

Life Together While Far Apart: Psychological, Physical, and Emotional Impacts of Transnational Marriages in the Context of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Transnational couples make life together while far apart across international borders. Fully understanding transnational couple living requires an in-depth analysis of the causes of marital relationship strains among transnational couples and the behavioral adjustments and expectancies needed to accommodate relationship disruptions. Framed within the double ABC-X model of family stress and coping, this study investigated the impacts of transnational living on married Ghanaian couples. Twenty-Four married participants from three U.S. States and their Ghanaian spouses in Ghana were interviewed. Participants shared what motivated their transnational migration to the United States, how U.S. immigration policies influenced their marriage, and the psychological, physical, and emotional impacts of transnational living on them and their marriage relationship. Findings reveal that married transnational couples experience relationship strains that significantly affect different domains of their health and wellbeing. These strains exhibit as psychological, physical, and emotional challenges. Participants reported issues including recurring depression, chronic illnesses, financial hardships, and divorce. These relationship strains were found to result from unrealistic expectations about life in the U.S., inadequate understanding of immigration realities, lack of relationship nurturing, and barriers created by changing U.S. immigration policies. This study has implications for health practitioners and immigration policymakers.

Keywords

Transnational living, Life Together Apart, Relationship Quality, Marriage Relationships, Psychological, Physical and Emotional Impacts.

Introduction

“Transnational migration exacerbates conflicts that exist in families unaffected by transnational migrations...” [1]. This conclusion about the impact of transnational living on families and spousal relationships is consistent with narratives from this study participant who describes his feelings about living and working in the U.S.- across border and the Atlantic ocean- from his wife and children in Ghana. “Well, how can I begin? A lot of things have come up between us especially issues concerning the children and how long I have been away from them. I feel badly that I haven’t really been there to see much of their upbringing but at the same time I am here because of the children and my wife. My

being here is beneficial to all of us.” This experience is typical of intimate partners who live across international borders [2]. To delve deeper into this phenomenon and examine how transnational living affects marriage relationships, twenty-four participants, i.e., twelve married couples were recruited to participate in this study. The study was guided by three research questions framed around the literature and the theory: investigating what motivates transnational migration among Ghanaian immigrants in the U.S.; how transnational living arrangements affect the care and nurture of marriage relationships among Ghanaian couples; and how immigration policies impact Ghanaian immigrants and their marriage relationship quality.

Prior and Current Literature on Transnationalism

Although COVID has slowed global migration by 27% [3], the number of international migrants has increased from 173 million in 2000 to 281 million in 2020 representing almost 4% of the world’s

population. The United States (U.S.) is the main destination for migrants with 51 million international migrants in 2020 [3].

Diasporas can be forced or chosen, often pursued because of economic (increased career opportunities), social (following family who have gone before), political (escaping war), or environmental (in response to natural disasters) reasons [4]. Prior migration literature established transnationalism as a mere connection and essential inter-relations between migrants and non-migrants [1,5,6]. These connections are critical to the selection of marriage partners, the strengthening of relationships and the survival of transnational families during the separation period. Al-Sharmani and Ismail [5], for example, examined the role transnational family ties play in new spousal selection, marriage arrangements, and the management of spousal resources. These authors conclude that maintaining these transnational ties are important to sustaining both the migrant and non-migrant. However, recent literature presents transnational living as a non-consequence of migration but rather the effort to avoid it. Carling, Erdal, and Talleraas [7] studied transnational immigrants to Norway and Netherlands and present evidence establishing transnationalism as a fundamental challenge to migration. Also, Davidson and Hannaford [8] present transnational living as a coping mechanism for family stress focusing on intimate partner violence (IPV). While migration may be a solution to a specific problem, such as IPV, migrants experience a multitude of challenges such as immigration difficulties, high cost of living, loss of social connectedness, and lack of familial support [1]. Diasporas, whether forced or chosen, have residential outcomes in host nations and present social well-being concerns [9].

Goals for Ghanaian Emigration to the U.S.

The migration rate of African people to the U.S. increased by 41% within the past two decades [10], making them one of the fastest growing immigrant groups [11]. African immigrants now comprise approximately 5% of the U.S. population [12], with Ghana the 4th largest African immigrant population in the U.S. [13]. Unlike immigrants from war-torn African countries, Ghanaians are unlikely to immigrate as refugees or asylum seekers, largely due to the nation's significant political stability.

Ghanaians immigrate to the U.S. for educational enhancement and for occupational opportunities [14]. The U.S. is a target destination due to its economic stability and its varied and advanced educational opportunities [15]. The Ghanaian population in the U.S. emigrated in the hopes of bettering their lives and that of their family relations [6] and pursuing academic advancement or for esteem and image – A Ghanaian immigrant who returns to Ghana from the U.S. is hailed as wealthy by the non-migrants [16]. They carry with them the intent to attain the “American Dream” and to extend this life to their remaining families back at home. “American Dream” is a term James Adams coined when he described the “...dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” [6]. The “American Dream” is held as the measure of success [6,17] and the process of “becoming middle-

class, becoming homeowners (in often forgotten communities) and participating in the political processes” [6]. While the pursuit of the “American Dream” seems alluring to immigrant groups, more so to those emigrating from developing countries, it is not without strain and effort. Several obstacles such as financial strain, settlement uncertainties and, in most cases, frequently changing immigration policies prolong or prevent the attainment of the “American Dream.” The following section discusses U.S. immigration policy as barriers to transnational families.

