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# Migration experiences of Sierra Leoneans: Acculturation and Psychological Adjustment

Daphne J. Cole

*University of Rhode Island*, [djcole@my.uri.edu](mailto:djcole@my.uri.edu)

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MIGRATION EXPERIENCES OF SIERRA LEONEANS: ACCULTURATION  
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

BY

DAPHNE J. COLE

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OF  
DAPHNE J. COLE

APPROVED:

Thesis Committee:

Major Professor      Paul Florin  
Margaret Rogers  
Ginette Ferszt  
Jasmine Mena

Nasser H. Zawia  
DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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## **Abstract**

From 1991 to 2002, Sierra Leone was a country entrenched in an 11-year civil war, which was characterized by a number of atrocities, including the abduction of children, systematic rape, and severe amputations; significantly impacting thousands who are maimed with deep psychological wounds. The war resulted in nearly 70,000 casualties and millions were displaced. Displaced persons fleeing brutal wars and political persecution are known to experience a number of associated health concerns which are often exacerbated alongside adjusting to another country. The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore the migration experiences of Sierra Leonean immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeking populations in the United States, in order to describe acculturation experiences, psychological adjustment, and associated mental health outcomes during a post-conflict era. The sample comprised 12 persons who emigrated from Sierra Leone to the United States after the civil war. Individual interviews were used and descriptive content and thematic analysis was utilized in order to guide data collection and analysis. Results revealed themes in six domains: impact of the war; reasons for migration; acculturation; psychological impact; strength and resilience; and researcher recommendations. Findings shed light on the unique challenges and triumphs of an underexplored population. There are also implications about the possible benefits of utilizing cultural insiders to conduct research with vulnerable populations.

## Acknowledgments

First I would like to acknowledge the overall support that I have received from my major professor, Paul Florin. Throughout this journey, he has been extremely patient, applauded every triumph, offered continual encouragement through each challenge, and has consistently reminded me of the importance of this research. This project has also benefitted from the thoughtful input and integral feedback of my thesis committee members, Ginette Ferszt, Margaret Rogers, and Jasmine Mena. Of course this project would not be possible without the help and support of Mr. Aiah Fanday and *Friends of Sierra Leone*, alongside all of the wonderful people who were interviewed and have allowed me to share a part of their life story. I would also like to acknowledge Brandis Ruise, Brittney Williams, and Wayne Benevides for all of their help with transcriptions and coding, your efforts really launched me into the final phase of this process. I am also grateful for the support and encouragement of my parents and other family members, friends, mentors and Dr. David Dove who never ceased to provide the reassurance that I needed to keep pushing. Most of all I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for guidance and perseverance throughout this research project. While pursuing this important albeit challenging research topic, I have relied on my faith in God and His promises which state that “*I can do all things Christ who strengthens me*” (Philippians 4:13 New King James Version), “*For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future*” (Jeremiah 29:11 New International Version), and “*But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about*

*my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me*" (2 Corinthians 12:9 New International Version). Resting on these promises has shown me that in times of uncertainty and challenge, spiritual strength and resolve can help one endure the journey. It is my hope that this project represents the first step in examining the underexplored realities of a vulnerable population.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

There are number of associated health concerns among displaced persons who flee their home country due to political strife, persecution, and brutal wars (Akinsulure-Smith & Jones, 2011; Fox & Tang, 2000). These health outcomes can often be exacerbated alongside adjusting to another country and trying to obtain basic resources (Akinsulure-Smith & Jones, 2011). This study aims to qualitatively explore migration experiences of Sierra Leonean displaced persons while considering probable war-related trauma and acculturative experiences in order to understand psychological adjustment in the United States. As research regarding the mental health concerns and psychological adjustment among African immigrant populations in the United States is scant (Kamya, 1997; Venters et al., 2011), this study aims to reveal the nuanced experience of an understudied group while extending the body of literature on the psychological adjustment of displaced populations from conflict regions.

### **Review of Literature**

An 11-year civil war lasting from 1991 to 2002 in Sierra Leone resulted in nearly 70,000 casualties and 2.6 million displaced people (World Health Organization, 2006). As the conflict was characterized by widespread atrocities, including the abduction of children and systematic rape, it has significantly impacted thousands that are maimed with deep psychological wounds. Following the end of the war in 2002, a mental-health survey conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 400,000 Sierra Leoneans suffered from mental illnesses such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, with less than 1% of the population receiving treatment

(WHO, 2006). As many individuals were often displaced and migrated to other countries, it is important to understand how immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeking populations are dealing with trauma in a post-conflict era in the midst of adjusting to life in another country.

### **Civil Unrest in Sierra Leone**

Extensive conflict and displacement continue to impact large proportions of individuals worldwide (Obemeyer & Murray, 2008; Steel, Chey, Silove, Marnane, & van Ommeren, 2009). In 2010, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were nearly 10.55 million refugees and 837,500 asylums seekers displaced by conflict or violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2011). Among all of the regions plagued by war and conflict, Africa is said to be one of the most heavily affected with reports of 11.1 million displaced persons from 21 different countries in 2010 (IDMC, 2011).

In West Africa, there has been a long-standing history of political strife and conflict that have led to civil wars, military coups, and a number of atrocities experienced by civilians. These coups and conflicts have been an immense developmental disaster for West Africa and its 238 million people, resulting in at least 2 million dead during and after the Biafran War, at least 200,000 in the first Liberian civil war, and more than 100,000 in the Sierra Leonean civil wars, with millions more international refugees (Jackson, 2002; McGowan, 2005).

African states in general comprise six of the ten largest groups for refugees (Rasmussen, Smith, & Keller, 2007) and the West African nations of Liberia and Sierra Leone in particular rank among the top 10 refugee-producing countries in the

world in 2000 (Fox & Tang, 2000). In 1991, tensions sparked in Sierra Leone when rebel forces, known as The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), along with a former corporal in the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), and allies from the neighboring country of Liberia, including the former President Charles Taylor, launched their first attack on the country (Akinsulure-Smith & Smith, 2012). The conflict in Sierra Leone was characterized by deep-rooted historical tension between classes (e.g., rural vs. urban, less well-off interior vs. coastal capital of Freetown) and government corruption marked by competition for wealth and resources, especially from diamond mining districts of Sierra Leone (Akinsulure-Smith & Smith, 2011; Beah, 2007; Campbell, 2008; Fox & Tang, 2000; Vinson & Chang, 2012). The initial attack in 1991 led to a bloody civil war that lasted more than a decade as rebel forces wreaked havoc upon civilians of Sierra Leone through horrific violence, trauma and suffering, sexual assault, mutilations, reckless killings, and recruitment of child soldiers (Akinsulure-Smith & Smith, 2011; Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis, 2010; Fox & Tang, 2000; Vinson & Chang, 2012; WHO, 2006; WHO, 2010). By the end of this 11-year conflict, thousands of lives were taken from the many atrocities committed and resulted in more than 400,000 refugees (de Jong, Mulhern, Van de Kam, & Kleber, 2000).

### **Impact of War on Mental Health**

The psychological impact of the decade long conflict in Sierra Leone was pervasive. The experiences of losing loved ones, witnessing deaths along with experiences of torture are serious risk factors for the development of mental illnesses. Existing literature reports a zero to 99% prevalence rate of PTSD and 3 to 86%

prevalence rate of depression in affected regions such as Iran and Sierra Leone (de Jong et al., 2000; Steel et al., 2009). Moreover, as a large proportion of the population experienced psychopathology few rarely received treatment (WHO, 2006). Studies reported that the civil war destroyed most of the health and economic infrastructure during that decade (Alemu et al., 2012). Furthermore, as the war destroyed the basic health infrastructure, it also displaced many health personnel which negatively impacted healthcare at all levels. This included the only psychiatric hospital. As various Sierra Leonean civilians were experiencing a range of psychological sequelae, one could imagine how such deep psychological wounds may worsen as one is forcibly removed from their home and forced to, not only deal with their predicament, but also a new environment.

### **Migration to The United States**

The United Nations Commission on Refugees estimated there were over 15 million refugees and asylees worldwide by the end of 2008 (Akinsulure-Smith & Jones, 2011; UNCHR, 2009). In order to better understand displaced populations and the difficulties they face, it is important to highlight the distinctions between refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. While *immigrants* are individuals that have been granted legal permanent residence by host countries, *refugees* are individuals that cross national boundaries in search of safety because of fear of persecution (Kamya, 1997). Asylum status is available to those who 1) meet the government definition of refugee, 2) are already in the United States, and 3) are seeking admission at a port of entry (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). *Asylum seekers* are those who

apply for protection before their application for asylum has been granted by the government of their host country (Asgary & Segar, 2011).

Chaos and displacement resulting from war-related traumatic events pose significant challenges for forced migrants who are already susceptible to a host of negative health outcomes (Akinsulure-Smith & Jones, 2011). Previous research has even stated that the traumatic experiences of forced migrants are often compounded by the long and arduous, complex process of seeking asylum in a host country (Akinsulure-Smith, 2012). By the end of the Sierra Leonean conflict in 2002, UNCHR reported that more than 130,000 Sierra Leoneans remained refugees or asylum seekers (UNCHR, 2011). These included some 70,000 in Guinea, 40,000 in Liberia, and 5,000 each in Ghana and Gambia and nearly 10,000 in the United States (UNCHR, 2011).

In fact, the United States is specifically noted as one of the largest resettlement communities for those displaced by violent conflict (Akinsulure-Smith, 2009; U.S. Committee for Refugees, 2003). Since 1975 more than two million refugees have settled in the United States, a figure representing more resettled refugees than all other countries combined (UNHCR, 2011). In addition, the United States expends massive amounts of funding to support refugee resettlement, specifically an estimated \$500 million from federal, state and local government, alongside non-governmental agencies (UNHCR, 2011). While the majority of refugees have come to the U.S. from Eastern Europe, a substantial growing population is coming from Asia and Africa (Akinsulure-Smith & Jones, 2011; UNCR, 2009).

## **African Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Immigrants**

Percentages of African immigrants within the United States have increased 40-fold between 1960 and 2007 from roughly 35,355 to 1.4 million, with the majority of the growth taking place since 1990 (Akinsulure-Smith & Jones, 2011; Terrazas, 2009). In addition, between 2001 and 2010, over 860,000 African immigrants gained lawful permanent residence (LPR) in the United States, with 22.3 percent of them gaining residence as refugees or asylees (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2010; Li & Batalova, 2011).

Unlike immigrants, refugee and asylum seekers flee to the United States to escape war, persecution, and other human right violations (Akinsulure-Smith, 2009). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2010) states that both refugees and asylees are eligible to apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status only after one year of continuous presence in the United States as a refugee or asylee. However, upon arrival to the United States displaced individuals may face a number of difficulties obtaining legal residency. Prior to migrating many refugees and asylees endure several chronic challenges during their flights to safety, such as repeated and numerous losses, deprivation of basic needs, separation from caregivers, disruption from education and repeated exposure to violence (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Lustig et al., 2004). Thus the combination of difficulties faced during flights to safety followed by acculturation stressors upon arrival in the United States may exacerbate past war-related traumatic experiences.



## **Acculturation and Mental Health**

Several studies have suggested that adjustment to the host culture is very difficult and stressful (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Mori, 2000). Adjustment concerns include culture displacement, housing difficulties, communication barriers, and problems negotiating medical and educational systems (Ward, Sellers, & Pate, 2011). Acculturation is generally defined as the process of adapting to a culture and it involves the transition that takes place as a result of contact between two differing cultures (Berry, 1997; Berry, 1991; Flannery, Reise, & Yu, 2001). There are two models that describe the acculturative process. The first is the unidimensional model which describes acculturation as the process of moving from one cultural identity (e.g., ethnic identity) to the other (e.g., mainstream cultural identity of host culture) over time (Gordon, 1964; Kang, 2006). This unidimensional model of acculturation is often called an assimilation model or bipolar model and is valued because of its simplicity (Nguyen & von Eye, 2002). Yet, this model has been criticized for assuming a mutual exclusion of the two cultural identities because it does not allow to ethnic minorities to hold full-blown bicultural identities (Rogler, Cortés, & Malgady, 1991; Kang 2006).

The second model of acculturation is the bidimensional model that highlights two discrete dimensions of the acculturation process: (1) the adaptation to the culture of the host country and (2) maintaining the culture of heritage (Berry, 1980; Flannery, Reise, & Yu, 2001). The acculturative process is one that can involve a number of physical, biological, political, economic, social, as well as psychological changes (Berry, 1997; Berry & Kim, 1988). The stress experienced by this adaptive process is

referred to as *acculturative stress* (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004, Mena, Padilla & Maldonado, 1987). Extant research suggests that the health of refugees and immigrants, especially mental health, tends to be poorer compared with the domestic population of the host country (Fox & Tang, 2000). While successful acculturation can be viewed as a marker of positive mental health outcomes (Berry & Kim, 1988; Ngo, Tran, Gibbons, & Oliver, 2001), it is important to note existing literature on acculturation and mental health has reported inconsistent results. Even as some reports have found that less acculturated immigrants experience more psychological distress (Ngo, et al. 2001; Vega, Warheit, Buhl-auth, & Meinhardt, 1984), other reports have shown adverse effects for more acculturated immigrants, such as being alienated from their cultural group (Burnam, Hough, Karno, Escobar, & Telles, 1987; Ngo, et al. 2001). Considering that the relationship between levels of acculturation and mental health outcomes is often complex, understanding the degree of stress experienced during acculturation might illuminate why immigrant populations are more susceptible to negative mental health outcomes. Previous studies have found moderate relationships between acculturative stress and mental health symptoms (Lee, et al., 2004); alluding to the idea that when immigrants experience a number of changes in the acculturative process, the stress of adapting to the host culture leads to experiences of psychological distress. Furthermore, as there is a lack of research that examines acculturation specifically among people of African descent, it is important to consider culture-specific elements of the acculturative process (Obasi & Leong, 2010).

