participants shared that church was really the only organization with which they were involved. Participant 9 shared her experience singing in the Ethiopian Catholic Church choir: "It feels like I'm back home when I'm there on Sundays … we sing in Amharic. Everybody in there is from Ethiopia. We speak our own language together … It's like I have another family at church. Yes. It's beautiful. I love it." She said this was the only organization she had been involved with continuously for the 7 years she has been in the US. Similarly, Participant 2 explained that church was also her main involvement: "I don't really participate in any other thing outside of church that much." In this sense, connection to church is the sole connection to organized community life for these women.

Participant 12 explained that she took her American born children to both "American and Ethiopian" churches for the cultural opportunities. She said: "The decision to do both is that I want my kids to accustom both of them. So, we went to the morning American church and Sunday school, and they participate. Afternoon, we go to our church, which is a different view, and they learn our language; they learn our customs." She went on to explain how her children could learn about the culture simply from attending church services: "The difference is when you go to American church, you just say hi and bye … In Ethiopia … when you see, you just hug each other and 'Hi, how are you?' That's our culture" [P12]. She followed up:

> And so they see two different cultures. I want them to see. That's my culture. 'Why are you going too much? You just saw them last week, you saw them today.' That's our culture. That's the way we say hi. That's the way we talk. That's the way we laugh [P12].

Both she and her children learned from these interactions: "The reason I'm involved in both is I want the kids to learn, and for myself too. I learn the culture too, and the social life, and the language. That helps me." Her children learned of her culture and language at Ethiopian church and she was exposed to English and American culture at the American church. In this way, the church organization served as an educational opportunity.

Participants talked about the range of ways their churches provided them an avenue to deal with the daily challenges of life. Participant 1 explained that as a church community, they prepare food, make visits, host baby and

wedding showers, and collect money [P1]. "And at the church, we make food when Christmas come in, when somebody dead, when somebody, she born a baby, we contribute food" [P1].

Despite denomination, the church as an organization played an important role in the lives of participants for various reasons – spiritually, connection to Ethiopia, a safe home, an educational environment, and a web of support for facing daily personal and family challenges.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the importance of the church for Ethiopian immigrant women. This illustrates the social capital theory's explanation that social connectedness and relationships within group membership provide benefits to group members. The social capital theory concept of "bonding capital" includes "networks among similar groups or individuals or institutions" (Schneider, 2010, p. 6), which explains how the similarities in background, religious belief, and social customs drew these participants to their church communities. Among these women, bonding capital explains the closeness they could immediately feel in a church community, despite never having met previously. In their church communities, the women were able to find familiarity and a group working on a common religious goal, as well as day to day support in terms of providing meals when a baby is born or celebrating a wedding together. In addition, the church community provided a "bounded solidarity" in the form of shared struggles in learning the language, overcoming culture shock, and trying to earn a living in a new country.

The church further provided a social network in which reciprocity played an important part. Through the church, these women organized to help make food for holidays and to provide comfort and mourning in times of bereavement – taking turns depending on who needed the services at the time. Social capital theory defines this as an example of reciprocation.

"Enforceable trust" is another concept in social capital theory that is based on individual members' compliance with group expectations, not because of internal values or commitments, but due instead to anticipation of future benefits of being in favor with the group (Portes, 1998; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). It is different from reciprocity because it relies on the group as a collective body to enforce through rewards and sanctions (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). One possible demonstration of enforceable trust in this study is the participation of some of the women in church services despite their lack of deep religious belief. Even participants who did not express strong religious beliefs talked of participating in church activities or holy days from time to time. Through the social capital lens, this could be explained as based on enforceable trust. Though they might not

believe, they want to benefit from membership in the group, and participation in the Ethiopian church helps solidify that membership. Another explanation of these behaviors might be bounded solidarity; their commitment to the group and their common struggles in the new land binds them to the other women with similar struggles. Because of their deep commitment to the group, they attend the holy day services as an act of solidarity.

The structural aspect of social capital is clearly demonstrated in the theme of the importance of the role of the church in the lives of the participants. Structural aspects of social capital not only refer to observable social structures such as institutions, organizations, associations, and committees, but also to the rules governing such structures (Krishna & Uphoff, 2002).

Receiving and giving help is an indicator of structural capital among family and friends. The data from this study demonstrate a high level of involvement in this type of reciprocal behavior. As discussed, the church was a key community network in the carrying out of this reciprocal function. Clearly, the church congregations with their attendant participants, services, and cooperative actions are an example of the structural aspect of social capital in the lives of the participants.

The cognitive aspect of social capital is also demonstrated in the church communities in which the women in this study participate. Cognitive aspects of social capital include 1) emotional support and sense of belonging, 2) trust and solidarity (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2002), and 3) information and communication (Harpham et al., 2002). All of these can be demonstrated in the findings of this study in relation to church participation. Participants spoke of how their church community was like a family to them – it provided them a sense of emotional support and belonging. They spoke of working together on projects, serving on committees, and sharing information. This is clearly an example of the way cognitive aspects of social capital work in social networks.

