

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BLACK INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A POST-1992 UNIVERSITY IN ENGLAND: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ACADEMIC RESILIENCE

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Abstract

Throughout the past few decades, there has been a rise in the number of black international students accessing predominantly White-dominated institutions in England, but their experiences have consistently been overlooked. There have been increased awareness calls to make structural changes in institutions nationwide. This issue was brought to the fore again with the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the prevalent incident in June 2020, followed by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (Sewell report) published in March 2021. Many increasingly question whether colleges and universities have failed in their stated mission of increasing societal equity. This study uses a multi-faceted framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Bourdieusian thinking tools and Yosso's community cultural wealth (CCW) capitals (aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, familial and resistant). The findings of this research analysis demonstrate the subtle but powerful manner in which racial microaggressions can manifest within the university setting and the strategies of resistance via which these minoritised students subsequently navigate the institution daily. Besides, they reveal that negative stereotyping, low expectations by academics and various forms of discrimination prevails in UK higher education environment. Furthermore, there is strong evidence to suggest that there are insufficient Black role models, the Curriculum in English institutions is Eurocentric, and parental involvement is key, in impacting educational experiences and outcomes. The main contribution of this study is that it considers African and Caribbean students studying at various levels of higher education and adds pertinent information on each aspect of their holistic experiences, such as socio-cultural, learning and language, possessing other forms of capital, as well as financial challenges and coping strategies. The study also confirms the increase in resilience of these students over some time as well as the development of a third culture identity.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Third Cultural Identity, CRT, Capital, Stereotyping, Black international Students.

1 INTRODUCTION

University campuses are hubs of variety and multiculturalism, making them the perfect gathering places for international students, lecturers, staff, and administrators to interact and share ideas and life experiences. In general, international students are seen as profitable to the higher education industry, particularly in the West [1]. International students, especially those classified as people of colour, may encounter difficulties even though they make financial contributions to the host economies. There is a prevalent belief that international students have cultural deficiencies, such as inadequate language proficiency, which hinders their academic success, in the literature on international students studying abroad in Western environments, such as in England and the USA ([2], [3]).

This paper contends that such a perception of international students, especially those racialised as Black (Caribbean and African), is connected to the performance and reproduction of whiteness in English higher education. Whiteness is widely accepted in English higher education, and it is seen as natural and invisible [4]. The imprecise social classification of "Black, Asian and minority ethnic" reveals its pervasiveness (BAME). The categorisation is consistently repeated in government reports on higher education statistics, promoting the category of white racial people as the standard [5]. With built-in subcategories of Black (Caribbean, African, Other), Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Other), Malaysian, Mixed, and Other, the diversity within the BAME category is extensive. We bring up the issue of international students, especially those of African descent (Caribbean and African), in light of the prevalent discourse on race and racism in English higher education. Key performance indicators of racial inequality, such as access to higher education and academic results, downplay their experiences. The primary focus of data collection and reporting on racial equality in higher education is on Black students who reside there ([6], [7], [8], [9]). There is no justification for concentrating only on those with UK

citizenship, especially as international students of African descent who live and study in the UK may not only face obstacles of racial discrimination [10] but may endure many other barriers that have not been fully explored in the past. Therefore, it could be vital to learn more about the experiences of international students of African descent who have the opportunity of studying at a post- 1992 university in England. We will be exploring the difficulties they encounter, and the coping mechanisms they have developed to survive in settings overly predominated by white students and staffs. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: The methodology and research instrument utilised to collect the data are discussed in Section 2. Section 3 offers a thorough examination of the results, while Section 4 offers a conclusion and suggestions for further work.

2 METHODOLOGY

International students of African ancestry were the main ethnic focus of this study on widening participation. In-depth interviews were conducted with Caribbean and African students enrolled in a post-1992 English university. We have investigated the social lived experiences of these participants and made an effort to identify the key difficulties they encountered as well as their coping mechanisms. The research was qualitative, and the methodology was designated as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Phenomenology is more interested in the participant's experiences in specific settings, as phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger emphasised. Husserl was interested in learning how someone could accurately know their own experience of a phenomenon with depth and rigour so they could pinpoint the experience's basic characteristics [11]. In contrast to Husserl's proposed descriptive approach, Heidegger believed that the phenomenological approach was primarily interpretative. IPA focuses on examining in-depth human lived experience and the meaning of that experience as expressed by the individual in their own words, free from any pre-established classifications [11]. The main application of IPA has been in psychological research. As a result, its application in an institutional setting offers some innovation. Given that reality is socially produced, the researchers' ontological view is social constructionism, and their epistemological position is interpretivism. With a sample size of 7, a purposive sampling technique was used. Of the sample, 5 were Sub-Saharan African International students, and 2 were Caribbean International students. Undergraduate and graduate students participated in these in-depth semi-structured interviews. The Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) [12] were used to explain the results. This educational research is necessary because it makes it possible to gain an in-depth cultural and intellectual understanding of the participants' overall experiences.