Barriers Transnational Families Encounter Due to U.S. Immigration Policy

Non-Family oriented, financially motivated, and racist intentions

Transnational living shares characteristics with other types of migration such as lifestyle migrants, expats, temporary labor migrants and international students. However, it is a distinct phenomenon defined as having continuous and considerable attachments, exchanges, and presence in more than one country [7]. Reasons for the creation of transnational families are many and varied. However, Kulu-Glasgow and Leerkes [18], among other transnational researchers, have cited stringent immigration laws as a predominant reason for couple separation and relationship strain among transnational spouses. These researchers imply that immigration policies or their modifications play a vital role in immigrant family separation or reunification. Transnational literature points to restrictive immigration policies in the last few decades with more restrictions in recent years [19]. The increased restrictions have especially been severe for persons emigrating from middle eastern and sub-Saharan African countries. Several recent situations in the U.S. have confirmed these assertions. For example, the U.S. immigration ban imposed by former U.S. president, Donald Trump, caused extreme turmoil and hardships for immigrants from several countries and their spouses, particularly for those from six Muslim-majority countries (i.e., Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen) targeted for immigration and visa exclusion [20]. During this period, legal U.S. residents including U.S. citizens and permanent residents from these countries could not reunite with their spouses for 120 days; for some countries, this postponement was indefinite [20]. Also, in March 2019, Donald Trump created an uproar with his intent to cancel the Deferred Enforcement Departure (DED) Program for Liberian immigrants who fled Liberia during the country's civil war [21]. A group of civil rights attorneys cited racism against Black African immigrants in a filed lawsuit. The lawsuit cited this action as part of the Trump administration's attempts to forcibly remove nonwhite immigrants from the U.S. while maintaining and opening their doors to white immigrants [27]. This was clearly racist against Black immigrants.

Other U.S. Immigration policy modification has also targeted immigrants from middle eastern and sub-Saharan African countries. Several factors may explain such immigration policy modifications. For example, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) released several modifications to sections of their immigration policies after the occurrence of the

9/11 terrorist attack. USCIS cited that these modifications aim to streamline the U.S. immigration process, provide more security, and create more vigilance [19]. Additionally, in 2019, the Trump administration announced a major modification to the immigration policy on financial sponsorship requirement for permanent resident (green card) applications which affected majority of immigrants from sub-Saharan African countries. Civil and immigrant rights activists opposed this modification citing the action as racism against low-income immigrants' families [22]. This stringency and restrictions in U.S. immigration policy especially targeted at these populations leave limited possibilities for African families to migrate together as a family unit to begin with. Thus, when married couples emigrate, they are faced with the decision of separating from their spouses with the intention of reuniting with them after their settlement in the destination country [1], a plan that often is further thwarted by settlement uncertainties after arrival in the U.S. The process of migrating in and of itself is a stressful life event with the potential to affect a couple's marriage, more so, when the migration is distant and across international borders. Transnational couples face different relationship challenges that couples residing together do not face. In the next section, I discuss some of these challenges within the Ghanaian context.

Effects of Transnational Living on Married Ghanaian Couples

Secombe [23] described marriage as a legally contracted and recognized union of two people as partners in a personal relationship. Among the purposes of marriage, is to establish rights and obligations between the two individuals and any biological or adopted children resulting from that union [23]. While this definition is legal and western but not cultural, the purpose components of this definition still apply to marriage within the Ghanaian culture and context. The purpose of this section is to highlight the distinction of Ghanaian marriage from marriage in other cultures and its relevance to the current study. In Ghanaian culture, marriage bestows special honor and respect on a couple and is viewed as an important social institution that marks the transition of the partners from adolescence to adulthood. Marriage, in this culture, is deemed to promote moral uprightness, allowing for the legitimization of sexual intercourse and practices. Thus, marriage officially defines to a couple the socio- culturally sanctioned context for reproduction [24]. Ghanaian married couples, like in other cultures, have roles and responsibilities. However, a distinction of Ghanaian marriage from one in other cultures is that conjugal responsibilities are mandated by the culture [25].