## **Acculturation, Trauma and Mental Health**

While acculturation may differentially impact the mental health of immigrant populations, it is of great importance to highlight that *premigration* experiences, such as war, torture, experiencing the death of loved ones, starvation, and other deprivations can also put immigrants and refugees at risk for developing social and mental health problems in a host culture (Ngo, et al, 2001). One notable study exploring pre-migration trauma, mental health status and post-migration adjustment among Sudanese refugees (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006) found that *both* pre-migration trauma and post-migration adjustment were associated with mental illnesses.

### **Purpose & Research Questions**

It is important to parse out what elements of post-migration adjustment and premigration trauma may be driving higher instances of psychological distress among West African migrants. The primary aim of this study was to qualitatively explore the migration experiences of Sierra Leonean immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeking populations in the United States, in order to describe acculturation experiences, psychological adjustment, and associated mental health outcomes during a post-conflict era.

This study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How do Sierra Leoneans describe their adjustment to the United States after probable exposure to conflict Sierra Leone?
2. What factors have aided and/or hindered their adjustment to life in the United States?

## Chapter 2: Method

### Participants

Participants were ( $n=12$ ) individuals, who were originally from Sierra Leone and were recruited through flyers and email forwards from a community organization. Seven participants were women, while five were men. The sample all identified as Sierra Leonean but varied in ethnic background, Krio ( $n=5$ ), Temne ( $n=3$ ), Mende ( $n=1$ ), Fullah ( $n=1$ ), Limba ( $n=1$ ) and Kono ( $n=1$ ). Participants ranged in age from 25-56 ( $M=33$ ,  $SD=10.7$ ). Only two participants reported having a high school diploma/GED, while most participants reported having at least some degree of university education, some college ( $n=3$ ), bachelor's degree ( $n=4$ ), and graduate degree ( $n=3$ ). Length of time in the United States ranged from 1-23 years ( $M=8.7$ ,  $SD=6.8$ ). Additional demographics can be seen in Table 1.

While the sample size in this study ( $n=12$ ) is smaller than samples used in quantitative studies, such a sample is consistent with the sizes usually found in qualitative studies that range from 5 to 25 participants (Kvale, 1996).

### Measures

#### *Semi-Structured Interview*

A semi-structured open-ended interview was utilized in order to examine migration experiences, acculturation, and psychological adjustment. In-depth semi-structured interviews aim to gain information about participant experiences, as well as information about the meaning that participants ascribe to those experiences (Seidman, 1998). Participants were asked to describe their migration experiences and latter

adjustment to the United States after leaving Sierra Leone during the civil war. They were also asked to describe Sierra Leone during the war and some decided to share personal experiences, while others spoke generally about the events that happened during the war.

The interview guide that was developed for the current study was used to establish the general focus of the interview (see Appendix III). Research has shown that utilizing an interview guide serves to assist the researcher in obtaining information from all participants as well as providing some sequencing and guidance without interfering with the flow of the participant's reflection (Polit & Beck, 2008; Seidman, 2006). To assure that the interview guide contained appropriate verbiage that was culturally sensitive, age appropriate and non-judgmental, faculty members who have expertise working with multiethnic populations reviewed the interview guide and appropriate adjustments were made. Adjustments to the interview guide were also made based on input regarding linguistic and culturally appropriate language from the members of the non-profit organization, *Friends of Sierra Leone*. Moreover, it is noted that there is gap in the acculturation literature that is specifically applied to people of African descent; therefore questions addressing acculturation were guided by examining the Measurement of Acculturation Strategies for People of African Descent (MASPAD) scale (Obasi & Leong, 2010) and the short version of the Padilla SAFE acculturative stress measure.

Throughout the interview process, informal member checking and various follow-up questions were used to verify participant responses and to make sure that descriptions were truly being explained through the lens of the participants and not

imposed by the views of the researcher. Personal reflections including thoughts and feelings and reactions of this researcher were also documented in a personal journal after each interaction with participants and throughout the coding process. Debriefing sessions were also held with the principal investigator of the study after a series of interviews and throughout coding.

### *Demographics*

Participants were also instructed to provide basic demographic information such as current age, gender, ethnicity, language(s) spoken, relationship status, education, employment, length of time in the United States, immigration status, whether or not they had access to healthcare, and if they ever received counseling services (see Appendix IV).

### **Procedure**

Following the approval of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Rhode Island, in April of 2014 participants were recruited with the collaboration of the vice president of the non-profit organization, *Friends of Sierra Leone*. Eligible participants were at least 18 years of age, migrated to the United States from 1991 up until 2014, were in the United States for at least 6 months, and were able to understand, read and speak the English language. Flyers along with a copy of interview questions were distributed at a community event sponsored by the Sierra Leonean Embassy, *Friends of Sierra Leone*, and various other organizations located in the Washington DC metro area (see Appendix I). Flyers were also distributed via email listserv forwards by *Friends of Sierra Leone*. 17 participants expressed interest. 2 of these either failed to schedule interviews or later declined participation.

In late May and early June 2013, follow-up phone calls and email messages were made to schedule interviews. 15 face-to-face interviews ranging from 15-to 50-minutes took place in the participants' homes or at mutually agreed upon public locations (e.g., outside patio of coffee shop or community civic center). At the public locations the researcher was mindful to pick a quiet location where others could not hear the detailed account of interview responses.

Prior to the interview, an explanation of the purpose and process of the research study as well as the risks and benefits was discussed with each participant. Participants were asked to explain their understanding of the study for clarification and then were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix II). As this study involved the use of audio recorders, participants were also asked to consent to having the interview recorded. Participants were also made aware that the researcher would be applying for a Certificate of Confidentiality. The semi-structured interview, which served as the qualitative portion of this interview, was administered first then participants were instructed to fill out the demographic sheet. Upon completion of the interview, participants were compensated with a \$25 gift card for their time. Three participants were later deemed ineligible after the interviews, because they were either born in the United States or emigrated from the United Kingdom during the time of the war, however these participants were also compensated for their time and participation.

After all the interviews were conducted, qualitative data was initially transcribed word-for-word from the audiotaped interviews with a team of research assistants and the researcher. However, due to the large quantity of qualitative data, a

transcription company, *TranscribeMe* professionally transcribed the majority of the audiotaped interviews. All transcriptions were edited several times in order make sure verbatim responses were accurately captured. Data were also edited to eliminate all possible identifiers, and participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. These pseudonyms were then linked to randomly selected ID numbers in order to provide links between interview and demographic data.

#### *Ethical Considerations and Challenges for Vulnerable Populations*

Throughout this project it was important to be mindful of the ethical implications inherent in qualitative research, particularly with sensitive topics. Given the vulnerability of this population, this research necessitated full IRB review by the University of Rhode and every effort was made to make to abide by ethical principles described by Polit & Beck (2008) and Richards & Morse (2007). The amount of scrutiny this qualitative study has undergone was to be expected as many Institutional Review Boards often apply the same criteria for used for biomedical research (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Such inquiry often extends issues of physical harm, confidentiality, and anonymity to include concerns about the risks of psychological harm or “emotional distress” (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Such is the reason why various a priori strategies were developed for the current study, in order to address any unanticipated harm.

While interviewing individuals from a vulnerable population who may be at risk for distress, it was important to make additional considerations in order to safeguard their protection. Individuals who have been displaced from their homeland due to conflict and exposure to war-related trauma have a high potential to experience



intense emotional reactions. Prior to conducting the interviews, it was important to consider that a participant could become distressed and to always be prepared for this possibility. As clinicians are trained in assessment and attunement to subtle displays of distress, it was imperative that the process of gathering data did not distract me from gathering data, as I am a training clinician. Research on qualitative interviewing conducted by applied psychologists states that researchers must be attentive to crossing the boundary from pursuing inquiry to providing therapy (Haverkamp, 2005). Even as the clinical skills acquired through scientist-practitioner training make clinicians exceptionally effective qualitative research interviewers, it may also increase risks for both participants and for researchers (Haverkamp, 2005; Kvale, 1996, Lowes & Gill, 2006). Moreover, when participants share personal information in a research setting they have not consented to an experience that will produce a change in their view of themselves or their relationships, as would be expected in psychotherapy (Kvale, 1996; Haverkamp, 2005). While conducting the interviews, process consent was utilized in order to establish an ongoing and interactive process in which the participants and I could engage in a collaborative manner to renegotiate consent on an ongoing basis (Haverkamp, 2005; Smythe & Murray, 2000). In qualitative studies especially with vulnerable populations, or emotional topics, a strategy of process consent is often employed (Polit and Beck, 2008; Haverkamp, 2005; Usher and Arthur, 1998). Each participant was also reminded that they could withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty.

Additionally, if the interview proved to be emotionally difficult, a number of identified mental health and support agencies located throughout the metro

Washington D.C. area were made available to participants (see Appendix V). The list of referral agencies was identified after each site was called and was found to have experience working with African populations from conflict-zones. All participants were also called 2-5 days post-interview to “check-in” about their emotional well-being. They were asked to provide their contact information for follow up on a separate form (see Appendix VI) and were assured that any forms with identifying information would be kept completely separate from demographic forms and interview data. Such efforts were taken as the literature suggests that qualitative researchers should demonstrate another aspect of competence, consisting of having sufficient knowledge of the potential consequences of an intense interview and acting to provide appropriate follow-up support (Haverkamp, 2005; Lowes & Gill, 2006; McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber, 2001).

Furthermore, as I was mindful of the fine line that could be drawn between the role of a clinician and qualitative researcher, I took advantage of a training opportunity for physicians and students at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, which offered skills in evaluating survivors of torture and other human rights violations. While I did not intend on administering full psychological assessments of participants, such training was helpful in identifying and quantifying emotionally difficult material for the members of the Institutional Review Board. According to the Physicians for Human Rights (2012), emotionally difficult material is any question that may elicit a typical reaction that is associated with severe trauma (e.g., mistrust, sadness, fear, shame, rage, guilt or irritability or in more severe cases withdrawal or flattened affect that could evidence an attempt to detach from the traumatic event.

Quantifying emotionally difficult material for the purposes of this research project was important because I had to be aware of such affective responses during the interviews and be prepared to respond appropriately; not in the role of a clinician but in the role of a qualitative researcher.

Moreover, one of the most challenging endeavors during this project was applying for the Certificate of Confidentiality. This procedure was necessary as an additional safeguard to protect participants who may reveal information about their immigration status, which could range anywhere between permanent resident to refugee or asylum seeker. At the conclusion of data collection many inquiries were made with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in order to follow the appropriate procedures to have a certificate issued. After the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) was identified as the appropriate agency for the application, several IRB revisions were made to fulfill requirements of the application, including a revision of the consent form to reflect a full description of the protection afforded by the Certificate of Confidentiality (see Appendix VII). As the participants were fully consented and the interviews were completed prior to the submission of the application for the Certificate of Confidentiality, this revision to the consent form presented an ethical challenge. The application for the Certificate of Confidentiality would not be accepted without the revision but the participants who were already fully consented would have to be notified of this change. After receiving guidance from the members of the IRB, it was decided that the revised consent form could be mailed out to participants with an explanation of the changes once the Certificate of Confidentiality was issued.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts put forth to adequately fulfill the requirements for Certificate of Confidentiality, NIMH disapproved the application on the grounds that this study did not focus on a mental illness or disorder. Following that disapproval, the IRB committee was notified of the decision and determined that it was not necessary to submit another application to a different institute of NIH. This challenging and arduous experience has shown that despite putting forth due diligence to safeguard a vulnerable population, sometimes the journey a researcher experiences can be very uncertain especially when examining underexplored phenomena among an understudied population.

#### *Benefits of Being a Cultural Insider*

Research on ethical challenges with immigrants and refugees states that working with a cultural insider is one of the most important strategies to employ when designing and implementing a study (Birman, 2005). Throughout this project, I felt that this research has benefitted greatly not only through collaborating with an organization like *Friends of Sierra Leone*, which aims to promote and celebrate African culture and is widely regarded as a major advocate for Sierra Leonean issues in the United States, but also because as a researcher conducting this project I represent a *partial insider*. Due to my shared cultural identity with the participants, as my parents are originally from Sierra Leone, I was able to identify *Friends of Sierra Leone*, as a collaborating agency to work with through existing connections within the Sierra Leonean community. Moreover, working the vice president of *Friends of Sierra Leone*, who knows many individuals involved within the DC metro Sierra Leonean community, expedited the recruitment of participants and data collection process.

Working with such an organization, coupled with the matched cultural identity of participants and the researcher is beneficial not only because of the familiarity and understanding of the culture, but the personal investment to act ethically according to the culture of the research participants and the culture of the researcher (Birman, 2005; Tapp, Kelman, Triandis, Writsman, & Coelho, 1974).

Another benefit of the matched cultural identity of participants and the researcher was that during this project I was embraced as a guest in many of the participants' homes and they really opened up about their life experiences. While I made sure to adhere to the procedures set forth by the research protocol, many of the participants ( $n=8$ ), and I sat talked after the conclusion of the interview. Customary to Sierra Leonean culture, I was also routinely offered a beverage or meal upon conclusion of the interview when it took place in their home. One participant in particular, who used the pseudonym 'Judith' seemed initially distant and gave short and guarded answers in the beginning of the interview, delved into more detailed accounts of her experiences of the war, after asked one of the final questions of the interview guide (e.g., "*Is there anything else that you would like to share?*"). Such an experience may account for the some of the positive effects participants experience when participating in research about sensitive topics (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Dyregrov, 2004; Hutchinson, Wilson, & Skodol Wilson, 1994). Extant research indicates that a cathartic process can occur in research on sensitive topics, which is characterized by a sense of relief that seems to come in part from having an accepting and engaged listener (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Skodol Wilson, 1994).