3 RESULTS

The participants emphasised numerous problems and contradictions between the present institution's policies of being super supportive, having students' experience at the centre of UK HE, and the actual institutional practises in explaining their lived experiences and involvement. Participants' narratives highlighted these disparities between them and the white students by highlighting their experiences and those of classmates at various levels of the institution. Problems with discrimination, linguistic racism, cultural identity, the curriculum's Eurocentrism, and white privilege have all been identified. Participants agreed that overt racism was not present, but that subtle racism Challenges faced by international African Descent students in the UK

3.1 Struggle with Discrimination, Racism, segregation, and Bias

Racial harassment, from open abuse to more passive mistreatment, is so commonplace in UK universities. In this study, the researchers didn't find any concrete evidence of overt racism experienced by any of the participants. Still, much evidence of prejudice and various kind of discrimination was the primary cause of the unfair educational practices that affected their experiences. CRT has been used as a framework to help explain these challenges. White privilege was highlighted, and the lack of infrastructure for responding to complaints of racism by students suggested that issues of race were neither understood nor prioritised. Less favourable treatment due to ethnicity and accent or based on their language use (linguistic racism) was also identified, Segregation was also an issue. In the classroom, White students tend to sit with other White students, Asian students with other Asian students and Black generally don't feel accepted by other groups, so they also sit with other Black students. The same behaviours are repeated while choosing members for group assignments. These problems of segregation are also replicated in student accommodation. Racial prejudice and stereotypes, racial microaggressions (micro assault, microinsult, microinvalidation), white students and

staff ignoring or interrupting Black students. Many black students had self-doubt and a lack of confidence (imposter syndrome). They were overly represented at academic misconduct panels. There was also a widespread sense that lecturers might be marking their assignments down, due to a lack of understanding of their cultural backgrounds and perspectives, and stereotypical perceptions of Black people lacking intellectual ability.

“Again, I have gained a lot of things but I would say I’ve only experienced a bit of discrimination maybe from - during our undergrad some teachers were [...] favour some students, they would offer certain opportunities for them other than just trying to offer the whole class or myself. I experienced that. [...] Only just I would say just teachers picking out favourites in classes. That’s what it looked like because they were providing extra support for them and extra opportunities for them other than just trying to provide extra opportunities for the black students [...] One example is I know a student that got a placement opportunity [muffled] because of their relationship and because if [...] I believe it was because it was of their ethnicity. And I know people who in that class that were black, they actually pointed it out because they weren’t - of the other black students there were in the class, there were those two or three or four in particular, the white students, they were the ones that were given the opportunity from another teacher.” – Black African Zimbabwe - Jotobi

Aggressive Stigma; the black angry girl: I don’t think I come across threatening, I don’t think I ever show that kind of attitude, but obviously a lot of stigmas around black people is that they are aggressive and we will lash out. So, I got excluded for three days. It was internal exclusion but I had to be chaperoned around all day and the other student wasn’t black but she was actually the person who would ‘bullying me’ so I was the victim! Black Caribbean female- Fanta

3.2 Effect of long commuting

Due to the challenges of getting local private accommodation, many students who came with their families could not find accommodation within the town, so they had to commute to the university. Fig. 1 shows the effect of long commuting.

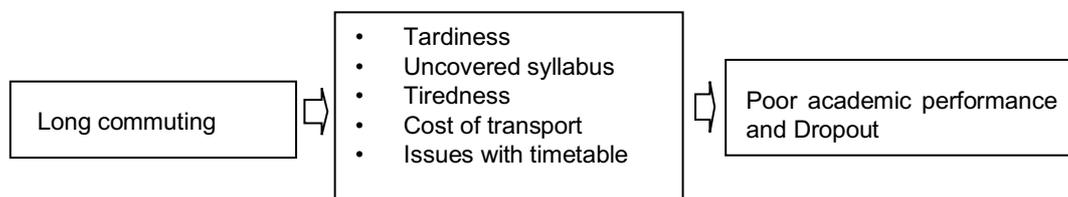


Figure 1. Effect of long Commuting.