Spouses are obligated to perform such functions as providing emotional and physical support, resource sharing, and reproduction to promote spousal harmony between the couple and sometimes their extended families [26]. These conjugal responsibilities include practices such as meeting the physical, financial, emotional, and sexual needs of the couple. Furthermore, unlike marriage in other cultures, where spouses may choose to live apart, Ghanaian culture mandates married couples to co-reside in one home and highlights the importance of routine marital practices, i.e., regular family practices such as sharing mealtimes and engaging in sexual relations as the marriage institution officially permits them to

[27]. In transnational marriages, however, most of these elements of daily marital practices are unavailable to a couple [26]. These culturally mandated expectations amplify the challenges Ghanaian transnational couples face that transnational couples from other cultures may not. Contrary to these cultural expectations, Tai and Hewitt [28] reported the high rates of Living Apart Together (LAT) couple relationships in western cultures specifically the U.K., U.S., Australia, and other European countries. While any spousal separation may be challenging and all couples, including Tai and Hewitt's [28] LAT couples may not live challenge-free lives, Ghanaian transnational couples are faced with a unique challenge. The separation of families in Ghana as a result of migration is not a new phenomenon. Ghana has a long history of its citizens traveling within and beyond the country for commerce and economic activities [29]. In recent years, however, the purpose and duration of family separation have significantly shifted and expanded to include often semi-permanent stays in host countries for economic and academic advancement purposes. While transnational living has been studied among some immigrant groups, the impact of transnational living on marriage relationships and on intimate couples has never been studied among African people, particularly Ghanaian immigrants, who often emigrate in marital status.

Theoretical Framework: The Double ABC-X Model of Family Stress and Coping

This study examines the role of transnational living on relationship quality using the double ABC-X model of family stress and coping [30,31]. This theoretical model is a useful framework for analyzing the factors determining the relationship between stressful events and crises within families. The double ABC-X model comprises of a stressor event (A), the resources available to the family (B), the family's perceptions of the stressor (C), and the likelihood of a crisis (X). The double ABC-X model is an updated version of the ABC-X model and includes additional factors like the family's social context [32]. The double ABC-X model also addresses post-crises and coping processing, determining the ability of the family to adapt to a crisis. Thus, the double ABC-X model comprises of (aA) the pileup of additional stressors and the original crises; (bB) the existing resources and additional developed resources to meet the crises; (cC) the family's perceptions of the crisis, additional stressors, and their available resources; (xX) the likelihood of adaption to the crises [32].

The Double ABC-X Model and the Current Study

For the current study, the A variable is the migration event which has the potential to generate stress for the couple. The B variable is the couple's available resources, such as extended family support and communication tools which are helpful in mitigating potential crises when facing such an event. Couples lacking such resources are likely to encounter a crisis, as indicated by this theory. The C variable is the positive perception the couple maintains about the stressor event. Because these couples perceive this venture as one that has the potential to improve their lives, the likelihood of the stressor resulting in a crisis is low. Rosino [33] on interpreting the double ABC-X model, conveyed that the way in which a family perceives a stressor event can translate into a "self-fulfilling"

prophecy such that families that define stressors as crises are more likely to experience crises than those who do not define stressors as crises (p. 2). Thus, stressor-meeting resources and a positive perception of the stressor event can potentially avoid the stressor resulting in a crisis [33]. The X variable is the crises that result from the immigration experiences, which, for this population, is the unexpected obstacles the spouses encounter in the destination country that prevent them from reuniting with their spouses as initially planned. The X variable may not be preventable by the availability of adequate family resources because the crises may result from external factors, like changes in immigration policies. For example, with the frequently changing U.S. immigration policies, new immigrants may not know of new requirements for family reunification until they arrive in the U.S. Thus, although these couples may have enough family resources, these may not necessarily be stressor-meeting and the couple may still encounter a crisis. The X variable (the crisis) leads to aA, bB, cC, and xX, which form the constitutes of the double ABC-X model and consist of both the original variables in the ABC-X model and post-crises variables. Considering the crises for this population, aA becomes the pileup of crises and stressors, bB is the existing and added resources; cC is the perceptions of the crises, the pileup of existing and added resources; and xX is the family's unsuccessful adaptation to the crises. The variables of the double ABC-X model interact with the variables of the ABC-X model which means that the crises for these couples may not be a specific new event but a problematic situation resulting from the original stressor (i.e., the migration). If the available family resources do not adequately

meet the needs of this stressor, even with the couples' positive perception of the stressor, a crisis may still result. Over time, the resulting crisis may be intensified by other factors that affect the couples' relationship such as lack of relationship nurturing [33].

The study aimed to investigate the impacts of transnational living on couples and their marriage relationships quality within the Ghanaian context. Twenty-four participants from three U.S. states and their spouses living in Ghana were interviewed to investigate this phenomenon.