Additionally, an emergent body of research has highlighted that research participation may also serve the interests of the participants and not only the researcher because rather than causing distress, it may be may be educational, enriching, therapeutic, or empowering for vulnerable populations (Dyregrov, 2004). In the case of this research project, it appears as if the matched identity of the researcher and the population of inquiry may have bolstered experiences of catharsis; especially as Kvale (1984), has found that “the very act of talking with another person that shares a common interest, is genuinely interested in your viewpoint, and who is not critical can be a richly rewarding experience” (Corbin & Morse, 2003, p. 339). Such sentiments were supported when another participant, who used the pseudonym ‘Olu’, told me that talking about his experiences felt as if he received counseling services even though his demographic form illustrated that he never received counseling services.

### **Theoretical and Analytic Approach**

After reading the transcriptions several times with the assistance of a team of research assistants, data were analyzed using a qualitative description approach that used content and thematic analysis to examine codes or themes that emerged from the data. This methodology is a useful way to identify, analyze and describe data in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers utilizing descriptive content and thematic analysis not only aim establish categories and count the number of instances where the categories exist within the text, but such methods also allow one to derive meaning from the context of the text (Joffe & Yardley, 2003). Depending on the level of inquiry, researchers may derive *manifest* content from the data, characterized by

something directly observable, or *latent* content, which relies on a more deductive level of inquiry and involves an interpretation of the underlying meaning of the text (Joffe & Yardley, 2003; Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). While the coding strategy employed in this study heavily relied on inductive reasoning, where themes and categories emerged from the data from the research team's careful examination and constant comparison (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009), it is important to note that this methodology did not exclude deductive reasoning, especially due to the richness of the data provided. Research has shown that generating some concepts from preexisting theories and studies is also useful, especially at the initial stage of data analysis (Berg, 2001, as cited in Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Nvivo Version 10 was used to assist with the coding and analysis of the transcribed data. Coding involved open coding of categories and subcategories by examining units of data (sentences and/or phrases) and capturing responses to the interview questions. Interviews were first coded by the researcher and then coded independently by an undergraduate research assistant. Throughout the coding process, memos were written to capture the formation of initial codes and subsequent revision and refinement of final categories and subcategories. The coding team often engaged in discussions about the coding process and interpretations until a consensus was found.

In the initial phase of coding, it is important to underscore that there was one instance where I had a disagreement with the undergraduate research assistant about the interpretation of a code for a participant who had a verbose manner of speaking. This participant's interview was actually the most challenging interview to code due

the richness of experience he provided. At that time the undergraduate research assistant confidently shared his interpretation of this participant's experience beyond what was verbally stated in the text and I was subsequently confused because the aim was to simply capture the participant's response to the research question. In an attempt to reach a consensus we listened to the audio recording several times while reviewing the transcription, yet there was still disagreement about the meaning of the text. The undergraduate research assistant shared that he derived his interpretation based on the context of the entire interview. I found that it was important to advise the undergraduate research assistant to refrain from reading too far into the text because the participant's cultural background influenced his way of expression and verbal mannerisms. I also explained that there might be cross-cultural differences in the underlying meaning of the participant's statement, which is why member-checking, or follow up questions were used to verify responses. Finally, I also reminded the undergraduate research assistant that the purpose of the analysis was to *describe* the data while staying as true to the data as possible. That disagreement, not only exposed our different cultural interpretations of the text, which led to a slightly impassioned debate, but also accentuated the importance of identifying underlying assumptions in qualitative research.

Within qualitative research, I'm inclined to fall in line with the underlying assumptions of the constructivist line of inquiry. I believe that each participant has constructed the nature of their reality, which is to be interpreted by the researcher noticing common themes. Just as Marshall & Rossman (1995) claim that "the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the



participant views it, not as the researcher views it”, such reasoning is why descriptive thematic and content analyses were utilized in the current study. The aim was to try to stay as true to what the data said because I wanted the participants to tell *their* story.

After that clarification was made, the undergraduate research assistant and I continued to engaged in discussions about the coding process and interpretations until a general consensus was found. Inter-coder reliability was also calculated across interviews in NVivo and resulted in a Kappa of .82, indicating a high degree of agreement across coders. Each coder also independently documented interpretations about the underlying themes apparent across interviews and discussed overall themes found in the study.

Moreover, as the coding process initially yielded finely demarcated themes, categories and subcategories, a faculty member with qualitative research expertise helped with the refinement of the final themes, categories and subcategories for the current study. We reviewed the codebook established in the initial phases of coding and engaged in discussions about what major themes, categories, and subcategories best fit the vast amount of data yielded from participants. Morse (2008) highlights the importance of distinguishing between categories and themes in qualitative research, stating that “categories” capture essentially *what* is in the data, while a “theme” is the significant *essence* that runs throughout the data.

### *Trustworthiness*

Trustworthiness was addressed in the current study using a number of strategies discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is characterized by credibility, dependability, confirmability and

transferability. Credibility was established through informal member checking during interviews, the use of descriptive or “Nvivo” codes in the language of the participants, and by double-checking transcripts to ensure that they were verbatim accounts of participant responses. Furthermore, journaling took place throughout data collection and analysis to document and check the biases of the researcher. Creating an audit trail of records generated throughout the study supported dependability and confirmability. All memos, journal entries, and interview and coding notes were maintained throughout the study. All materials were made available to all members of the master’s thesis committee. Transferability, or level generalizability, was supported with the use of thick descriptions of research findings.

### Chapter 3: Results

The purpose of the individual interviews ( $N=12$ ) was to explore the migration experiences of Sierra Leonean immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers utilizing the two following research questions:

- 1) *How do Sierra Leoneans describe their adjustment to the United States after probable exposure to conflict Sierra Leone?*
- 2) *What factors have aided and/or hindered their adjustment to life in the United States?*

After examining the interview results emergent themes fell across the following six domains: 1) impact of the war; 2) reasons for migration; 3) acculturation; 4) psychological impact; 5) strength and resilience; and 6) researcher recommendations. All themes were organized temporally from the time of premigration to subsequent adjustment in the United States and themes 1-5 specifically address the first research question. Themes 3 & 5 specifically address the second research question, while theme 6 presents additional findings that serve to aid researchers working with vulnerable populations. The following sections will provide detailed descriptions of the themes and categories that emerged from the interview data.

#### *Impact of the War*

The following four categories emerged to describe the *impact of the war* in Sierra Leone: a) *descriptions of war*; b) *direct impact of war*; 3) *indirect impact of war*; and 4) *post-war Sierra Leone*.

Out of the 12 participants in the study, many ( $n=11$ ) described the war in Sierra Leone as a *terrible and horrible experience*, that was *terrifying, very stressful*, and *devastating*. For example Olu, a 25- year-old participant stated:

**Olu:** Describing Sierra Leone at that time-- Sierra Leone was like..... Sierra Leone was like a farm area. [silence] Sierra Leone was a blood stained ground. Meaning the land was filled with lifeless bodies. I think, like I just said, we have seen one of the most devastated act in the whole wide world in Africa or in the whole wide world to this day.

Thomas, a 56-year old participant echoed those sentiments describing dire conditions.

**Thomas:** I was there when the war started and it ended in 2002. That moment was very, very, very, very, very stressful, very, very pathetic, nowhere to go.

While another participant, 33-year old Gloria, described the rebel soldiers.

**Gloria:** I don't know, like when you talk about rebels, I would imagine these monsters, I wont imagine people, I'll imagine these monsters.

Nearly all participants ( $n=11$ ) were *directly impacted* by the war in Sierra Leone evidenced by witnessing acts of violence (e.g., seeing limbs cut, people killed, raped), having their sense of security threatened, experiencing a lack of resources (e.g., food and water), losing family members and/or loved ones and fleeing for safety. Judith, age 25, Laila, age 39, and Will, age 30, all describe their experiences below.

**Judith:** It's very painful. At my own age at that time, I don't want to see killing people in front of my face. Seeing a lot of people - more than 1,000 people. Because every day, you see a dead person in the streets. You call out to pee, because it's a mosque you can see outside, and everybody's lying down, lying down, lying down.

**Laila:** Then we had to evacuate from where we lived to somewhere else. And that was.... things were hard at that time because we went to stay with some of our relatives...and they don't have a lot space...enough room for us to spare...that was hard.

**Will:** It was very terrible. You can hear gunshots everywhere. In fact I saw somebody got killed in front of my eye.

Marie, a 40-something year old participant even spent some time as a refugee in another African country where she faced other challenges:

**Marie:** I went to Guinea and happened to travel to other countries and experienced life as a refugee in those countries. Then I returned back in 1997 and right after Christmas the rebels attacked again. And this time I told myself I'm not going to Guinea; it was a very unfriendly country. It is a very unfriendly country.

While Thomas and his family had to find refuge in the rural forests of the provinces:

**Thomas:** I spent at least-- I know my family 3 months in the bush...but one thing in the bush when that 3 months we commit ourselves to prayers, we were eating bush meat, bush meat, ... no rice.

While the majority of participants were directly impacted by the war, two out of the 11 participants who were directly impacted described how the war initially impacted them *indirectly*, because they were not living in the rural provinces of Sierra Leone at the beginning of the war. Two participants, (Laila and Gloria) describe how the war impacted them initially.

**Laila:** The people in the Provinces and the people who were unemployed...and then the ones...that were...that.... the ones that had a lot of kids with low salary.... things were hard for them.

**Gloria:** During the war. Well, the war started in 1991, and I was only 11 years then. And it started in the provinces. So, I just want to give you a little background because when it started in the provinces, it's like - for me Freetown was normal. It was like nothing happening.

Only 1 participant, 25-year old Vicky described how the war in Sierra Leone primarily impacted other people because her family was well off and she did not reveal any indication that she directly witnessed violent acts but seems to have had an *indirect impact of the war*.

**Vicky:** I could imagine it was tough. A lot of things changed. It wasn't the same Sierra Leone, wasn't--the peace wasn't there so you know, just living in fear, not knowing how tomorrow is going to be and also-- but my family, they were well

off. They had you know, businesses and money. So I'm sure their businesses suffered a lot because of what was going on. But today I know that they're doing okay, they manage. They managed to survive it okay. I don't really think they were affected too much by the war.

While participants were providing various descriptions of Sierra Leone during the war, ( $n=5$ ) participants mentioned factors relevant to *post-war Sierra Leone*. Three participants (Judith, age 25, Ida, age 49, and Laila, age 39), described instances of overcrowding in the capital city of Freetown, a hectic climate, lack of housing, and how many individuals are still in need.

**Judith:** They have a lot of people there, like they're still living there like the war is affecting them. They have no place to sleep, so they need help.

**Ida:** When the war finished, I was there. Imagine you see people running, you see this oh lord-- It was not easy. It was not. And, everything just begin to go backward, because they burn schools, burn you know? That's the bad thing... Yeah. It was not easy, to live in Sierra Leone after the war.

**Laila:** Oh yes, because a lot of people when they travel to Freetown, they don't want to go back. They don't want to go back...just like for some of us, when we come here, we don't want to go back. We just want to go visit and then come back...a lot of people. It will be like some people don't even have a place to stay, they decide to stay around the... beach.

Out of 5 participants mentioning post-war factors, 2 participants, (Thomas and Olu), mentioned how Sierra Leone experienced some sense of relief.

**Thomas:** And up 'til now 75% of all, some of the villages, people will not return there again because they have no houses again, no more houses, no schools, there are no schools, children yea, for nearly out of the 11, eh 10 years of civil war, no school, nobody was going to school. Yea everybody rushed down to the capital city of Freetown, there; there was a little bit of salvation.

**Olu:** And I want to acknowledge all like the people who stand to bring this 11-year bloody war to an end. Sierra Leone is now a different land. I think we're experiencing good life, good things is coming on. Yeah.

### *Reasons for Migration*

When participants were asked about their *reasons for migrating* to the United States, 5 categories emerged, a) *education*, b) *chasing the American Dream*, c) *initially came to visit*, d) *came for family*, and e) *seeking safety*. Out of the 12 participants in the study ( $n=5$ ) stated they came to the United States in order to seek or further their education. Three participants (Olu, age 25, Tiffany, age 25, and Thomas, age 56) describe their educational pursuits below.

**Olu:** Yeah, so to answer your question directly, my purpose of coming to the United States is for education.

**Tiffany:** It was family and just better education. I believe that my dad wanted his children to have the best education and he felt like this was the place for us to have that experience and further our education.

**Thomas:** To educate, to transform my life because I want to be somebody here in the U.S. and I want to be somebody back in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Additionally, ( $n=5$ ) participants stated that they migrated to the United States in order to chase the American Dream. Three participants, (Leo, age 28, Michael, age 30 and Thomas, age 56) describe their experiences below.

**Leo:** Like the reason why I came here for me particularly, I'm in the line of chasing down American dream you know.

**Michael:** Like my friend said it earlier, I came here basically because of the American dream.

**Thomas:** As I told you at the initial stage of this interview, I prayed for this, yes. I know that what I won't get back home, the promise land I will come to get it. Yes. And the United States is the promise land.

While many participants relocated to the United States for education and/or to pursue the American Dream, half of all participants ( $n=6$ ) stated that they relocated for *family*, with the intention of joining family members and/or spouses in the U.S. One

participant, Laila, even mentioned her reasoning for relocation was twofold, to join her spouse in the U.S. but to also provide support for family back in Sierra Leone.

**Laila:** Because when I was back home I was the one taking care of my family...not one of my parents...my family. So when I came here, I said to myself, "How am I going to support my family?"