“I live in London with my family, and then I commute when I have class. I cannot afford to rent by myself in this town. I can save on my rent. London is about [...] from here, so it is not too far. I really appreciate spending time with my family and taking care of my younger sister. My mum is a single mum you know. [...] It can be sometimes challenging to be on time due to train delay. Sometimes the lecturer will not let us in the class when we are late. I sometimes have to leave early to catch my train back to London [...]” ~ Black Caribbean female - Fanta

3.3 Struggle with sociocultural and well-being issues

Many students come with families, and they have caring responsibilities, particularly those studying at the postgraduate level. Although some proportion of these students come from a wealthy background, they are expected to work to sustain themselves rather than counting on their parents to send them money for living expenses. They also have family and peer pressure, Black males as a group, experience disproportionate amounts of school failure compared to Black females and White males, for example, Black males have the highest dropout rates, poorest achievement, and lowest test scores. Other less privileged students must work and send money back to their families in Africa. This is referred to as the “Black tax”. There are also hostile mainstream media narratives about immigration, extensive analysis of media coverage of black young men and boys in the British news and current affairs media generally depicts Black people negatively. Many students don’t have this sense of belonging and experience imposter syndrome. Untreated mental health difficulties among university students adversely impact students’ academic performance, and grades, as many miss their home countries and live in

isolation. It was also observed that many Black students do not access support services at the university. They face several educational concerns and don't generally share personal problems with support service staff. Additionally, as these students can't get financial support, they work part-time. Moreover, those students who worked part-time achieved poorer marks than those that did not. Other identified impacts include missed lectures and tutorials, reduced time for study and fatigue.

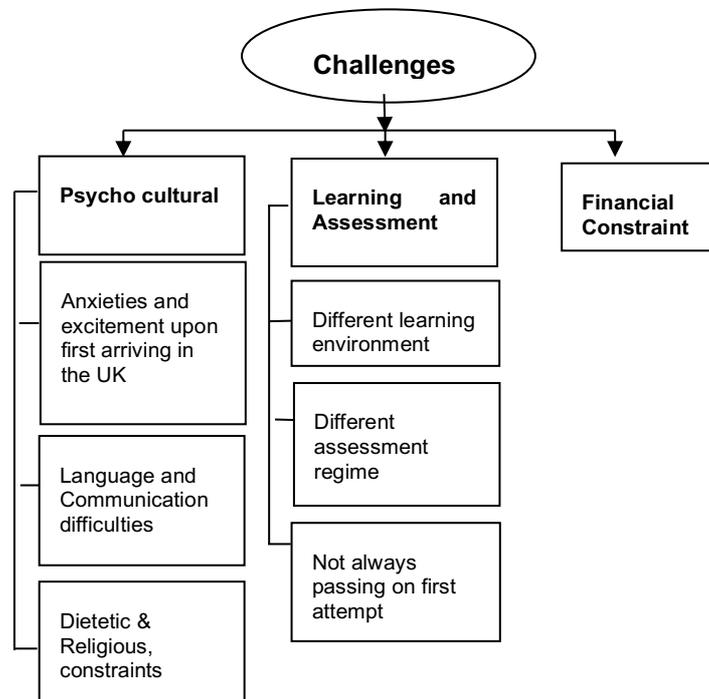


Figure 2. Additional sociocultural challenges.

3.4 Eurocentric Nature of the education received

Institutions, large and small, continue to place much emphasis on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Decolonising the curriculum is not just a fad due to the escalation of Black Lives Matter in 2020. The concept emerged from the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall campaign in Cape Town. Those pushing for decolonising the curriculum argue that the production, nature and validity of knowledge is not a neutral project. Several prominent voices in academia are calling for the decolonisation and internationalisation of the British curriculum, therefore moving away from the colonial legacy of the UK. The national curriculum currently omits the vast contribution that black people have made to the UK and the ongoing legacy of Britain's imperial legacy. Some participants reported that they often have to "work harder" than their white peers to "connect" with content in curriculums and assessments as they find it difficult to relate to several aspects of the course and examples provided by white lecturers. It has also been observed that most international students are used to exams as a form of assessment in their home countries. So, when they arrive in the UK, they face a massive shock as many courses are assessed through coursework, presentation, group work. In some cases, these students are not aware of the concepts of referencing, therefore ending up committing academic misconducts such as collusion, plagiarism and personation (especially 'contract cheating' through the use of bespoke essays through essay mills). With relatively few systems provided by the university to prepare these students and allow a smooth transition to the UK system, some of them end up not completing their studies or withdrawing from their courses because of lack of academic progress.