Recruitment

I followed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants for this study. According to Patton [34], purposive sampling involves the recruitment of participants who are carefully chosen based on their shared common characteristics. Participants were recruited from Massachusetts, Maryland, and New York through social media. These states were chosen for their large Ghanaian populations and for face-to-face interview convenience. A study flyer with the researcher's contact information was circulated on social media and posted at African grocery stores to invite subjects for participation. Potential subjects reached out via telephone for pre-screening. The pre-screening eligibility criteria were (a) 18+ years, (b) Ghanaian citizen, (c) married in the Ghanaian context, and (d) live in the U.S. or Ghana with the other spouse in the other country. Twenty-eight subjects were initially recruited four of which were eliminated for the following reasons: two subjects lived in the U.S. together with their spouses at the time

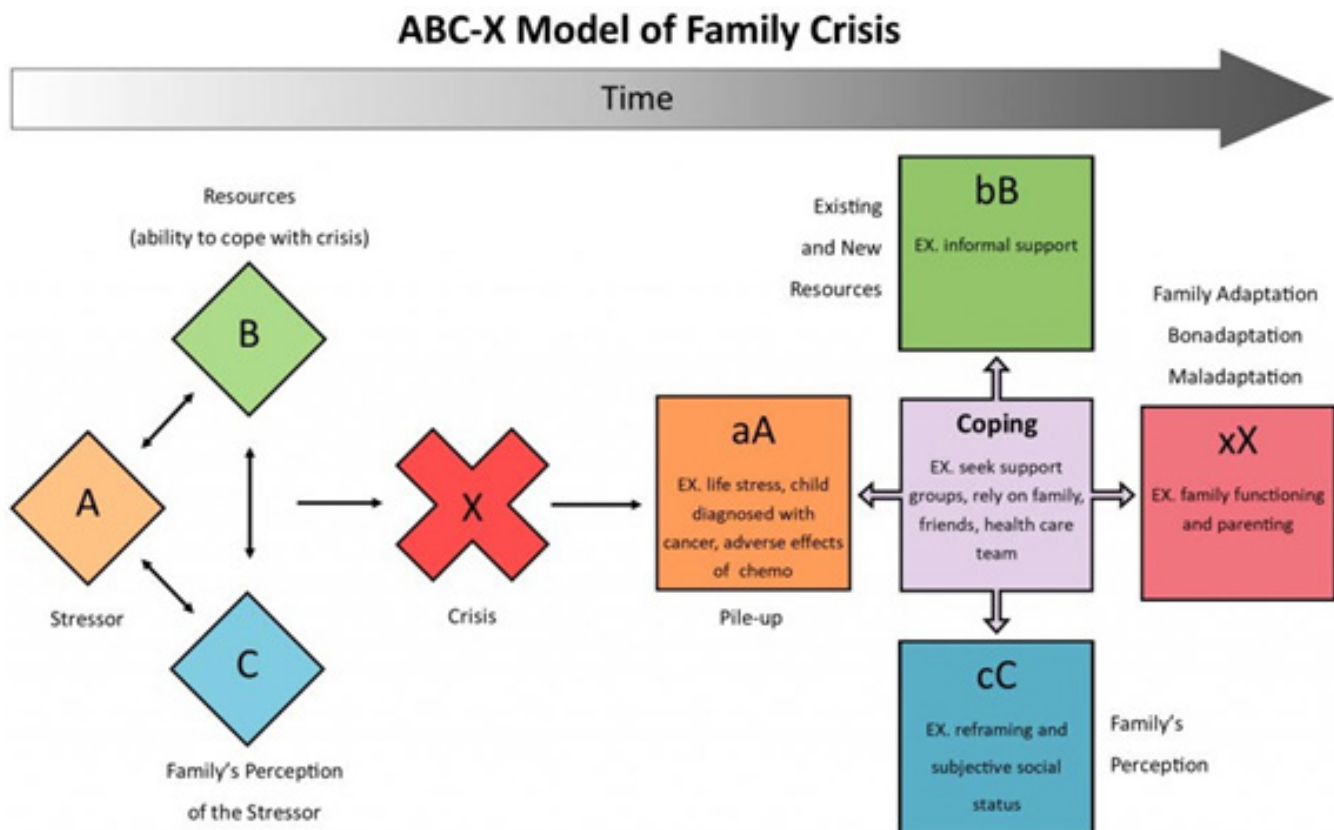


Figure 1: The image above is an adaptation of the ABC-X model [32].

Table 1: Sample Characteristics.

| Code | Participant Assigned Name | Gender | Religion | Age Group | Marital Status | Period Apart | Residential Country |
|------|---------------------------|--------|-----------|-----------|----------------|--------------|---------------------|
| 1 | DH | Male | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 8 | US |
| 2 | Fred | Male | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 6 | Ghana |
| 3 | Danielle | Female | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 4 | Ghana |
| 4 | Mel | Female | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 2 | US |
| 5 | Janet | Female | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 3 | Ghana |
| 6 | Amina | Female | Muslim | 30-50 | Married | 7 | US |
| 7 | Phil | Male | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 7 | US |
| 8 | Dora | Female | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 8 | Ghana |
| 9 | Duncan | Male | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 4 | US |
| 10 | Alex | Male | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 5 | Ghana |
| 11 | Alicia | Female | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 6 | US |
| 12 | Omar | Male | Nothing | 30-50 | Married | 5 | US |
| 13 | Jim | Male | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 1 | Ghana |
| 14 | Muhammed | Male | Muslim | 18-30 | Married | 2 | Ghana |
| 15 | Jordan | Female | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 8 | Ghana |
| 16 | Isaka | Male | Muslim | 30-50 | Married | 7 | Ghana |
| 17 | Roberta | Female | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 7 | Ghana |
| 18 | Emily | Female | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 1 | US |
| 19 | Stan | Male | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 2 | Ghana |
| 20 | Joe | Male | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 3 | US |
| 21 | Aisha | Female | Muslim | 18-30 | Married | 2 | US |
| 22 | Melissa | Female | Christian | 18-30 | Married | 5 | US |
| 23 | Alice | Female | Nothing | 30-50 | Married | 5 | Ghana |
| 24 | Ben | Male | Christian | 30-50 | Married | 3 | US |

