

Thesis Topic and Research Question

Since the late 1960s, there has been a significant increase in the emigration of skilled healthcare professionals from African countries, with the United States (U.S.) being a primary destination for these migrants. Because the U.S. is a major destination, African healthcare professionals in the U.S. are a source from which to learn about the experiences of the professionals, who are at the core of the “brain drain” policy issue. Motivations for migration among these healthcare professionals have been identified by several sources, and include aspirations for increased wages and career development opportunities. However, finer-grained analysis of the distinct experiences of sub-populations, such as females and males, within this group of professionals, has not been deeply explored. Thus, the proposed topic of this research project is the gendered experiences of African healthcare professional immigrants in the U.S.

My research project asks whether there are gendered differences among African healthcare professional immigrants in the U.S. in: (1) their motivations and decisions to migrate to the U.S.; (2) their experiences in the U.S. healthcare labor market after their arrival; and (3) their views of their long-term career paths and possible humanitarian aspirations. These questions lie at the intersection of research literature concerning: (1) African immigration to the U.S., (2) high-skilled professional immigration to the U.S., and (3) gender in the process of migration and the U.S. labor market experience. (See attached bibliography for a list of literature sources.) Furthermore, these questions have policy implications concerning not only the “brain drain” of professionals from African countries, but also disparities involving gender in the medical profession, and the potential for humanitarian partnerships with members of the African diaspora.

Research Design

I have already conducted a smaller-scale version of this project for my spring 2008 Junior Tutorial in Sociology (Sociology 98m), concerning immigration in contemporary America. In conjunction with Dr. Helen Marrow, my Sociology 98m professor, I decided to use semi-structured in-depth interview methodology, because this project is concerned with the subjective perspectives of respondents. I will interview 10 to 15 male and 10 to 15 female healthcare professionals who were born and trained in medicine in Africa, and who are working in the U.S. The interview guide is a list of about 45 questions, which I will ask study participants, in order to address each of my three aforementioned research questions. Study participants will be recruited by pursuing contacts, which I have in the Harvard Medical School community, and then expanding this base of participants via the social and professional networks of these people.

Projected Work Schedule

This summer, I will do more interviews to expand the work, which I have already done in Sociology 98m, into a larger-scale senior thesis. Professor Mary Waters of the Sociology Department will be my thesis advisor. I will be in Cambridge for seven weeks studying for the MCATs and conducting two to three interviews per week, for a total of approximately fourteen to twenty-one interviews. Funding for this summer research, including transportation to interviews and interview transcription, is coming from the Harvard College Research Program. I will meet with Professor Waters every other week to discuss my progress, and send her an email update each week that we do not meet.

During my senior year, I will be taking Sociology 99 and stay in close contact with Professor Waters, in order to consistently make progress on my thesis. I will finish all interviews, analyze the content of my interview transcripts using Atlas.ti software for

qualitative data analysis, and write and revise my thesis. I plan to adhere to the following

work schedule:

Monday, September 15 – Begin basic coding and writing approximately 1 page per week on initial trends I perceive in the interviews

Monday, November 3 – All interviews completed

Monday, November 17 – All interviews transcribed

Monday, December 15 – Literature review and methodology section completed

Tuesday, December 17 – Begin in-depth coding and writing the rest of the first draft

Monday, February 9 – Thesis draft sent to Professor Waters and first reader

Friday, March 21 – Turn in thesis by 1pm

Conclusion

I am passionate about this project, because it truly is a convergence of all of my academic and professional interests. I have taken every theory and methodology course required of Sociology concentrators to prepare me to conduct original research. I have also taken Medical Sociology, a course which addressed issues of gender and race among medical professionals. In addition to my study of Sociology, I am a pre-medical student and have a strong interest in global health. This past summer 2007, I served as a Weissman International Intern for ten weeks at iTEACH, an HIV/AIDS and TB initiative at Edendale Hospital in South Africa. During this internship, I had first-hand experience with the “brain drain” issue. I met patients with life-threatening conditions, who waited weeks to see a doctor, due to the lack of hospital staff. I also met frustrated doctors who detested being unable to save the lives of patients, because of problems such as lack of medical equipment. Thus, I am highly motivated to learn about the perspectives of doctors, who have emigrated from resource-scarce settings in Africa, because doing so will enable me to more effectively pursue my career goal of providing medical care to people in such resource scarce settings. Through these interviews, I will meet the kinds of people with whom I will collaborate to pursue this goal as an adult.