Out of the 6 participants that relocated to the United States for family, 1 participant, Gloria, mentioned that while her husband accounted for her staying in the United States, she *initially came to the U.S. on a visit* before embarking on her medical studies back in Sierra Leone.

**Gloria:** I came for a visit, I was in-- I was just accepted to a medical school back home and before I embarked on the seven year it was-- our education system as you know is slightly different. It was going to be seven full years and then before the other steps, It's not like here four-four. And so my mom was like, "Okay, take a break, travel little, and then you start." I just lost my dad, so, for the first time coming here, I stop and think, "Is this really what I want to do? Is that a path that I want for myself or is that a path that was already laid out for me?" Everybody says, "Oh, you're going to be a doctor." So, for first time I sat down and think about what I want to do.

She also remarked how her decision to stay in the United States reflected a level of autonomy in deciding her life path.

**Gloria:** Yes, because for the first time I was saying, I thought about what I wanted. I want to do what I want. I don't know if it was the right thing. At least I did it my way.

Interestingly enough, out of all participants, only 1 participant mentioned relocating to the United States in order to *seek safety* from the war in Sierra Leone. Vicky described how her family fled Sierra Leone at the very beginning of the war to find refuge in the United States.



**Vicky:** Right when we came was the start of the war. I think the Civil War was getting ready to break out or had already broke out. So for safety reasons is why we came here and also hope for a better future.

### *Acculturation*

As participants described various reasons for deciding to relocate to the United States, when they described the process of adapting to the culture of the United States, two categories emerged: a) *logistics and difficulties* and b) *acculturative stressors*. Each category revealed subcategories, which are further explained below.

As participants described the logistics and difficulties of relocating to the United States they mentioned a) *who they arrived with*, with large majority ( $n=8$ ) arriving with a family member, ranging from a mother, child, and/or spouse. Only four ( $n=4$ ) participants stated they came to the United States by themselves. Participants also described logistical difficulties they faced b) *upon arrival*. Such difficulties ranged from getting used to the environment ( $n=10$ ), weather ( $n=3$ ), language ( $n=4$ ) and transportation ( $n=6$ ), to problems securing housing ( $n=3$ ) and/or a job ( $n=3$ ). Five participants describe these logistical difficulties below.

**Laila:** When I first came...everything was strange. I didn't know where to start, where to go.... how am I going to make it? That was one of the challenges.

**Olu:** Oh, yes. Shelter. That's one major problem Sierra Leoneans always encounter when they come to the States. Imagine coming to the United States, you have been Visa'd, come to the United States, maybe for study or whatever purpose and then you don't have none of your family in the United States. I mean it's difficult, it's stressful. You want to come to the United States in order for you to get western civilization or whatever like education or find yourself a better job, so you can sponsor your family back home. But you don't have someone that will receive you, that will shelter you, like homing you for the moment, right. That's a major thing. That's a major problem.

**Ida:** Yeah, when you come to the U.S., the language. Yeah, because like when you talk to them, they'd be like, "I don't understand you."

**Will:** Yes. I came here in the winter. The place was very cold, and I have never experienced such kind of cold before. So it's like I was always inside wearing so many clothes [chuckles].

**Thomas:** Very difficult experience that I got---especially like now. Now the experience that are presently, I'm out of, I lost my job since December last year. So I'm going through all these difficulties.

Some participants, ( $n=2$ ) even mentioned experiencing changes in marital status after arrival either for economic reasons or reasons associated with other settled Sierra Leoneans in the United States.

**Thomas:** Yeah we stayed for a few uh then we moved, we came to [current location] but she decided to leave me. Yea simply because inequality in income...to be honest... I was paid, my first job there is \$8.25 and she was earning \$12.

**Ida:** No although when I came here, I come to my husband but at the end of the day we end up break up. And I think that like when Africans come from-- here, when their home is good. But when they come here, your own Sierra Leoneans will go and destroy your marriage, go and destroy your relationship that is what is the thing here.

Furthermore, while participants mentioned logistical difficulties, all participants described acculturative stressors that fell along four subcategories:

a) *cultural differences*, b) *stigma and differential treatment*, c) *marginalization*, and d) *contention between African and African/Black Americans*.

Nearly all participants, ( $n=11$ ) mentioned that they experienced cultural differences which were characterized by differences in the way of interacting with others, adjusting to the food, difficulties mixing aspects of African culture and American culture and feeling at home in the United States. Four participants (Olu, Judith, Vicky and Will) described their experiences below.

**Olu:** I'm talking of the interacting, the way of speak like, African, Sierra Leoneans to be specific, we respect elders, way of dressing, the way of approaching issues, is quite different with Americans. Like for instance, Sierra Leoneans, when you're

talking to an elder, you can't look directly into their eyes. Not like you're shy, but it's a sign of respect.

**Judith:** I don't eat certain foods - I don't eat them because they give me a reaction, so like it's very difficult. I don't eat burger. Don't eat cheese, so they all like adjusting to that. Cheese is everywhere here.

**Vicky:** I still feel like there are a lot of things that I just don't connect with, a lot of people who are from here, you know? It's, not that I don't try - I do. But, I do understand that our cultures are different you know? Even the way that I speak at work, for instance. You know like, they just don't understand why I act the way I do, or why I say - you know what I'm saying? I don't feel like I can be comfortable or be myself around them because they don't understand.

**Will:** Whenever I want to go out, you see-- they are inviting us for a party, the way they dress, with ours it's quite different. We always have our jeans on. But for them - you guys - you are very formal. Our way of life is very simple. Even if you are without any money, you can live. But in this place, if you do not have any money, then you are stranded.

While participants remarked on cultural differences, ( $n=8$ ) participants also described experiences of *stigma and differential treatment* on the basis of their cultural background. Such experiences were characterized by facing negative stereotypes of Africans and subsequently working harder to dismantle such views, feeling personally devalued due to menial jobs, and having foreign educational degrees that lack equivalency to degrees obtained in the U.S. A few participants ( $n=4$ ) described such experiences below.

**Gloria:** A lot of people look at you like you come from Africa and you know nothing. "Oh, you come from Africa, Can you do that? Oh, you speak English, Oh..." Comments and stuff yea, and the thing is - even at work I always say it - we normally go to these seminars, women and whatever. I'm part of the WN, which is the women network, and they talk about how women are disadvantaged. And I always say, "Well I have three things going against me. One, I'm a woman. Two, I'm Black. Three, I have an accent." So the challenge you face is, you have to know your stuff. And when you speak, you have to, as best as possible, show them that you know.

**Olu:** I mean, like I will be housing his home. When I mean housing like taking care of all domestic works. Launder his clothe. I mean, it's good actually to take

care of house and all that, but I was - I don't know how to put it - I was disvalued. I was disvalued.

**Thomas:** I'm a permanent resident and a second-class citizen.

**Marie:** Right off you realize that there wasn't much consideration for your African bachelor's. I came with a bachelor's degree and I kept sensing the pressure to start a degree all over again rather than move forward with what I have.

Additionally, a couple of participants ( $n=5$ ) mentioned that they were not actively involved in the Sierra Leonean community and they had no desire to be. While one would be inclined to describe their experiences as aspects of *marginalization*, they did not provide enough information to support the notion that they distanced themselves entirely from the Sierra Leonean community or other individuals within their new host culture in the United States. However, one participant, Vicky, recalled that she especially felt isolated and experienced a sense of *marginalization*. It's important to note that Vicky was the only participant who fled the war in Sierra Leone at a very young age and spent the majority of her life in the United States. She describes her feelings below.

**Vicky:** Right. But then, the funny thing is I always considered myself-- like in my personal statement for undergrad they said, "Describe yourself." I always felt like an awkward African—like my American parents, they would describe me as an awkward African. And then to my African parents, they would describe me as I felt like I'm not African enough. So it's like I'm in this weird space where I'm not African enough, I'm not American enough. So where do I really fit in?

Vicky also recalled that struggling to find her place was especially difficult.

**Vicky:** Trying to find my identity... I struggled a lot. So that's where my whole interest in mental health comes in. I've been bullied. I've felt isolated. I can identify with people who have similar struggles in identity, and just wanting to feel included and just wanting to belong.

As some participants expressed no desire to be active in the Sierra Leonean community, and another struggled to find her place, a few participants mentioned instances where there was a *sense of contention with African Americans*. This sense of contention was described by ( $n=4$ ) participants who mentioned that African Americans did not embrace them but they were more likely to be accepted by others from other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

**Ida:** I notice that, here, the Black, the Americans, the Black Americans are the problem ones, not the White, the Black.

**Marie:** Caucasians will accept Africans faster than Afro-Americans will accept Africans. I also attended hair school and I was always having that discussion with a lot of them in the school. The Afro-Americans just find it hard to accept Africans, period.

**Thomas:** So all the, my supervisors were African Americans and the way that I was expecting to embrace, we coming from there, now we never felt it. Yea we were treated in such a way that it was not good. Yea the way they treat us sometimes I don't feel they want to embrace us to certain extent.

**Tiffany:** It's just sometimes, what I've noticed is this conflict between Black Americans and Africans. It's like when I came I was expecting the Black Americans to be very welcoming, very arm opening to receive me. I didn't get that as much. Before that, I got that from the Hispanic or other races. To me I just felt like it's like- I don't know, maybe it's something that needs to be looked into, but it's tension between Africans and Black Americans. And I felt that. When going to middle school, I was mocked. Like, "Oh, African booty scratcher." You know the saying that goes like that? And you would get that from the Black American, and compared to the Hispanics or the White or the Filipinos. Trust me, I have different friends. I have Filipinos. I have Chinese. I have African. I have American. I try to be diverse with my friends and everything. But I just feel like it's a tension. Like they're not very welcoming towards us African, especially us Africans. They see us like we're some type of trash. We're beneath them.

### *Psychological Impact*

Just as all participants were impacted by the war in Sierra Leone either indirectly or directly, all participants ( $n=12$ ) were impacted psychologically as a result of the war and upon migrating and adjusting to life in the United States. Three categories emerged to describe the psychological impact of exposure to war and/or migration: a) *longing for “Sweet Salone”*, b) *dismantled American Dream*, and c) *war scars*. Each category is further described below.

A majority of participants revealed a sense of *longing for “Sweet Salone”* when they were asked the question, *“How have you felt since leaving Sierra Leone?”* Upon relocating to the United States ( $n=8$ ) participants mentioned that they have experienced homesickness and feelings of sadness since leaving Sierra Leone, and ( $n=2$ ) describe feelings of regret as if things would have been better if they would have remained in Sierra Leone. Four participants (Tiffany, Thomas, Will, and Michael) describe their feelings below.

**Tiffany:** Sometimes I get homesick. Sometimes there are days where I just want to pack up my stuff and go. There are days where I'm like, "I have a reason why I'm here, let me just accomplish it and then go back."

**Thomas:** Sometimes when I sit down, I call my friends back in Sierra Leone, we joke, we laugh, I feel it... Yes, sadness because I want to be among them. We sit down we joke, we talk, what we used to eat, we eat it freely [laughter] we drink our local wine yea. Yea our local wine yea, then at least we do what we want to do [laughter].

**Will:** I'm happy to be in the States, but the way things are going, I'm a bit sad that- this is not what I was expecting.

**Michael:** I felt very hard; it was very hard for me because, basically what I'm doing now I cannot imagine doing back in my country. Like my friend just told you, I'm not sure, he graduated from Fourah Bay College. I was working for a very big company over there, but I decided to come over here. So now, what I'm doing is completely different from what I've been doing over there. No matter what the condition is I think it should have been better to be over there.

Vicky also revealed this sense of longing as she describes a sense of missing out.

**Vicky:** Well, I know that we left family behind so I felt as though I've missed out on that aspect, getting to know my family back home. Also, just the culture. Even though we brought the culture here, I didn't get to experience all the beaches and I didn't get to experience school back home.

While most participants revealed generally down feelings about leaving Sierra Leone, only one participant, Laila, revealed a sense of relief.

**Laila:** Not-uh... I felt relieved...Yes. The reason why I said I felt relieved is that I was having family problem.

Just as the majority of participants shared various feelings about leaving Sierra Leone, nearly all of them ( $n=10$ ) expressed the desire to return to Sierra Leone or apply for dual-citizenship in Sierra Leone and the United States. Five participants (Marie, Olu, Tiffany, Thomas, and Vicky describe their feelings below.

**Marie:** I think that every Sierra Leonean's desire is to go back permanently, is to die in their country.

**Olu:** Yes. It's always been my desire to go back home, since I came into the United States. So once I achieve my dreams with the help of God, yeah, Sierra Leone, here I come.

**Tiffany:** I wish I could go today [laughter].

**Thomas:** Yes I'm going to be a child of two worlds [laughter] an American-- because our constitution back in Sierra Leone you can be dual citizen.

**Vicky:** I thought about dual citizenship. Maybe going back to start a business, start some type of center, because my focus is special education, so I'd like to work with, not just necessarily children, but adults with special needs. Fight for rights and advocate. I don't necessarily know too much about that topic back home, but I know that there's always a need for this advocacy. I would definitely want to go back there and just see what the needs are and then fit in where I get in, I guess.

Meanwhile, only 2 participants revealed that they would like to return to Sierra Leone only to visit.

**Gloria:** I want back to visit much more. And then when I'm old, my husband is from Ghana, so it'll be between Ghana and Sierra Leone.

**Laila:** Just visit.

While many participants migrated to the United States to further their education and pursue the American dream, ( $n=5$ ) participants described experiences that reveal a *dismantled American dream*. Such experiences are characterized by the initial expectations of life in the United States, how goals change, and some of the challenging realities that are faced upon relocating to the United States. Five participants describe these sentiments below.

**Marie:** And back home we call here the land of milk and honey. Until you come here, you realize, yeah, it's got a little bit of milk and honey, but it ain't got that much [laughter].