In all the lectures I have attended during my master, all case studies my teachers have used are always related to UK or US, we come in here, spending a lot of money for our education, we only study white people stuff you know [...] some of us want to go back a many of the things we have learned here sometimes do not have any direct relevance to the situation in Africa. I know the lecturers work very hard, but it would be great if they could go that extra mile and come up with scenario that we as African can also relate to. -Male African – Nigeria - Augustin

3.5 Students' experiences of educational, cultural adjustments, the Third Cultural Identity

3.5.1 Cultural homelessness

Cultural homelessness describes individuals of mixed cultural backgrounds living within a framework of experiences, feelings, and thoughts that do not belong to any single racial, ethnic, or cultural reference group. Indeed, many students, particularly those coming at an early age to study in the UK will develop a third cultural identity. This happens during the process of integration, as the host country's culture is different from the student's home country's culture, which results in the creation of a hybrid way of behaving in society. After spending a long time in the country, although they may still identify as international students, they don't feel African or Caribbean wholly anymore because of the changes they had to make to their behaviour to adapt. This becomes more apparent when they travel back home for holidays, they are treated as foreigners in their own countries of origin because of their changed behaviours.

I have experienced it. For example, after my first year I was able to travel back to Nigeria. Getting to Nigeria, I did know I had changed a bit, but it was people who were telling me, "You have changed, you are more reserved and don't talk too much. Keeping to yourself. The way you talk to people. You just say, "hello" and that's it". Back in Nigeria you are seen as a stranger or a foreigner and when you come here you also seem like a stranger again. It's not just you. You are who you are. I am who I am and I just can't be them. No matter how I try to learn about the culture, if I am not them, I am not them. Maybe it's a personal thing. I can't pretend to be what I'm not. I'm not an actor. No matter how I try, I'm not a good actor and that's probably why they see this is still a Nigerian here. ~ Black Nigerian Male, international student - Augustin

3.5.2 African descent Families in the UK, their parenting and Influences

Family plays a vital role in Black infants' development and behaviour. The family role as an educator is a crucial contributor to child education, growth and, later on, their view and understanding of the nature of reality and the choices they will make in their future lives as adults. During the study, participants explained the impact of their parents on the way they view the world and focus on their studies. Findings revealed a strong influence of the structural forces of race, power and cultural differences on parents' thought processes and actions. Some of the issues raised were a loss of identity of the participants' parents, stigma attached to their children speaking English with an accent, not being sure of welfare and other laws and subsequently concern of falling foul of authority, and concern that disciplining their children could lead to punishment by child welfare agencies or social workers taking their children away.

3.6 Coping strategies adopted

3.6.1 Dealing with Racism and other forms of discrimination

While analysing the data from African students interviewed, it was clear that the way these students perceived racism and other forms of discrimination was very different from other African descent subgroups (Black British and Caribbean students). Most African students had issues recognising some other forms of non-overt racism. The usual approach adopted was to ignore the person perpetrating the act. Several participants also dealt with racism and discrimination as if they were dealing with tribalism in their native countries. It didn't matter where they came from in Africa, they all had similar protective behaviours. In Africa, tribal groups are highly respected by their members as they regard their groups as priority in crossing their daily activities. There are over three thousand tribal groups found among nations of the continents. Tribalism is the state of being organised and advocating for a tribe. In conformity, tribalism refers to a cultural term, a way of thinking or behaving in which people are more loyal to their tribes than to their friends, countries or social groups. Tribalism, as a theory, is based on variables such as combinations of kingship-based, organisations, reciprocal exchange, manual production, oral communication and analogical enquiries. Tribalism is oriented around the valences of analogy, genealogy and mythology. This means that customary tribes have their social foundations in some variations of tribal orientations, which at the same time often taken as traditional practices [13]. Moreover, they also found a way to get away from the source of problems. They tend to talk amongst themselves (Africans from different backgrounds and ethnic groups), and work in groups together, as they understand each other better than when dealing with other White students or other Asian students. Based on the data collected from both the Black British participants and those from the Caribbean, some similarities were identified in their approach while dealing with racism and other forms of discrimination.