of recruitment and did not meet criterion d; one subject was married to an U.S. citizen and did not meet criterion c and one was not a Ghanaian citizen. Despite living in Ghana, she was not obligated to live by Ghana's cultural expectations and was eliminated for not meeting criterion b. Recruitment continued until I obtained the intended sample size. The sample included fifty percent males, fifty percent females (as biologically assigned at birth), fifty percent aged 18-30, and fifty percent aged 30-50. All except one couple had children. Respondents in the U.S. participated in a face-to-face interview, and their spouses in Ghana, a Skype or phone interview.

Participants did not receive monetary incentive for participation.

Data Collection

Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols were followed and approved. All participants received a copy of the informed consent ahead of the interview and consent protocols were followed. The informed consent described the study, confidentiality, risks and benefits of the study, and voluntary participation. To conduct consent, I presented participants the informed consent 3-5 days to the scheduled interview to allow participants ample time to read and reach out with questions about the study and their responsibilities if they chose to participate. Upon confirming understanding of the consent with no questions, I asked participants to indicate their consent to continue their participation in the study by signing the informed consent document at the time of interview. Interviews were audiorecorded using a hand-held audio recorder to which participants agreed also by indicating on the consent form. Participants received a copy of their signed consent form for their records. The same protocols were followed with their spouses

and participants in Ghana except that they emailed or texted their signed forms back.

Interviews

Interview questions were categorized into three sets consistent with the three research questions based on the transnational literature and the theory. Set one aimed to explore what the reason was for the transnational living arrangement by encouraging participants to discuss what motivated their decision or that of their spouse to emigrate either temporarily or permanently leaving the other spouse in Ghana. Set one asked: "What was the reason for your transnational living arrangement?" Set two had three questions that sought to understand participants' relationship strains as a result of their transnational living arrangement and any concerns about their future family reunification. Set two questions asked, 1. How has this living arrangement affected your marriage? 2. Have you experienced any challenge(s) as a result of living in two separate countries? If yes, what is/are the challenge(s) and how have you managed it(them)? 3. Do you have any concerns about your future reunification with your family? Set three questions were designed to elicit responses to U.S. immigration policies, and/or modifications, and their impacts on participants' immigration status and future family reunification. Set three questions asked: 1. Are there U.S. immigration policies that provided any obstacle/stress in your marriage relationship? If yes, can you share how this affects you and your marriage? 2. Have these policies changed overtime? All Interviews were conducted within sixteen weeks. Some Skype interviews were conducted more than once due to technical/internet disruptions.

Data Analysis

I used NVivo software for data analysis. Thematic content analysis, comprising preliminary data analysis, thematic data analysis and data interpretation stages was utilized to capture the emerging ideas and patterns in the data and to document those that led to the creation of the themes and the progression of the coding process, as noted by Hesse-Biber and Leavy [35]. In the first stage the raw data and researcher notes were transcribed using a voice recognition software and initially reviewed and re-read for familiarity. Then the data was loaded into the NVivo software. Then, using a mix of concepts from the literature, I identified important quotes from the data and formulated themes for further analysis after which I coded the data with labels. To code the data, I read the interview transcripts several times and re-read them again a few days later for accuracy. I utilized the Key-words-in-context (KWIC) feature in NVivo at this stage. Agar and Hobbs [36] describe the KWIC feature as closely associated with indigenous theme categories, themes that characterize the experience of informants. This feature is used to understand a concept by tracking the words or phrases respondents use to describe it [36]. Using the KWIC feature, I identified key words and searched the data to find all instances in which that word or phrase was used. Because this population has never been studied, developing free nodes seemed the best way to code my data. Free nodes, according to Bazeley [37], stand on their own. Unlike tree nodes, free nodes are used to capture emergent ideas that do not fit into hierarchical structure. I searched for themes with broader patterns of meaning and reviewed the themes to make sure they fit the data. Next, I defined and named the derived themes, sorting and organizing them into components and categories for interpretation. The modeling tool in NVivo was used for interpretation. Maxwell [38] refers to modeling as a visual journal or concept map that represents an association between nodes and sources that assists the qualitative researcher in clarifying a conceptual framework and theoretical link. To protect participants' identities, narratives were coded with random names.