**Michael:** Yeah, when I came initially, I would stay with my family. In fact, I would never thought I would be in the US for two months without having a job based on the perception I was having about America. So for me to stay here two months without a job, I was very, very confused. ---Imagine, for you to stay six months without a job. With a very high perception of what you're going to see. For you to come over here, then you will see the reality. We're disappointed.

**Leo:** Once you are back there you think that coming over here, everything will be fine. And once you come here, you start knowing the realities of being in America. So--yeah. In the first place, the perception of people in Sierra Leone: now once you come to America, you got a good job, you got a place to live and all those things. And it's kind of different somehow because when you come here, sometimes you can get jobs that you never think you got to do, and you just have to do them because you have to pay the bills and survive.

**Olu:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Somewhere along the way because-- there is a saying - a proverb - which says, "Man propose, God dispose". Right. You will propose that in the future this is what I want to accomplish. When I come to the United States this and this is what I want, this is what I want to achieve. But just as I said, eventually things get changed... It's really hard. You can realize that I mean as you go in, you get yourself involved in trouble. And then once you mess up yourself here, that information's been entered in any of their computer systems or whatever.

**Thomas:** In the month of October I got my first job at [name of company] nursing home in [undisclosed location] as a dishwasher. This was the first difficult job I ever done in my life because back home I was a teacher, I taught in high school, I taught chemistry, geography for 13 years. So coming into another land, in another environment it changed everything, everything changes.



Moreover, as participants faced certain challenges upon relocating to the United States and a great deal of them longed for life back in Sierra Leone, one would be remiss not to mention experiences that reflect residual *war scars*. Such experiences emerged for some participants ( $n=4$ ) when they were asked to describe the war in Sierra Leone. While some participants generally explained the setting and individuals around them, four participants, (Gloria, Judith, Tiffany and Olu), highlighted psychological remnants of exposure to war such as painful memories, nightmares, panic flashbacks, and ambivalence about talking about such experiences. Gloria's account is listed below and responses from the other participants are provided in Table 3. Gloria described her experience with a rebel soldier at a security checkpoint when she refused to be searched by a male soldier.

**Gloria:** I remembered one day when they were in power, they were in power for a little bit. And because they were not sure of people, they think that were trying to help the government come back; you have a lot of checkpoints around. We went by some checkpoints. It was me, my sister, my sister's then boyfriend, now husband. They want to check us. There was no female person there, because normally all these checkpoints will have a male person check on a female. "You can not"--And mind you I was a 16 year- old girl, I can't imagine what I was thinking. But, "You cannot check me if you don't have a woman to check me, it's impossible." And the guy was like, "Yes I am. I don't know what you're talking about." "You're going to kill me first", and he did cock his gun, I'm like "Go ahead and kill me, you're not going to touch me". And my brother-in-law stood in front of the gun and said, "No, please don't talk to them. It's like you're going to kill her, but please bring somebody, anybody."

Gloria mentioned that the rebel soldier allowed her sister to search her at the security checkpoint, however when news of the event reached her father at home she was chastised for risking her life by refusing the rebel soldier's orders.

**Gloria:** So they asked my sister to check me and then.... When I came home my dad almost killed me he was like, "I will kill you first, do you want to die now!" [laughter] "I will kill you first". But he has always told me that "You need to lose the battle so you can win the war. He who leaves the fight and runs, lives to fight another day."--- I thought it was the most cowardice thing; he would put me down

because I wasn't afraid of them. I think being naïve or -- and that was scary. They would just kill, they would just cock the gun without thinking and that's it, you're done. And he keeps telling me, "Shut up! Shut up! You don't argue. How are you going to argue with a rebel, really?". And now I look at myself, I'm like "really, really, seriously?" So that was something I didn't know until I grew older and I'm like, "Well, that was dumb. That was dumb." [laughter and got tearful]

### *Strength & Resilience*

While many participants faced difficulties during their time in Sierra Leone at the time of the war and through adjusting to the United States it is important to highlight the various factors that have aided their adjustment. The following 2 categories emerged to describe factors of strength and resilience: a) *during exposure to the war* and b) *during adjustment to the United States*.

As participants described the war in Sierra Leone, ( $n=5$ ) participants mentioned factors that aided their strength and resilience *during exposure to war*. Factors such as such as having family, resources, faith, and a sense of gratitude for being spared from significant harm seemed to help participants endure difficult times during the war in Sierra Leone. For example, as Gloria and Judith recounted the atrocities committed during the war they both reflected on how grateful they were to be spared from a heinous act such as rape.

**Gloria:** It was an experience. It was a tough one and people being, people being raped, and they would rape you, it's-- Thank God I was not raped, because one of the things I always say: "Before you do that, you better kill me first."

**Judith:** Some people rape them, Me I thank God because I was small. Even with small kids they rape them too. So that's the only good part for me, they don't rape me, they don't beat me. But have some people they rape, so that's really painful, imagine they rape you at that time and you get pregnant.

Additionally, as Thomas previously described the three months his family spent in the rural forests of eastern Sierra Leone he also expressed how he was spared from significant harm from wild animals as his family used their faith to endure.

**Thomas:** But one thing in the bush when that 3 months we commit ourselves to prayers, we were eating bush meat, bush meat, no rice. Sometimes we sleep on-- we only drink water you sleep, sleep in the bush with snakes and dangerous animals but nothing got wrong with us. Yea we see snake, we see dangerous snakes, we only see them passing but they never come near us.

Furthermore, another participant, Laila, mentioned how she was fortunate during the war due to resources such as food and money.

**Laila:** When we were living in the...at the house... 'cause I worked for the UN, I was getting food. So food was not a problem, not a problem, money was not my problem.

As one participant, Olu, previously mentioned that he did not like talking about what happened in the war (see Table 3), he also stated that it's important to do so because reflecting on where you came from can keep you going. Gloria shared similar sentiments as she recounted on how the war was life changing and allowed her to value the importance of life. Both of their accounts are listed below.

**Olu:** It's so sad, it's so sad that you can even reflect your mind to that. But sometimes its good to reflect your memory to history because it keeps you going. Knowing where you're going, where you're coming from, it keeps you going.

**Gloria:** It taught me for life that life is fragile, and all of --you know a lot of things doesn't matter. Relationships are better off than anything else. That's one thing, for me, experiencing all. Living in war was a good thing for me, because - it's a bad, of course - but I walked away knowing the importance of life.

While participants evidenced strength and resilience during the war, they also revealed such factors *during adjustment in the United States*. This category was further divided into 5 categories, which highlight a) *activities that helped with homesickness and adjustment*, b) *the ability to “adopt and adapt”*, c) *a sense of*

*community and support, c) submission and commitment to dreams, and d) tangible gains upon relocating to the United States.*

When participants were asked, “*what kinds of things were especially helpful?*” to their adjustment in the United States nearly all participants ( $n=11$ ) revealed various *activities that helped with homesickness and adjustment*. For instance ( $n=6$ ) participants stated that “calling home” or loved ones back in Sierra Leone was helpful, and ( $n=6$ ) participants also stated that seeking advice from family members and loved ones also aided adjustment. A few participants also mentioned other activities such as interacting with others, talking with friends, watching TV and going to school, and engaging in solitary activities such as writing.

Even as many participants faced various hardships during their adjustment to the United States, a lot of participants ( $n=8$ ) described *the ability to “adopt and adapt”* to their new environment. The ability to adopt and adapt encapsulates how participants have adopted new ways of thinking and have adapted to American culture evidenced by feeling at home in the U.S., having a mixture of African and American friends, finding ways to balance Sierra Leonean and American culture, and in some cases not experiencing difficulties because of their ethnic background. For instance, one participant, Thomas, profoundly spoke about the importance of adopting and adapting to one’s environment and how he feels at home in the United States.

**Thomas:** Feeling at home yes because one, I was praying for this, I felt at home because I met new friends, met different people, my church community, my school community, my own community... Man is a political animal you should adopt and adapt in every environment, yea. And everywhere and anywhere is your home, it depends to you how you'll be able to adopt and adapt, you see.

Ida also echoed those sentiments when she spoke about how it was difficult to leave Sierra Leone but she adjusted.

**Ida:** I feel bad when I'm coming, when I leave Sierra Leone to come here. I feel bad, but as I come I adjust.

Another participant, Gloria, also expressed her ability to adjust to life in the United States by finding ways to balance African and American culture as she raises her children.

**Gloria:** There's a lot of things here that are great that I try to incorporate in my life and I think that will make me be a better person. And I'm trying to do it in my kids as well. So for example, like I was saying before there's just the warmth in the African culture. The love that I feel is missing here and as best as possible I try to keep it. I try to be concerned, I try to look up like I said as best as possible, because with all the craziness going on, you get so busy - you go off with your own madness, you miss things. But as best as possible, I try to keep that. And there's a lot of things in the American culture that are beautiful that I think needs to be incorporated into somebody's life. Like for example, like growing up as a child, my parents did to some extent allowed me to speak up, to speak my mind because I have a lot of fights with my Dad. But in the general African culture, where kids are not allowed to speak back, kids are not allowed to speak up or speak their mind, I guess we could. So we try to incorporate that and said, "Okay yes, you're allowed to speak up."

While ( $n=8$ ) participants were able to successfully adjust to life in the United States due their ability to "adopt and adapt" it is also important to mention that three ( $n=3$ ) participants, (Olu, Leo, and Will) seemed to be in the midst of "adopting and adapting" to life in the United States. This is evidenced by their budding interest in other communities, getting comfortable in school, and stating that the United States just might feel like a second home in the future.

**Leo:** Well, kind of like it's challenging in a way, but I think I've made a little bit progress here because right now I'm doing my Masters and getting help from the-- getting the student's aid to help me go on with my Masters.

**Will:** I like to interact with the Spanish community because I want to speak Spanish.

**Olu:** Oh yeah, okay. Let me say this, inasmuch as I don't know what the future may hold, so for now I think I don't feel like home and America, United States to be specific, is going to be my second home. Yeah, maybe that's going to be in the future, but I don't know for now... I wish I'm involved in Sierra Leone community.

But for now, no. So to put it straight, I'm not yet well known in this community but I do believe in the future.

Though many participants have adjusted to life in the United States and a few are still in the midst of adjusting, nearly all participants ( $n=11$ ) revealed that another factor that aided their adjustment, *a sense of community and support*. Maintaining strong cultural ties to Sierra Leone and seeking support from family members, other Sierra Leoneans and/or African communities in the United States evidence this sense of community and support. For instance Marie mentioned that the United States now feels like home to her due to her strong connection to the Sierra Leonean community.

**Marie:** Now, yes. Because of my interaction with the community, the Sierra Leonean community to me here is just like back home, other than the basic necessities of life that are easily-- you can easily utilize the basic necessities of life here and medical benefits and things like that. But otherwise when it comes to community, for me it's just like back home.

Another participant, Michael also mentioned how living with his friends and former college roommates from back in Sierra Leone has also been helpful, alongside using the Internet to reach home and get updates on Sierra Leone. It's important to note that Michael's roommates are Will and Leo who were also participants in the current study. Even as all three young men previously mentioned that they were not actively involved in the greater Sierra Leonean community, their connection appears to offer a sense of community and support amongst each other.

**Michael:** Like I'm living with my friends, and most these guys we've been living back home even since we're in college so they're one of my most favorable friends. And secondly, thanks to YouTube at least you can update Sierra Leone on a daily basis. That's so and at least you could use Viber to call back home and talk to your family and friends so that keeps me going.

Additionally, a different participant, Olu mentioned that perhaps migrating to the United States provides the impetus for connecting with other Sierra Leoneans in the United States for support.

**Olu:** Oh yes, I've met all type of people but actually-- so to speak, Africans don't love themselves. We Africans, we don't love ourselves when we are in Africa, right. But I don't know the reason for that. I just don't know the reason, but at the same time, once we're out of our continent, things get changed. Things get different, yes. That is something that I've studied long ago. Even in Sierra Leone, when I'm in Sierra Leone right, Sierra Leone is known for loving strangers. We don't love ourselves but we do love strangers. So, Africa, as a whole, we don't love ourselves, but whenever we get out from our continent, we get united. We're able to define ourselves.

As a sense of community and support from other Sierra Leoneans has aided adjustment for the majority of participants, *submission and commitment to dreams* has also aided adjustment in to life in the United States. For ( $n=6$ ) participants this subcategory was characterized by having a drive to succeed, a strong faith, a sense of purpose and being committed to one's goals despite difficulties. Two participants, Olu and Thomas describe their thoughts below, additional participant responses are outlined in Table 4. Olu specifically stated that submission and commitment are two factors that have greatly aided his adjustment in the United States thus far.

**Olu:** Oh yes. Is two things to the name. Submission and commitment. Submission to-- I mean, in life, there are certain challenges that you'll be facing, right? But once you have your purpose, you have your dream you want to achieve, I think you will care less that the challenges that you're facing, because you have a dream that you want to achieve at the end. So you just need to submit yourself for the time being, because in the future, I think things will get better. So submission is one thing that's helped me greatly and commitment. Once you commit to what you're doing - giving your time, your knowledge, I mean, accept the challenge.

Thomas also echoed such sentiments and attributed his ability to overcome challenges to his faith.

**Thomas:** So that's why I took up this challenge and I've committed hands from God Almighty that's why I encourage you that, What God has done for me from

the 7th of July 2008 to the 7th of June 2014, that is a miracle a--so miraculous, very, very miraculous this is my life and I'm just I'm not even 60 years you see. So because one, each time I want to move He's with me. I commit everything into his hands. I will do **nothing**, nothing I will do in this country without him. And nothing you should not do without him because without him you can't see a way. You see, without him you can't succeed in life.