I may be wrong but there is this way that I feel that maybe when you are trying to put forward any idea, unless you are assertive and you [...] this concern know that, to know what you are saying, there's always this tendency of trying to maybe side-line you as probably maybe, 'This person is from Nigeria, this person is not really from this country'. Or, 'This person, the first language is not English', so they may not really want to take on your idea, even when you know what you are saying, unless you are ready to assert yourself and say no. Even though English is not my first language, I know what I'm saying; I'm intelligent, yes, so I can think critically and I can express myself. ~ Black African Female, doctoral student Debbie

3.6.2 Community Cultural Wealth capitals

Community cultural wealth (CCW) as an asset-based framework challenges the deficit notion that communities of Colour do not possess “cultural” capital. Indeed, anti-deficit and anti-racist frameworks have been part of social science and educational research for at least 70 years. In response to Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of cultural capital as assets that wealthy individuals possess to reproduce their positions of power in society and by using critical race theory as a theoretical foundation, Yosso in 2005 developed community cultural wealth as a contribution to anti-deficit frameworks ([14], [15]). In 2005, Yosso defined community cultural wealth as an interdisciplinary framework that identifies and highlights the various assets and resources utilized by Communities of Color as they navigate schools and other social systems [15]. She challenged Bourdieusian thought and how it was used to engage in deficit notions that Students of Color lacked the cultural capital and knowledge required to succeed within the education system. While community cultural wealth is not the first anti-deficit framework, it has contributed to social justice efforts. Since its development in 2005, it has been cited by more than 7,000 published studies. Fig. 3 Is a model of community cultural wealth Adapted from [12].

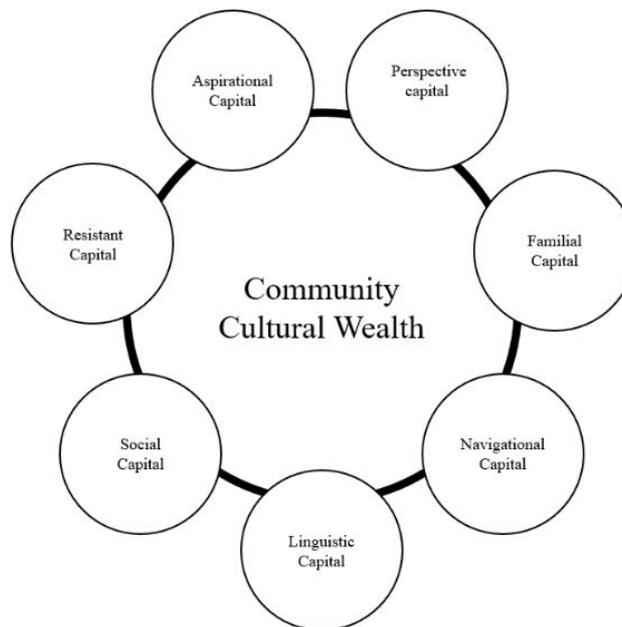


Figure 3. A model of community cultural wealth.

- **Familial capital** - can be described as the “cultural knowledges natured among family (kin)” (p.79), whereby family is understood in a broader sense of not only nuclear family but also the extended family (aunties, cousins, etc.), as well as family friends or family members who passed away. For example, familial capital can equip students with work ethics recognised and valued in the field of education.
- **Aspirational capital** - is “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p.77). In the field of education, it can relate to high aspirations for a university degree, which can be observed, among others, in Black African students in the UK. It was noticed during the various interviews conducted with the participants that students coming from Africa to complete their masters or PhD had bigger ambition than the black British or Caribbean students and this was reflected on their grades and perception of higher education.