Krishna and Uphoff (2002) discuss the power of social capital when the structural and cognitive aspects work in tandem, as they do in the church communities described by the participants in this study. The cognitive aspects – the trust and sense of belonging shared by the church community – motivate them to collective action such as organizing funerals and weddings, but the structural aspects such as the organization itself, the meeting schedule, the committees, and the leadership allow for the execution of the collective actions. In this way, the participants in this study demonstrate social capital theory's ideal marriage of cognitive and structural aspects of social capital to create powerful networks for action.

The social capital literature is supported in some important ways by this study. Mbanaso and Crewe's (2011) study of African immigrants found that the most important sources of social support for elderly African immigrants were a church organization and an ethnic association because they provide

regularly scheduled meetings, organize cultural activities, and host celebrations native to their countries of origin. The findings of this study support the importance of the church organization in the lives of the Ethiopian immigrant women. Indeed, the church was the most important source of structural/institutional support for the participants. This study did not find ethnic organizations to be a major source of social support for the participants. However, the churches with which the participants were affiliated may have served both the religious and the ethnic center purposes. The majority of the participants were involved with an "Ethiopian" church congregation in which their native language was spoken during the service; the congregation was comprised of other Ethiopians; and often a social hour followed the service during which members drank coffee, socialized, and connected with fellow Ethiopian immigrants. These rituals strengthen the bonding capital among the Ethiopian immigrant group. This strong bonding capital, along with the powerful cognitive and structural aspects of social capital, undergirds the theme that the church was a social home and community for the women.

Limitations of the study and implications for social work

This qualitative study contributes to the knowledge base of the lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrant women, a perspective that has all too often remained invisible in the research. Findings provide social workers and policymakers with in-depth information regarding how Ethiopian women experience immigration, including how informal and formal networks impact the process.

The findings in this study underscore the importance of religious communities among Ethiopian women immigrants. Social workers in refugee centers, health departments, and public schools would benefit from partnering with Ethiopian churches. This would be a focal point for educational outreach about issues such as vaccinations, social service program eligibility, English language classes, or other resources. The leaders of the church have a relationship of trust with the congregants. Social workers should cultivate relationships with the clergy in order to help gain insight into the needs of the community and how they might assist in meeting those needs.

One policy consideration supported by this study is to provide social service funding directly to churches as a way to reach new Ethiopian immigrants. The social capital networks of arriving immigrants help them find churches almost immediately. If state and local governments provided grant funding to Ethiopian churches, they could reach a broad spectrum at a very early point in their post-immigration life. Churches might be engaged to provide educational mentoring services and information sessions on how to take English language entrance exams, as well as college admission

procedures. Further, churches could host job and housing fairs. Connecting this already strong network of immigrants in the church communities with funding agencies would be a beneficial way to leverage the existing bonding social capital and to create linking social capital (Schneider, 2010). Current federal policy sets a precedent for partnering with religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for services to refugees. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) partners with non-governmental organizations, including religious organizations such as Episcopal Migration Ministries, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, to provide services to newly resettled refugees (ORR, 2019). The findings from this study suggest that Ethiopian immigrants could also benefit from services brokered through Ethiopian church communities, in similar ways to ORR partnerships with religious NGOS.

This study further highlights the need for more Ethiopian women in the social work field. The struggles of the researcher, because of her etic perspective suggest, that there is a need for research and practice from the emic perspective. Women with intimate knowledge of the Ethiopian community and culture as well as personal connections could be powerful advocates and serve as instruments in creating bridging and linking social capital (Schneider, 2010). Social work education could facilitate this through recruitment of Ethiopian social work students. Further, in preparing all students for social work practice, it is imperative that academic programs offer students opportunities to learn about the barriers that marginalized groups, such as immigrants, face. Reading the experiences of women in this study can help sensitize non-immigrant students to the challenges and cultural barriers that immigrant women face, which would help prepare them for fieldwork with immigrant populations.

Finally, it is important to note several limitations to this study. First, the lack of Muslim women in the sample population is a limitation. Although there is an Ethiopian Muslim population in the DC area, as evidenced by the predominantly Ethiopian mosque located in Washington, DC, no participants in the study identified as Muslim. This leaves out the perspective of a specific segment of Ethiopian immigrant women. There is a need for further research to include Muslim Ethiopian women. Do Muslim Ethiopian women also rely on social capital networks? Are they as successful at bridging and linking capital as their Christian counterparts? How does their Muslim faith complement or complicate their immigration process and post-immigration life?

As an exploratory qualitative study, the findings are in no way representative nor generalizable. The limited sample was successful in giving a glimpse into the lived experiences of Ethiopian immigrant women's lives, but leaves much room for further research. The findings in this study about

the importance of religion in the lives of the participants lead to more questions about the role of spirituality among Ethiopian immigrant women. Future research should examine how Ethiopian women utilize church for various aspects of spirituality. For example, it would be interesting to understand better how/if refugee and asylees use religion to heal from the painful experiences they fled in Ethiopia.

Note

1. Participants in the study are not identified by name. In this article, they are identified by participant number, which is either written out or bracketed following the reference to the participant. For example, Participant 1 is bracketed [P1].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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