The trustworthiness of the research was guaranteed by investing time to become familiar with the context of Ghanaian transnational living, building trust with Ghanaians, and getting rich data directly from participants who live these experiences on a daily basis to ensure the credibility of the data [39]. After data analysis, I reconnected with all participants in the U.S. with a summary of their interview and an interpretation of what they said for reconfirmation, validation and to ensure that the findings or the interpretations of this study were not subjectively influenced by the researcher. A thorough description of the sample and of the various steps and approaches used in the research process established dependability and confirmability [40]. Transferability was guaranteed through a thick description of the behavior, experiences, and context so that the resulting description becomes meaningful to an outsider [41]. Marshall and Rossman [42] encourage a redirection of the subjectivist discussion of qualitative research to "a discussion of epistemology and to strategies for ensuring credible and trustworthy research procedures" (p. 6). The sole purpose of this study is to add knowledge by contributing to the transnational literature.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I present an embedded discussion with my findings. As the study's interview questions were categorized into three sets consistent with the three research questions framed on the transnational literature and the double ABC-X theoretical model, I organize the findings and discussion in like manner.

Research Question One: Reason for Transnational Living

The main themes emerging from the narratives for research question one were consistent with transnational literature, pointing to a migration motivated by academic pursuits and occupational opportunities that are not readily available to immigrants in their native country.

The derived central theme, *Journey to attain a better life*, was supported by participant narratives. A husband and father, coded in this study as Alex, who had been living in the U.S. away from his family in Ghana for seven years stated, "I think everybody knows that the U.S. is much better than Ghana in terms of academic resources, scholarships, and just general academic support. I love Ghana and would love to live in Ghana but comparing the two countries, this country is far ahead of Ghana in terms of resources. We both thought it was a better choice to take, if I got admission into a school here. What a nice opportunity for not only me but also for my wife and kids to have a better life in the near future."

Improving one's economic value via attaining an improved and more respectable life emerges from the narratives to the set one question, "what was the reason for your transnational living arrangement?" In many African countries, an individual's self-worth is measured by his or her successes, as indicated by their attained physical wealth. Ghanaians often hold a high view that developed countries have more jobs, good salaries, and more academic institutions with attractive scholarships. The emerging themes indicate that Ghanaians bundle their resources – including their social, human-cultural, and financial capital – to acquire varying visa types to immigrate to the U. S. in pursuits of a dream - one that they perceive as a better life than that attainable in Ghana. Like most immigrants, Ghanaians view the U.S. as a "heaven" where everything is available or attainable with little or no effort.

Findings reveal a population that holds the perception that immigrating to the U.S. will improve their lives and ultimately improve their self-image which is consistent with the literature. Findings from this study depict a population that immigrates to the U.S. with grandiose expectations, imagined ideas, and hopeful dreams about a perfect America. Their aspiration is to attain the "American Dream" and extend it to the rest of their family. Combining these preconceived notions about the U.S. with one's desire to attract honor, prestige, and increased self-esteem yields an unwavering willingness to emigrate even if it requires all of one's livelihood and means life across the Atlantic Ocean from spouses and children. When participants were asked "what was the reason for your transnational living arrangement?" ninetyfive percent of respondents used the words "better life," "honor," "respect for our family," and "educational opportunities." Alex immediately

followed his response with a description of how frustrating it was for him to communicate with his family in Ghana and how desperately he wanted to see them. "... we try the best we can to make the most of our circumstance today," he explained, "to get a better future tomorrow." Imogene King [43,44] developed the goal attainment theory and described five concepts that form the basis of goal attainment. King [43,44] suggests that the concepts of perception, self-image, space, and time are strong influencing concepts of an individual's life goal attainment. Another participant in the U.S. coded as Fred noted:

"Not everyone gets the opportunity to come to school here. America has a good reputation in Ghana. You know when you travel to America people regard you highly. I think it has to do with all the things people see in the media about America having everything. It may not be that great here as people in Ghana think of America but there is a lot of pride that goes with traveling to America even if you were only a cleaner here"

Undoubtedly, the combination of King's [44] goal attainment concepts seem to drive this population's decision to immigrate to the U.S., sometimes for prolonged periods of time, to attain a better life they believe is not (or easily) attainable in Ghana within the same period of time. Consistent with the literature, the findings identify the motivational drive for transnational living among this population as the desire to attain greatness, prestige, and what participants described as "a better life."

Research Question Two: Transnational Relationship Strains

Findings from this study reveal that Ghanaian immigrants discover after they arrive in the U.S. that everything is not as freely available as perceived prior to emigrating, and that those that are attainable take more effort than perceived. Findings from this study indicate that married Ghanaian immigrants are significantly affected by different challenges of transnational living, although all participants reported anticipating some minimal marital interruption. All participants declared that their decision to emigrate was thoroughly discussed with their spouse and that their decision was a mutual one that they expected to come with some discomfort as relayed by a participant coded as Josh, "In many ways it affects me, as well as my wife and children. I feel lonely and depressed all the time... but we all, including the kids, were excited about our decision for me to take the opportunity and come here. We just didn't know it will be this intense..."