- **Linguistic capital** - can be understood as the cognitive and communicative skills derived from using more than one language or different styles of language or expression, including artistic expression and **code switching**. While Yosso referred to this capital mostly in the context of the bilingualism of Latinx pupils, in the UK the picture is much more intricate with a whole array of languages (Hindi, Yoruba, Patois) and English registers (from pidgin English to received pronunciation) and different degrees of fluency in them. Therefore, the researcher would argue that linguistic capital may manifest itself very differently in the UK and can be seen as closely linked to social class. Thus, linguistic capital stresses the links between 'race' and class (how the two are intersecting and mitigating each other), which the researcher argue, is something that Yosso failed to highlight in her initial work.
- **Social capital** – is a network of acquaintances, which can be utilised by people of colour, for example, to identify scholarships, help with the preparation of applications, providing reassurance or actually obtaining education and work. While not necessarily contradicting Bourdieu's understanding of social capital as having a more individualistic character, i.e. people who one simply gets to meet through family, school or work and bond with due to similar habitus, Yosso's understanding adds an element of a community spirit/habitus, in which the bonds which mobilise this capital stem from community. Such **social capital** is argued to provide not only material but also emotional support. Social capital has been widely theorised, which highlighted several functions that it serves. Most usefully for this study, social capital can be a source of aspiration which provides visible role models making success seem like an achievable goal; this often stems from the community. Secondly, **social capital** may be useful in facilitating the development of skills and abilities. And finally, social capital may provide direct access to opportunities for employment or education.
- **Navigational capital** - refers to the people of colour's ability to manoeuvre and achieve success within institutions which were built on racist assumptions, for example, by highlighting aspects of knowledge which have the most propensity to be valued by the dominant groups and downplaying those which may not be seen favourably.
- **Resistant capital** – can be understood as the knowledges and skills used to resist subordination by countering negative societal messages and valuing oneself despite/against them, for example by celebrating achievements and contributions of people of colour within science or literature.
- **Perspective capital** - When conceptualising the framework, Yosso noted that people of colour may have more capitals at their disposal than those described by her. Therefore, the researcher proposes another form of capital, which was missing in her framework and it is referred to as **perspective capital**. This is based on the argument that being a part of a non-dominant group, situated outside of the White (and often middle class) 'norm' and thus being othered allows an alternative view, not afforded to the majority in a given context. Dubois emphasised that the '**double-consciousness**' of the unjust racial order has been a crucial part of the socialisation of people of colour, which allowed them to turn that perspective into resistance. Thus, the researcher argues that **perspective capital** can be seen as a resource that allows people of colour to perceive of structural oppressions and their positionality within them, in order to leverage a perspective not easily observable by the dominant groups.

Possessing an alternative perspective can be an asset in understanding not only the positionality of oneself and one's community but also other marginalised communities. As the researcher has argued in other chapters, such perspective capital allows people who are othered to be an asset in an otherwise homogenous-perspective environment, and thus gives them an element of agency, which is not included in the theorisations of the other forms of capital.

For Yosso, *community cultural wealth capitals* are not seen as separate but rather as closely linked, intertwined and impacting one another. However, in her work, she did not specify exactly how the different capitals intersect and impact each other. This paper furthers the understanding of these interactions. First, *CCW capitals* are not separate from Bourdieu's cultural and social capitals. Still, they can be seen as more specific types of these, i.e. *social and familial capital* in the *CCW framework* are forms of Bourdieusian *social capital*, while *aspirational, resistant, navigational, linguistic and perspective capitals* can be understood as specific forms of embodied *cultural capital*. Furthermore, the researcher argues that *perspective capital, family capital and social capital* often act as capitals which build up or contribute to the development of other capitals. So, for international students, despite all the issues they face at UK universities, many can resist and successfully complete their studies with good degrees or distinctions for those studying at the postgraduate level. Many come to the UK with many forms of capital

that have not always been valued in western societies.

3.6.3 Behaviour modification

Code-switching has been identified as a way of coping with their challenges and feeling accepted. This includes using complete sentences, phrases and borrowed words from another language. These students adapt their behaviours based on the environment or the people they are interacting with. It is a common linguistic phenomenon noted among bilingual populations. To code-switch effectively, students must possess a high level of understanding of the two cultures and a deep understanding of the underlying structures and purposes of the two language systems. Some students change their names to integrate. The movement of African students and the influence of Western higher education is not a recent phenomenon. In 1946, around 200 students from the “Colonial Empire” in Africa were studying at British universities on scholarships, made available in the Colonial Development and Welfare Act. Since then, African students have been coming to the United Kingdom in significant numbers, to earn a higher education qualification and return to Africa [16]. Students of African descent studying in Britain generally face challenges with their name pronunciation. In some instance, they have either shortened their names to make them closer to European-sounding names which make life easier for white peers and lecturers trying to remember their names or pronounce them. The process of adopting White sounding names also increases the chances of being shortlisted for job interviews.