Lastly, while participants named various factors that have aided their adjustment, ranging from specific activities like calling family members for support to having a strong sense of faith and commitment to succeed, it's important to note that every participant ( $n=12$ ) mentioned *tangible gains* upon migrating to the United States. All participants mentioned that they have gained something during their time in the United States in spite of the challenges. Many recall that they have gained so many opportunities; education, family, meeting different people and learning new things, and a sense of freedom and stability, including the opportunity help other family members living back in Sierra Leone. One participant, Leo, nicely summarizes what so many have gained upon migrating to the United States.

**Leo:** And being here itself is a very big opportunity because there are millions of people trying to come to America, and never did, so being here itself is a big opportunity for me.

#### *Researcher Recommendations*

Conclusively, while the aforementioned themes, categories, and associated subcategories served to address the two major research questions of this study, this last theme describes various factors that serve to aid researchers and other professionals working with vulnerable populations, more specifically Sierra Leoneans. At the conclusion of the interview, all participants were asked the question; "*If you had the chance to talk to a group of people who would like to help other immigrants from Sierra Leone what would you like them to know?*" Participant responses fell along two categories: a) "*go to the ground*" and b) *genuine investment*.



Nearly all participants ( $n=11$ ) advising to “*go to the ground*” described the importance of understanding the people of Sierra Leone and their specific needs by going to the source. One participant, Olu, mentioned the power of going to the source in midst of talking about the war in Sierra Leone. The following statement was provided after he stated that he did not like talking about what happened in the war but he understood the importance of doing so.

**Olu:** No, I think, there's a saying, never let your strangers to write about your history, I think. Yeah. Never let a stranger to write your history. I think you need the right source; you need your own research to make things look better somehow. And then I think I'm the right person to give you this answer.

“Go to the ground” was further divided into 3 subcategories, as participants mentioned that people who aim to help Sierra Leoneans must be aware of a) *the needs of Sierra Leoneans*, b) *post-war cultural politics* and c) *the war in Sierra Leone*. For instance, Gloria mentioned that “going to the ground” is a vital step to take in order to address the true needs of Sierra Leoneans.

**Gloria:** Go to the ground. Some day I wish to help, go back and help, but a lot of organizations should go through--- I understand that people go through third parties and most of the time it doesn't get to the person that needs it. So if you really want to help go to the ground and get to understand the people. Get to understand their needs; because sometimes I get so frustrated, people talk to you and say, "Oh I send soap." A bunch of soap, really? No, we don't know what they need and you sending soap. Yeah, they can make their local soap and their cleaner to clean. So go to the ground, study the people, mingle with the people, then you can really know what they need and you can really help them. Then you can make a difference. That's what I would sa

As ( $n=9$ ) participants stated that individuals aiming to help Sierra Leoneans must be aware of *the needs of Sierra Leoneans*, they identified specific needs pertinent to Sierra Leonean immigrants living in the U.S. as well as individuals still living in Sierra Leone. For instance, participants stated that healthcare and education are still greatly needed in Sierra Leone.

**Marie:** I would like them to know that good healthcare is very much needed. I've heard horror stories about people being given antibiotics and they have fake drugs - and they don't do anything to you. Maybe the drugs being supplied back there are from countries - not naming any names - that put dust in a capsule. How could you do that? Just being able to get access to genuine drugs for you to be cured is a good thing.

**Laila:** They can help them ...like...education wise...try to improve education in Sierra Leone. I think that is the main thing affecting Sierra Leoneans.

Meanwhile, participants mentioned that people wanting to help Sierra Leonean immigrants living in the United States should focus on factors that can help build their career and gain success in the United States.

**Thomas:** I would like them to know about how this immigrant could gain success in the country and live successfully in this country. Successfully, yea so you see because we the immigrant we're faced with a lot, especially with employment, yea our employment status is so shaky yea.

**Laila:** For people who are here, if they can...I will tell the group of people, if they can help immigrants that are here, to help them build up their career, help them to do something that will help them in the future and that way if they decide to go back home they will try to help others, the less privileged people. Furthermore, ( $n=4$ ) participants also stated that individuals aiming to help

Sierra Leoneans should be aware of *post-war cultural politics* in Sierra Leone. Such politics are characterized by class differences, unequal distribution of power and resources between the capital city of Freetown and the rural provinces, and differential treatment of Sierra Leoneans returning to back to Sierra Leone. For instance, Marie remarked on how Sierra Leoneans living in the U.S. can no longer influence policies back in Sierra Leone even if they contribute financially.

**Marie:** We don't have fair treatment anymore because we're considered as rich people just because we are out here, right? We don't get a say in politics. We don't get a say in a lot of things because we are out here. So being out here is keeping us out of the policy-making in our own country. They want our money - they come here and fund-raise - but they don't want us to be a part of the policy making.

Additionally, Laila mentioned how life for individuals living in the rural provinces is especially hard because most resources are concentrated in the Capital city of Freetown.

**Laila:** Yes, everything is concentrated in Freetown. Yes, it is not like here. Unlike, Sierra Leone, people have to travel so many miles to buy--to buy wholesale goods. They have to drive back, pay transportation...by the time the goods reach to their final consumers that would be expensive. Then because of that...living on the provinces is very hard; it's very expensive because everything is centralized in the city.

Such cultural politics illustrate some of the challenges individuals aiming to help Sierra Leoneans may face in light of the post-war effects on the political climate of Sierra Leone and its residual impact on Sierra Leonean immigrants living in the United States.

Finally, ( $n=3$ ) participants stated that individuals aiming to help Sierra Leoneans should be aware of *the war in Sierra Leone*. Even as some participants previously expressed a sense of ambivalence about talking about the war in Sierra Leone, they revealed that spreading awareness about the war is important. For instance, Judith stated that it's important for individuals aiming to help Sierra Leoneans to know everything that has happened in Sierra Leone.

**Judith:** I would like them to know everything so they would see.

It's essential to note that initially at the beginning of the interview, Judith appeared to be somewhat distant and gave short and guarded answers. However, at the end of the interview, when asked the question "*Is there anything else that you would like to share?*" she shared a more detailed account of her experience, further illustrating her point on spreading awareness about the realities of war.

**Judith:** Yes, One more. When I was like in Africa during the war, my grandmother took me like from the mosque to go to see my, to go live with my

Aunty because they was killing people a lot. I walked with my knee from like, let me say from like when you enter inside here to down the streets. All the way down. With your knee.

Judith explained that she had to walk on her knees to avoid the line of fire from the rebel soldiers' guns.

**Judith:** No. Not doing like they will not see you and then when they shooting, you have to like down---Yes, to duck. That was really painful.

Meanwhile, Olu also mentioned that spreading awareness is important so it can shed light on the issues Sierra Leoneans face.

**Olu:** Yea you people do help us a lot with how by revealing to you some of our issues. It somehow give that relief like, "Oh, there are people out there who-- I mean, fighting for us." Not even not directly but somehow. I do believe one day if it didn't show up with me but in the future, people that are coming to United States from Sierra Leone or Africa as a whole, I think they will realize something better and then live a better life.

Lastly, Tiffany mentioned that spreading awareness about the war is vital so others can understand the people of Sierra Leone.

**Tiffany:** They have to know Sierra Leoneans have a long violent history, they might be perceived as violent people but they are not. It's because of their past.

As participants commented on the importance of understanding the needs, cultural politics, and history of Sierra Leoneans by "going to the ground", they also revealed that individuals aiming to help Sierra Leoneans should be *genuinely invested* in helping Sierra Leone. For instance, towards the end of the interview when participants were asked the question, "*Do you have any questions for me?*" many participants ( $n=8$ ) participants seemed quite interested in the researcher's investment in helping Sierra Leone. Table 5 outlines the specific questions that participants asked at the end of the interviews.

More specifically, some participants ( $n=5$ ) expressed curiosity about my cultural background and asked why Sierra Leone was chosen as the topic of inquiry. Additionally, Some participants ( $n=4$ ) recommended that I translate this research into action and half of participants ( $n=6$ ) stated that they would recommend this research project to a friend. For instance, Marie stated that she would definitely recommend this research project to a friend but she did not like that this project was just for my master's thesis because it is an important topic for many Sierra Leoneans.

**Marie:** Most definitely, yeah. Only thing I don't like about it is the fact that it's just for your paper right now. I really hate that part of it.

Meanwhile, Tiffany and Thomas gave specific recommendations on the future directions of this research.

**Tiffany:** As far as-- just like was asking earlier, I don't know if we had that stuff in the recording and stuff like that. I asked you if you - besides you doing this for your thesis and stuff like that - if it's something that you want to bring out to the open, you know? Let people be aware of it and just like what you said, maybe have an organization, not only for Sierra Leoneans but like immigrants in general. Because I believe a lot of immigrants are misunderstood. There's an issue that I think tends to be overlooked.

**Thomas:** What you are doing I'll be happy; I want you-- this research to be translated into a project...

## Chapter 4: Discussion

As research regarding the mental health concerns and psychological adjustment among African immigrant populations in the United States is limited (Kamya, 1997; Venters et al., 2011), this study aimed to qualitatively explore the distinct experiences of an understudied group. The interviews yielded very rich descriptions of the impact of war, adjustment, and various factors that have aided or hindered success in the United States.

*How do Sierra Leoneans describe their adjustment to the United States after probable exposure to conflict in Sierra Leone?*

Participants described adjustment to the United States as an initially difficult process. The majority of participants migrated to the United States for educational reasons, to chase the American dream, or to join family. Surprisingly, only one participant's family fled the war in Sierra Leone to seek refuge in the United States. Although, one participant's (Vicky) family fled Sierra Leone at the spark of the war, she noted that her family was economically advantaged revealing that they had the resources to relocate to the United States. Hence, nearly all participants in this study represented *voluntary immigrant minorities*; a term often used by researchers Ogbu & Simmons (1998) within the cultural-ecological theory of minorities.

On the surface, participants in this study seem to significantly differ from *refugees, or asylum seekers*, who are forced to come to the United States because of civil war or other crises in their places of origin. However, one of the most salient themes within the current study was that the war in Sierra Leone was impactful. Nearly all the participants were impacted by the war in some shape or form. The

effects of war ranged from being directly impacted by witnessing acts of violence and various other atrocities, losing loved ones, and fleeing for safety to being indirectly impacted through just hearing about the atrocities that occurred abroad.

Despite the level of impact, a great sense of loss was experienced. The war represented a time destruction, chaos, and uncertainty. As one participant, Thomas stated the climate was “very stressful, very, very pathetic”. From loss of family members, homes, schools, resources, and loss of communities to the post-conflict realities such as overcrowding, homelessness, and changed political realities for Sierra Leoneans within the country and in the United States; circumstances have changed for everyone. Previous research states that as many wars continue to engulf Africa, from east to west and from north to south, many Africans are left severely traumatized (Njenga, Kigamwa, & Okonji, 2003). So perhaps the realities of the participants within this study do not significantly differ from refugees and asylum seekers, as they also have had experiences that can leave psychological wounds and they also migrated when conditions in their country of origin were not the most favorable. Even individuals claiming to have a “good life” back in Sierra Leone were impacted, possibly in ways below their consciousness. Such was evidenced by reactions of participants like Gloria when she described her experiences in the war and became tearful.

While, I represent a *partial insider* due to a shared cultural identity, I remain an outsider to the experience of war in West Africa and also the experience of adjusting to life in the United States. However, a part of me identifies with this sense of loss. My parents have both lived in Sierra Leone during a time of peace and

prosperity. They are both from “well-to-do” socio-economically advantaged backgrounds, which afforded them the opportunity to voluntarily migrate to the United States for greater opportunities with the initial intention of returning. Yet, the atrocities committed during the war and the collapsed health and economic infrastructure of Sierra Leone (Alemu et al., 2012) reveals that this sense of loss is evident even across the shores. The “*Sweet Salone*” my parents and many Sierra Leoneans often reference has been replaced with the realities of post-conflict. The country once highly regarded as the “*Athens of Africa*” now represents one of the poorest nations of the world with more than 60% of the country’s educational infrastructure destroyed (Byaruhanga, 2008; *Pride of Lions Film*, 2009; Redwood-Sawyerr, 2011).

Throughout this study, and through memo writing I reflected on how Sierra Leone lost so much in the war but there was also a cultural shift, a loss of innocence. I recall conversations with my mother where she stated that her and my father lived in Sierra Leone at a time where strangers were embraced and people could leave their doors unlocked without worry. Our conversations echoed the sentiments of one of my participants, ‘Olu’, who also commented on Sierra Leone’s love of strangers. However, after over a decade of brutal war the innocence was stripped from Sierra Leone; violently cut off along with the limbs of innocent civilians. It appears that “longing for Sweet Salone” alongside the “war scars” of the participants represent psychological remnants of war. A harsh reality with a stench so strong it not only permeates the soil of Sierra Leone but its scent has been carried over the Atlantic to the United States. The sense of loss for Sierra Leoneans seems to be further



compounded by relocating to America and being faced with the harsh realities of migration and acculturation. As participants mentioned, embarking on a new life in the United States seemed to be exciting and full of promise until other challenges emerged during the course of their post-migration adjustment.

*What factors have aided and/or hindered their adjustment to life in the United States?*

As the majority of study participants migrated to the United States to seek better opportunities they were faced with various factors that served to hinder and bolster their adjustment. Initially, many participants noted that they faced various stressors ranging from securing employment and housing to dealing with cultural changes and differential treatment. During the process of adjusting to life in the United States participants struggled with bouts of homesickness and the disillusionment about their pursuit of the American dream. Many participants not only faced negative stereotypes about their culture but also differential treatment as they were forced to take up menial jobs for survival. The difficulties these participants encountered are consistent with the struggles of voluntary minorities who face disillusionment because of society's discriminatory educational policies and practices and also because of language and cultural differences (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Wang, 1995).