While participants in the U.S. reported that they expected some challenges, they also expressed desperation at some of the unexpected extremes, including a sobbing father's inability to go home for the burial of his child. Although this father was unable to physically say goodbye to his dying child and again unable to see the body of the child in person for the last time before the child's burial, he stopped short of expressing regret for his decision to emigrate. All participants acknowledged feeling marital strain but quickly added that they expected to experience some level of stress in their marriage, just not to the extent of the stress experienced. All participants discussed challenges they had experienced as a result

of their transnational living arrangements. Phil, as coded in this study, living, and working in the U.S. at the time of interview said, "In our culture, married couples have duties... how can I protect my wife if something is to happen to her? Yet, it is my duty to be near my wife and protect her in this marriage. This is my job." Another participant coded as Mel was a wife and mother living in the U.S. at the time of interview and expressed guilt feelings and her lack of care for her husband, "I worry every day about what my husband will eat since he doesn't know how to cook... he and his family members think I don't care about him. But the truth is that I worry about it every day." Spouses who had lived apart longer than 6 years reported experiencing several emotional and health issues, including depression and suicidal attempts. A participant living in Ghana reported, "In this culture we don't use the word, 'depressed' but I know I am. There are times I don't see the need to continue life here alone when he is in America living his good life. I just don't know when all this will end." Another participant, a wife coded as Dora living in Ghana talked about an attempted suicide as a result of her husband's inability to visit home and issues she described as "tired of dealing with alone" after 8 years of separation. According to Dora, she doesn't know if her husband is not returning home to her because he is married to another wife in the U.S. or something he does not want to disclose to her. "...I don't believe him anymore. It's just too many stories. I am just tired of this marriage." She added. When interviewing Dora's husband in the U.S., coded as DH, he narrated that "...life in America is not as easy as we think in Ghana. I miss my wife. I love my wife. I want her by my side, but it is not that simple. I need the correct papers to do that, and I am trying my best here. My papers had issues and I needed a lawyer and all that. The papers will soon come but for now all I can do is to continue to explain to her."

As indicated by the double ABC-X model of Family Stress and Coping, the C variable i.e., the family's perception of the stressor may not necessarily be stressor-meeting leading to a crisis. At the time of interview, Dora and her husband, DH, were encountering life-threatening crises in the form of depression and suicidal attempts although they had a strong family support (B) and a good perception of the stressor (C). While DH desperately wanted to visit Dora, his reason for not visiting home was out of his hand and control leading to a pile-up of other stressors (aA). According to the double ABC-X model, Dora and DH would need post crises additional support to combat the new pile-up crises and stressors (aA). This couple may need new supporting resources to add to their existing and may also need to review their perception of the new pileup crises (cC) to avoid exacerbation. Couples with young children also reported experiencing other physical illnesses, including chronic back pain, migraines, and frequent insomnia. Although participants expected some relationship interruption and reported deriving some positive benefits, such as being able to save money and build their own home rather than renting- a major life improvement- from their transnational living arrangement, nearly all (ninety-seven percent) admitted to this benefit coming at a much higher cost to their marriage, and their actual living experiences being above and beyond their perceived expectations.

The findings also reveal other marital strains caused by U.S. immigration policies as discussed in the next section.

Research Question Three: Impact of U.S. Immigration Policy

This study's findings directly associated stable immigration status with a stable U.S. settlement and overall life. Ghanaian immigrants with a stable immigration status, such as possessing a work authorization permit or a green card, reported experiencing fewer relationship problems and overall better health. Participants who had their spouses' immigration applications approved by USCIS had fewer financial misunderstandings, reported highly trusting each other, and enjoyed each other and their marriage. Conversely, participants who had submitted some immigration paperwork for their spouse expressed anxiety as they awaited decisions. All participants residing in the U.S. expressed concern about perceived hostility toward African immigrants and immigration policy changes consistent with transnational literature. One participant, coded as Omar, lamented about the U.S. no longer being as welcoming to immigrants as it has been historically. Another had concerns about the unpredictability of immigration policies not knowing when something will change next in the immigration policy. This participant reported always being on edge as she was waiting to submit documents for her husband living in Ghana.

A host country's immigration policies have tremendous influence on the determination of immigrants' fate concerning their living situation and their ability to move around [45-47]. Once immigrants enter a destination country, their lives and movements are regulated by the country's immigration policies. In Hines [2], Ghanaian immigrants reported not being able to return home to visit family members due to immigration restrictions. In this study, ninety five percent of participants currently residing in the U.S. affirmed that they considered immigration policies as obstacles in the quality of their marriage. This was illustrated by one U.S. participant's reference to the 2019 family visa cap reduction, leading to green card and student visa refusals in several African countries. Changes (i.e., increase) in the green card application sponsorship income amounts led to the denial of her husband's permanent resident application and ultimately to her inability to reunite with her husband. "My husband was devastated. I was too, and it created a lot of problems in the marriage, but we have to hang in there" she reported. This wife followed all the green card application rules and met all the eligibility criteria but by the time of application review by USCIS officials the policy change had taken effect leading to a denial of their application.