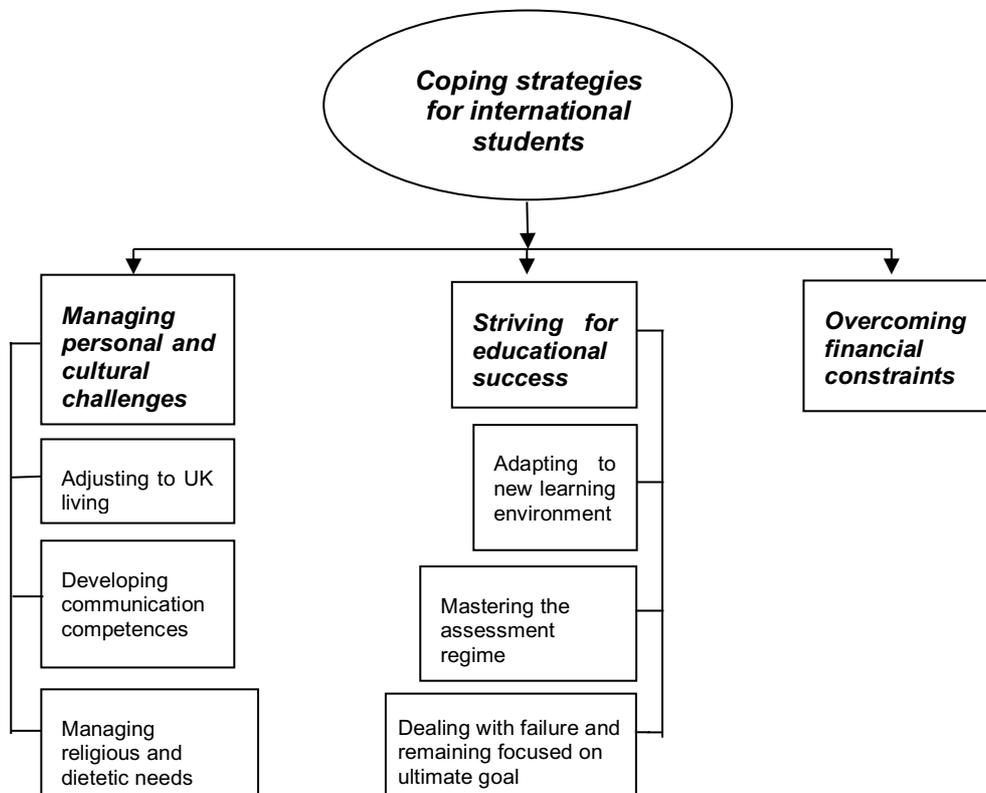


Figure 4. Coping strategies for international students.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated the importance of exploring the experiences of international African descent students at a post-1992 University in England. The participants in this research were studying at all 3 cycles of HE, starting from the undergraduate level to the doctoral level. Moreover, the study had a mixture of nationalities and genders, providing a complete picture of the challenges they faced, and the coping strategies adopted to survive in this mainly white-dominated environment. These problems identified highlighted their trauma or lack of trauma before attending university in the UK, the key challenges they faced at university, and how they managed to cope and survive. It was necessary to highlight that the African-descent student population in England is not a homogenous group. They are made up of Black African, Black Caribbean, Black British and mixed races who behave very differently, perform differently academically and have various capitals. The study confirmed that there are personal,

educational and professional aspirations that prompt students to study at university and that there are certain 'push' factors like racism, discrimination, segregation, the Eurocentric nature of the education they receive, the effect of long commuting that massively affect their performance and progress. In addition, the attraction or the 'pull' factors of their community cultural wealth capital help some progress in their studies and successfully complete their degrees. Students faced a combination of psychological, academic and financial challenges relating to anxieties of adjusting to a new culture for international students, language difficulties, new ways of learning and assessment, and having to work alongside their studies. The study also maps the different approaches used for addressing the challenges and working towards successfully completing the studies. The participants chose to live together as they adjusted to the new culture by code-switching and worked part-time to subsidise their living expenses. The participants in this research also demonstrated similar adjusting attitudes and abilities by constantly re-constructing their multiple identities while facing various and tough challenges. Future research could focus on exploring issues related to access to university support services by black students.

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