Furthermore, participants seemed even more disappointed in the fact that sometimes forms of maltreatment and social distancing came from African Americans as opposed to individuals from other racial and cultural groups. Such experiences highlight the notion that a shared complexion does not necessarily equate a shared cultural identity or a mutual alliance (Okonofua, 2013; Reddick, 2010). While acculturative stressors, experiences of stigma and differential treatment, and the

subsequent disappointment about the acculturative process in the United States served to hinder the adjustment of many participants, there were several other factors that mitigated such effects.

Despite all of the challenges the participants faced during the war in Sierra Leone and also during their adjustment to life in the United States, they all have exhibited a prominent amount of strength and resilience. Many participants revealed that having the support of family back in Sierra Leone alongside a network of individuals to connect with in the United States proved to be beneficial. Family and community support has been found to play a vital part in promoting psychological adjustment of individuals exposed to war. For example a follow up study by Betancourt, Newnham, McBain & Brennan (2013) indicated that family and community support led to improvement in PTSD symptoms among former child soldiers despite limited access to care. Moreover, as existing research among Sudanese refugees has found that *both* pre-migration trauma and post-migration adjustment were associated with a higher instances of mental illnesses (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006), it is important to mention that the refugees in that sample lacked familial and community support especially due to the lower proportion of individuals from their country of origin located in their new environment. Experiencing that lack of social support coupled with difficulties adjusting to cultural life in that new environment was associated with increased depression, anxiety and somatization (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006). While the symptomatology for PTSD and other mental illnesses was not measured in the current study, the majority of participants were impacted in some way by the war in Sierra Leone. It also important

to note that only 3 out the 12 participants reported that they have received counseling services (See Table 2). Perhaps having the support of family members, friends, and other members of the Sierra Leonean community has helped promote the psychological adjustment of this population.

Having that support alongside the willingness to integrate or “adopt and adapt” to the culture of the United States seems to have also promoted the adjustment of the current sample. As participants represent a group who has entered into the acculturation process voluntarily (Berry, 1997), and they demonstrate a strong cultural connection to Sierra Leone, their desire to balance the best from both cultures has served them well.

Overall, in light of the harsh realities faced during the war in Sierra Leone coupled with the difficulties faced during the initial stages of adjustment in the United States, nearly all participants shared that something was gained by migrating to the United States. Whether it was education, exposure to different people and opportunities, or starting or a family many reflected on the positive aspects of post-migration. Even for participants like Thomas or Olu who are still in the process of adjusting and overcoming challenges, a strong sense of faith and determination to succeed in face of adversity further suggests the resiliency of this population.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to address when interpreting the findings of the current study. First, the participants represented a sample of convenience and likely represent a sub-population of Sierra Leoneans who voluntarily migrated to the United States. Such depictions may have differed if the sample included a mixture of voluntary immigrants and involuntary immigrants (i.e., refugees or asylum seekers). Therefore the findings of this study may not be applicable to the general population of Sierra Leoneans or other immigrant populations who flee from conflict regions.

Furthermore, the coding team struggled at times with cleaning transcriptions and coding interview data even after utilizing a professional transcription company. Even though all participants were fluent in English, perhaps it would have been more effective to conduct interviews with a fluent Krio speaker in order to capture the true essence of participants' experiences. Finally, this qualitative study primarily relied on interview data, memo writing, and demographic information from the participants and although many efforts were made to support the ideals of trustworthiness, perhaps utilizing multiple methods and collecting data over different time periods would bolster trustworthiness through triangulation.

## Implications and Future Directions

Working with these participants has also revealed that when conducting research with such vulnerable understudied groups, it's important to be flexible, remain open-minded, work with a cultural insider or become one so that a sense of trust is established. That sense of trust is vital for a group with a history marked with violence and exploitation. However, with that trust comes a great deal of responsibility, especially when a researcher is an insider, or even a *partial insider*. Conducting research as partial insider is akin to the old adage "To whom much is given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

At the onset of this study, I was met with suspicion and even curiosity about the focus of my study, as I do not outwardly appear to be Sierra Leonean nor can I effortlessly speak Krio. At times, I too can identify with one participant's experience (Vicky) of feeling like an "awkward African". However, upon revealing my cultural heritage and gaining rapport either through language, expression, or being tested on my knowledge of Sierra Leonean topics (i.e., food, African proverbs, customs), I was embraced quickly. Individuals who were initially hesitant to open up about their experiences soon shared vivid accounts of their time in war. They demonstrated extreme levels of courage and strength to relive painful memories in the hope that it may help someone understand their plight and work to do something about it. They embraced me, as one of them, as a part of them, and encouraged me to be the one to tell their story "from the ground", from the source. Never allowing a stranger, an outsider to the cultural realities of the Sierra Leonean experience to be the one to tell an abridged or watered down version. That notion further supports the importance of

utilizing a cultural insider who understands these dynamics in order to explore the realities of a vulnerable population. For me to say “*I de sabi Krio*” to participants is a simple statement that relays that I understand Krio. However, it also unlocks a door to say, “I know you because I am you”. In discussions with participants I often said “*Me na Salone Pikin*” when they asked me about myself. That statement translates to mean, “I am a child of Sierra Leone”; therefore, revealing that identity fosters a level of trust but also a grave responsibility to respect and protect that trust and vulnerability.

Furthermore, there is a saying in Krio which states “*You nah we pikin, waitin’ you go do foh help we*”, or in other words, “You are our child, you’re one of us, so what are you going to do with this information?” Such statements fall in line with the many questions participants posed to gauge my investment in helping Sierra Leoneans beyond the scope of this research project. Overall, from the inception of this research project I have been interested in helping Sierra Leoneans and making some sort of impact by shedding light on the realities of an understudied population. It is my hope that this study will represent the first step out of many in order to make a difference for Sierra Leoneans in the United States and abroad.

Future studies would benefit from examining the effectiveness of utilizing cultural insiders to conduct research with other vulnerable and understudied populations. Qualitatively exploring the realities of an understudied group may serve as a foundation for exploring such phenomena using mixed-method or quantitative designs. It may also be useful to examine what specific factors predict resiliency in vulnerable populations with probable war trauma.

Table 1.

*Demographic information about study participants.*

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Current Age</u>	<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>Language(s) Spoken<sup>1</sup></u>	<u>Relationship Status</u>	<u>Education</u>
Thomas	M	56	Kono	English/Krio/ Mende	Divorced/Separated	Some college
Laila	F	39	Limba	Krio	Married/Partnered	Some college
Marie	F	Above 40	Mende	English/Mende/ French	Married/Partnered	Graduate degree
Ida	F	49	Krio	Krio	Single	High school diploma
Olu	M	25	Temne	Krio	Single	Some college
Judith	F	25	Krio	Krio	Single	High school diploma
Tiffany	F	25	Fullah	Krio/English	Single	College degree
Vicky	F	25	Krio	English	Single	College degree
Gloria	F	33	Krio	English	Married/Partnered	Graduate degree
Leo	M	28	Temne	Krio/English	Single	Graduate degree
Will	M	28	Krio	Krio	Married/Partnered	College degree
Michael	M	30	Temne	Krio	Married/Partnered	College degree

<sup>1</sup> Refers to language spoken most of the time. Even when not explicitly stated, all participants were fluent in English.

Table 2.

*Demographic information about study participants continued.*

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Employed</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Years in U.S.</u>	<u>Initial Immigration Status</u>	<u>Status Change</u>	<u>New Immigration Status</u>	<u>Access to Healthcare</u>	<u>Counseling</u>
Thomas	N	N/A	6	Permanent Resident	N	-----	N	N
Laila	Y	Sales Associate	3.5	Visitor's Visa	Y	Permanent Resident	Y	N
Marie	Y	-----	14	Permanent Resident	Y	U.S. Citizen	Y	Y
Ida	Y	Nurse	10	Permanent Resident	N	-----	Y	N
Olu	Y	Grocery Store Associate	1yr/5 mo	Permanent Resident	N	-----	N	N
Judith	Y	CNA	5	Visitor's Visa	Y	Permanent Resident	N	N
Tiffany	N	Student	>12	Visitor's Visa	Y	Deferred Action	N	Y
Vicky	Y	Teacher	23	Visitor's Visa	Y	U.S. Citizen	Y	Y
Gloria	Y	Financial Analyst	12	Visitor's Visa	Y	U.S. Citizen	Y	N
Leo	Y	-----	1yr/8 mo	Permanent Resident	N	-----	Y	N
Will	Y	Production Employee	1	Permanent Resident	N	-----	N	N
Michael	Y	Security Guard	1.5	Permanent Resident	N	-----	N	N



Table 3.	
<i>War Scars: Additional participant responses.</i>	
Participants	Example
Judith	And sometime when I sleep, I have a nightmare. I have to shout during my sleep. My grandmother have to tell me like, "It's okay." Like sometimes I dream about it, like I can dream about it and wake up. It's long time now, but sometimes it gets... then thinking about it---Yeah, some people get help taking about it, some people don't want to talk about it. Cause even when they talk about it, they cry, they feel bad, even me. Sometimes I don't even talk, because I say, "I'm over it", it's the past because I was young. Sometimes when I sleep I wake up-- sometime, even when I'm asleep I would. Like when I see some scar I have, even my knee when I see it, "Oh, this is what I go through, that's why I have this scar." So like it's hard for you to forget and get over it. Like no, because even when people see you they say, "Oh, where did you get this scar from?" You have to explain.
Tiffany	There are times - when I'm here, when you hear the sound of a loud noise or a firecracker, you still get that shock of panic because it is a country where you see people being killed, people being tortured, it was a horrible experience.
Olu	Normally, I don't like talking of these because it keep reminds me a lot when I was there. Even though I was at the age of... 8, so I was a little boy back then but I think no matter what your age once you in Sierra Leone during that bad years you might experience something bad happen to you. Because, can you imagine one year old baby get amputated?

Table 4.	
<i>Submission and Commitment to Dreams: Additional participant responses.</i>	
<u>Participants</u>	<u>Example</u>
Vicky	Exactly. So, everything that I've been saved from, I just felt like God has been preserving me for something. My purpose is for something and I'm still seeking, like, what is it? And also, my spirituality is very important to me because I feel like without God I would not be where I am right now at all. God really helped me out a lot.
Gloria	One thing I love about the United States is the fact that if you work hard, you can do it. And as much as it's hard, but you need to work hard and you're given the same chance as anybody else that did. So I love that. And you're not doing it based on your mother's name, or based on your father's name, you're doing it based on you, it's an accomplishment in itself.
Ida	Well, anyway I thank God for my life, yea I thank God for my life and I thank God the way God is helping me and able to live, though it's a different country.
Laila	Because back home I was working as an administrator. I worked for the UN. Then I came here. Some people have been telling me...oh if you don't have a degree from here...if you don't have credentials from here, it will be difficult for you to find a job. And I said, ok. How am I going to do this? Will I have to go to school or do I have to do a labor job? Then I put that into prayers and I think God directed me. Then I started working at [company]. Until now...then last year, I decided to enroll in [name of school] Community College. So now I'm in school.

Table 5.	
<i>Questions for the researcher at the end of the interviews.</i>	
<u>Participants</u>	<u>Example</u>
Leo	That I'd like to ask you? Okay, how do you want to use this survey to help Sierra Leoneans?
Laila	Yes, after this whole thing...are you going to put this into reality?  You were born here?
Marie	Yes, you said you're doing this survey to help Friends of Sierra Leone, to help immigrants?
Thomas	Well and first and foremost why did you decided to take this? Focus your research on Sierra Leone why?
Vicky	Well, I'm really interested to just see the results of the study and what you come up with. So if you could, share a little bit with me about-- Yeah, what the next step would be.  So the results will go to the people in Sierra Leone?
Gloria	You can tell me a little bit about yourself.
Olu	That I would like to ask you. Like I don't know. I am already— [laughter] Oh, in that case, in that case, not really, but I would just like to know your age, like [laughter] help me in taking this venture, it takes a lot. It really takes a lot. I know you're in your 20s.
Ida	Well... I'm just going to ask you-- what I want to know that if your parents take you to Sierra Leone, will you stay there?  And would you like to marry to Sierra Leone man?

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX I: Recruitment Flyer



**Are you a Sierra Leonean living in the Washington D.C. metro area who....**

- ◆ **Is at least 18 years of age?**
- ◆ **Has relocated to the United States anytime after 1991?**
- ◆ **Has been living in the United States for at least 6 months?**

If so, you may be eligible to participate in a research study that aims to better understand the experiences of Sierra Leoneans when they come to the United States. This study is being conducted by Dr. Paul Florin, the lead researcher and Daphne Cole, a graduate student, from the University of Rhode Island, Clinical Psychology Program, Kingston, RI 02881. This study has been approved by the URI Institutional Review Board (HU1314-092) and the student researcher is a first-generation American with Sierra Leonean heritage that is very passionate about this topic.

Participation in this study will involve completing an audio taped interview lasting about 30 minutes to 1 hour. Your responses to all study questions (listed below) will be kept confidential. At the end of the interview you will receive a \$25 gift card for your participation.

If you are interested in participating please contact the Vice President of *Friends of Sierra Leone*, Aiah Fanday at (240-821-3641, *and/or fanday@aol.com*).

APPENDIX I CONTINUED



*Recruitment Flyer Continued*  
Interview Questions

- Q1. When you first came to the U.S. was there anything in particular that was difficult to deal with?**
- Q2. What kinds of things were especially helpful?**
- Q3. Who did you come with? Did you have anyone to stay with when you arrived?**
- Q4. Would you say that you feel at home in this country?**
- Q5. Many people come to the United States for different reasons. For example some come for educational or job opportunities, others come to live with family, or some come to seek safety, what reasons led you to come to the United States?**
- Q6. Since coming to the United States, would you say that you have more African friends, more American friends, or about the same?**
- Q7. Have you found it difficult to mix your own family's culture and American culture?**
- Q8. Are you actively involved in a Sierra Leonean community or any other community?**
- Q9. Did you experience any difficulties during your time in the United States, specifically because of your ethnic background?**
- Q10. Do you hope to be able to return to Sierra Leone?**
- Q11. How have you felt since leaving Sierra Leone?**
- Q12. Do you do anything to help you feel better?\*** (*optional*)
- Q13. How would you describe Sierra Leone during the war? What was it like living in Sierra Leone?**
- Q14. Is there anything you gained by living in the United States?**
- Q15. Is there anything else that you would like to share?**
- Q16. If you had the chance to talk to a group of people who would like to help other immigrants from Sierra Leone what would you like them to know?**

## APPENDIX II: Informed Consent

The University of Rhode Island  
Department of Psychology  
Address: 10 Chafee Hall, Kingston, RI 02881  
Title of Project: Migration experiences of Sierra Leoneans: Acculturation and psychological adjustment

### CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

You have been invited to take part in a research project described below. The researcher will explain the project to you in detail. You should feel free to ask questions. If you have additional questions at later time, please contact Dr. Paul Florin, 401-277-5302, or Daphne Cole, B.A, 404-964-4605, [Djcole@my.uri.edu](mailto:Djcole@my.uri.edu). Daphne Cole, the person responsible for carrying out this study, will discuss them with you. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research project.

#### *Description of the project:*

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of Sierra Leonean immigrants when they come to the United States.

#### *What will be done?*

If you decide to take part in this study this is what will happen: You will be asked to participate in an interview which will last approximately thirty minutes to an hour and will be audio recorded.

You will be asked some questions and can discuss these questions and your answers with the interviewer. All identifying information such as individual names will be removed. These are standard procedures for interviews. In appreciation for your time, you will receive a \$25 gift card after completing the interview. You will receive a phone call 2-5 days after the interview. The purpose of this call is to briefly check in with you to see how you are doing and to answer any questions or concerns you may have about the study.

#### *Risks or discomfort:*

Answering questions about adjustment to another country can be difficult. If you experience any distress, a list of agencies that have counselors who are experienced working with immigrants will be given to you.

#### *Benefits of this study:*

It is possible that you will receive no specific benefits from participating in this study. A potential benefit of this project is to provide a greater understanding of the experiences of Sierra Leoneans who come to the United States. Some people, however, report feeling relieved to share their experiences with others.

#### *Confidentiality:*

Your participation in this study is confidential. Any forms with identifying information, such as this consent form and the follow up contact form, will be kept completely separate from interview materials which will use special codes that are not linked to your name. You will also be asked to choose a pseudonym, or false name, at the beginning of the interview and that name will be used on the audio recording. To

keep your information confidential, the audio recording of the interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet until a written word-for-word copy of the interview has been created. All typed versions of interviews will be kept on a computer that is password-protected and uses special coding to protect confidential information. All study materials will be destroyed three years after the completion of this study. The researchers will apply for a Certificate of Confidentiality for this study.

*Decision to quit at any time:*

The decision to take part in this study is up to you. You do not have to participate. If you decide to take part in the study, you may quit at any time without penalty. If you wish to quit, simply inform Daphne Cole of your decision during the interview or by calling her at 404-964-4605.

*Rights and Complaints:*

If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed, you may discuss your complaints with Dr. Paul Florin, 401-277-5302 or with Daphne Cole, 404-964-4605, anonymously, if you choose. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the office of the Vice President for Research, 70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, telephone: (401) 874-4328.

You have read the Consent Form. Your questions have been answered. Your signature on this form means that you understand the information and you agree to participate in this study.

_____ Signature of Participant	_____ Signature of Researcher
_____ Typed/printed Name	_____ Typed/printed name
_____ Date	_____ Date

The researcher will use a digital recording device in order to audio record the full interview between the participant and the researcher. Please indicate your decision to be recorded by placing an "X" on one of the lines below followed by your signature.

I agree \_\_\_\_\_ or I decline \_\_\_\_\_ to be recorded

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

***Please sign both consent forms, keeping one copy for yourself.***

## APPENDIX III: Interview Guide

[Begin with introduction]

**Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. As you know, my name is Daphne Cole and I am completing my Master's Degree from the University of Rhode Island. I am very interested in helping other immigrants who come from Sierra Leone to the United States in the future. I hope that you can help me better understand the experience of coming from Sierra Leone to this country.**

[Provide information about the interview process, and review informed consent.]

**1. When you first came to the U.S. was there anything in particular that was difficult to deal with? [Can you remember an instance when -----was a challenge?]**

**2. What kinds of things were especially helpful?**

**3. Who did you come with? Did you have anyone to stay with when you arrived?**

**4. Would you say that you feel at home in this country?**

**5. Many people come to the United States for different reasons. For example some come for educational or job opportunities, others come to live with family, or some come to seek safety, what reasons led you to come to the United States?**

**6. Since coming to the United States, would you say that you have more African friends, more American friends, or about the same?**

**7. Have you found it difficult to mix your own family's culture and American culture?**

**8. Are you actively involved in the Sierra Leonean community or any other community?**

**9. Did you experience any difficulties during your time in the United States, specifically because of your ethnic background?**

**10. Do you hope to be able to return to Sierra Leone?**



**11. How have you felt since leaving Sierra Leone? [Explain if participant doesn't understand (any stress, sadness, anxiety, homesickness, loneliness, frustration, health problems etc.?)]**

**12. Do you do anything to help you feel better? (ask only if they describe difficulties)**

**\*\*For the next set of questions you can feel free to answer or if you would rather not talk about it that is fine also. It will not at all affect your participation in the study or affiliation with *Friends of Sierra Leone*.**

**13. How would you describe Sierra Leone during the war? What was it like living in Sierra Leone?**

[Reflect and follow up with additional questions, check in to see if participant is still comfortable. If not, check in [This can be difficult/uncomfortable to talk about, if you do not want to continue talking about this that is fine, we can move on]

**14. Is there anything you gained by living in the United States?**

**15. Is there anything else that you would like to share?**

**16. If you had the chance to talk to a group of people who would like to help other immigrants from Sierra Leone what would you like them to know? [Reflect and follow up]**

[Wrap up]

17. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

18. After talking to me today, do you think you would recommend this project to a friend?

**Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about your experiences and how to help others from Sierra Leone. Do you have any questions for me?**

[Address any questions participants may have and if necessary provide referral information for local mental health provider contact if necessary]

APPENDIX IV: Demographic Sheet

Participant ID:

Date:

**Please provide your answers below by checking the box or filling in the blank.**

1. Gender: (check one)  Male  Female
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. What ethnic group do you belong to? (Temne, Mende, Kono, Krio, etc.)  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. In which language do you speak most often? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your current relationship status? (check one)
  - Single
  - In a relationship
  - Married/Partnered
  - Divorced/Separated
  - Widowed
6. What is the highest level of education you have achieved? (check one)
  - 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less
  - Some high school but did not graduate
  - High School Diploma/GED
  - Trade/technical/vocational training
  - Some college (e.g., one year, associate degree)
  - College degree (e.g., Bachelor's Degree)
  - Graduate degree and/or Professional degree (e.g., MA, MS, and PhD)
7. Are you currently employed? (check one)
  - Yes
  - No
- 7a. If yes, what is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How long have you lived in the United States? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What was your immigration status when you first came to the United States?  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Has your immigration status changed since then?: (check one)
  - No  Yes  N/A

If yes how so? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Do you have a primary health physician or access to health care?  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. Have you ever received counseling services?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX V: Support Agencies

1. **Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC):**

TASSC is a non-profit organization that provides a range of support services for survivors of torture such as free counseling, free housing on a temporary basis, free legal representation for those who are seeking asylum, medical referrals, employment related assistance and other services.

  - 4121 Harewood Road, NE, Suite B, Washington DC 20017,  
Telephone: 202-529-2991  
Website: <http://www.tassc.org/counseling>
2. **Advocates for Survivors of Trauma (ASTT):**

This organization is a part of the National Consortium of Torture Treatment Centers, a network of service providers who specialize in the care of torture survivors. It provides free psychological and case management services in order to address survivor's needs in a culturally responsive and holistic way.

  - Baltimore Office: 431 East Belvedere Avenue  
Baltimore, MD 21212  
Telephone: (410) 464-9006
  - Washington DC Office  
1624 U Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
Telephone: (202) 290-1672  
Website: <http://astt.org/wordpress/>
3. **Human Rights First:**

This organization is an independent advocacy and action organization that offers a Refugee Protection Program is that committed to advancing the rights of refugees, including the right to seek asylum. This agency advocates for access to asylum, for fair asylum procedures, and for U.S. compliance with international refugee and human rights law. Legal services are offered to refugees through a pro bono Asylum Legal Representation Program.

  - Washington DC Office  
805 15th Street, NW  
Suite 900  
Washington, DC 20005  
Telephone: (202) 547-5692  
Website: <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/our-work/refugee-protection>
4. **Catholic Charities: Archdiocese of Washington**

This organization is the social ministry outreach agency that houses a number of services to refugee and immigrant populations. The Refugee Center offers case management and employment service support to recent refugees and asylum seeker living in DC as they seek to make a new start in the US. Assistance is offered in job searching, interviewing, benefit enrollment, workplace ESL classes and all facets of the employment process.

  - Refugee Center  
1018 Monroe Street, NE  
Washington, DC 20017  
(202) 266-3062  
Telephone: (202) 529-2991  
Website: <http://www.catholiccharitiesdc.org/RefugeeCenter>

## APPENDIX VI

### Follow-up Contact Form

Thank you so much again for the taking the time to talk with me about your experiences. We have discussed many topics today and I would like to briefly follow up with you in a few days just to see how you are doing and to answer any additional questions you may have.

Please provide your contact information below:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone #: \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to reach you: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix VII: Revised Informed Consent

The University of Rhode Island  
Department of Psychology  
Address: 10 Chafee Hall, Kingston, RI 02881  
Title of Project: Migration experiences of Sierra Leoneans: Acculturation  
and psychological adjustment

### CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

You have been invited to take part in a research project described below. The researcher will explain the project to you in detail. You should feel free to ask questions. If you have additional questions at later time, please contact Dr. Paul Florin, 401-277-5302, or Daphne Cole, B.A, 404-964-4605, [Djcole@my.uri.edu](mailto:Djcole@my.uri.edu). Daphne Cole, the person responsible for carrying out this study, will discuss them with you. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this research project.

#### *Description of the project:*

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of Sierra Leonean immigrants when they come to the United States.

#### *What will be done?*

If you decide to take part in this study this is what will happen: You will be asked to participate in an interview which will last approximately thirty minutes to an hour and will be audio recorded.

You will be asked some questions and can discuss these questions and your answers with the interviewer. All identifying information such as individual names will be removed. These are standard procedures for interviews. In appreciation for your time, you will receive a \$25 gift card after completing the interview. You will receive a phone call 2-5 days after the interview. The purpose of this call is to briefly check in with you to see how you are doing and to answer any questions or concerns you may have about the study.

*Risks or discomfort:*

Answering questions about adjustment to another country can be difficult. If you experience any distress, a list of agencies that have counselors who are experienced working with immigrants will be given to you.

*Benefits of this study:*

It is possible that you will receive no specific benefits from participating in this study. A potential benefit of this project is to provide a greater understanding of the experiences of Sierra Leoneans who come to the United States. Some people, however, report feeling relieved to share their experiences with others.

*Confidentiality:*

Your participation in this study is confidential. Any forms with identifying information, such as this consent form and the follow up contact form, will be kept completely separate from interview materials which will use special codes that are not linked to your name. You will also be asked to choose a pseudonym, or false name, at the beginning of the interview and that name will be used on the audio recording. To keep your information confidential, the audio recording of the interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet until a written word-for-word copy of the interview has been created. All typed versions of interviews will be kept on a computer that is password-protected and uses special coding to protect confidential information. All study materials will be destroyed three years after the completion of this study. We will do everything we can to keep others from learning about your participation in the research. To further help us protect your privacy, the researchers have obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services.

The researchers can use this certificate to refuse to disclose information (for example if there were a court subpoena) that may identify you in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings.

Disclosure will be necessary, however, upon request of DHHS for the purpose of audit or evaluation.

You should understand that a Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent you or a member of your family from voluntarily releasing

information about yourself or your involvement in this research. Note however, that if an insurer or employer, learns about your participation, and obtains your consent to receive research information, then the researcher may not use the Certificate of Confidentiality to withhold this information. This means that you and your family must also actively protect your own privacy.

Finally, you should understand that the investigator is not prevented from taking steps, including reporting to authorities, to prevent serious harm to yourself or others. The Certificate of Confidentiality will not be used to prevent disclosure to local authorities of child abuse and neglect, or harm to self or others.

*Decision to quit at any time:*

The decision to take part in this study is up to you. You do not have to participate. If you decide to take part in the study, you may quit at any time without penalty. If you wish to quit, simply inform Daphne Cole of your decision during the interview or by calling her at 404-964-4605.

*Rights and Complaints:*

If you are not satisfied with the way this study is performed, you may discuss your complaints with Dr. Paul Florin, 401-277-5302 or with Daphne Cole, 404-964-4605, anonymously, if you choose. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the office of the Vice President for Research, 70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island, telephone: (401) 874-4328.

You have read the Consent Form. Your questions have been answered. Your signature on this form means that you understand the information and you agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Typed/printed name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The researcher will use a digital recording device in order to audio record the full interview between the participant and the researcher. Please indicate your decision to be recorded by placing an “X” on one of the lines below followed by your signature.

I agree \_\_\_\_\_ or I decline \_\_\_\_\_ to be recorded

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

***Please sign both consent forms, keeping one copy for yourself.***



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