During the separate interviews with this couple both the husband and wife cited the denial reason as insufficient funds due to the recently increased amount. Another participant coded as Danny expressed the frustrations and stress the new increased sponsorship amount policy caused in his marriage: "...you have to make a lot of money to be able to bring your family here...they are trying to say something like don't come to America anymore if you are not wealthy even if you can sustain your family on what you make." This finding is consistent with transnational literature on racism against Black immigrants [48,49]. The U.S. particularly, during

Trump's presidency, was criticized for racializing immigration and instituting stricter immigration policies for Black, especially African immigrants [48].

All U.S. participants discussed hostility toward African immigrants. Eighty-five percent of the participants in Ghana mentioned "Trump" at least once as a reason they are experiencing some challenge or stress in their marriage. Participants expressed worry and anxiety over the animosity toward African immigrants in the U.S. One participant stated, "Not at the time I was coming or the pre-Trump period as I like to call it. Now I know that some of the immigration family policies have changed... it is unrealistic for Trump to do that, but we understand it is his way of driving out some of us. His communication is clear enough." Participants exhibited significant emotions, ranging from anger to fear to disgust toward immigration policy changes perceived as attributable to the Trump administration and U.S. immigration in recent years. All spouses in the U.S. who had submitted immigration petitions for their spouses or family reported feeling tremendous stress and anxiety, often accompanied by frequent headaches and migraines. Some participants reported experiencing insomnia at night, resulting from anxiety while awaiting a decision on their submitted immigration petitions. Even participants who did not have pending petitions expressed stress and worry about the stringency of U.S. immigration policies unfairly targeted at African immigrants. All these experiences in one way or another contributed to marital strain and stressors because the couple's resources that helped them to cope healthily with the stressor of emigrating did not adequately meet the U.S. immigration barriers and demands experienced in the destination country as the double ABC-X model indicate.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate transnational relationship strains and how they impact psychological, physical, and emotional health among married Ghanaian couples. Findings from the study identified the motivations for transnational living as the desire to attain greatness, prestige, and what participants described as "a better life." Although participants reported deriving some positive experiences from their transnational living arrangements, these came at a high cost to their personal lives and their marriage relationship. Participants experienced psychological, physical, and emotional challenges. Findings from this study indicate that while temporary separation was a thought-out plan for these couples, the actual experience after the migration was far beyond anything expected or planned.

Transnational couples experience recurring depression, chronic illness, financial hardships, and other psychological, physical, and emotional issues that affect their overall health and wellbeing. The study participants reported experiencing at least one of these health issues.

These strains and stresses are deepened by poor management of expectations, inadequate understanding of the realities of migration, or lack of relationship nurturing. Extensive pre- migration couple

counseling and immigration educational programs, such as Pretravel workshops on expectations in the destination country, may need to be developed to help prepare this population on what to expect while living together apart. As these findings indicate, this population's migration is motivated by the attainment of better life opportunities but lack an understanding of the processes needed to attain this better life. These pre-migration educational programs may help Ghanaians draft more realistic expectations about the U.S. that may potentially diminish the intensity of shock experienced after arrival. Additionally, this study found that host countries' immigration policies have incredible influence on the determination of immigrants' fate regarding living situation and movements after entry. Findings from this study are important to policy makers and practitioners who see this population. More studies with a larger sample are needed to assess the impacts of transnational living more accurately on marriage relationships and on the health of married couples.

Implications

As revealed by the data, emigration from Ghana is highly motivated by academic advancement, better occupational opportunities, and holding on to the "American Dream" ideology with a lack of preparation and a level of ignorance about the U.S. immigration policies and how these affect immigrants' specific situations. Ghanaian immigrants experience shock after arriving in the U.S. and finding that life in the U.S. is not as anticipated. The initial experience of shock for this population is a life-threatening medical condition with serious health implications. Educational programs prior to migrating with the sole purpose of familiarizing Ghanaians with U.S. immigration policies may be helpful in preparing Ghanaians for a more successful life in the U.S. This educational program may provide ample information about U.S. immigration laws, expectations, petition eligibility criteria, processing times, etc., prior to migrating to help Ghanaians be more realistic in their planning and decision-making. Practitioners, like marriage and family therapists, may offer pre-separation counseling to prepare married couples who plan to live transnationally. As part of these pre-separation educational programs, practitioners may guide couples who intend to migrate to the United States to develop a back-up plan if the migrant is unable to return home as planned. In marriages with children, especially young ones, couple separation often leads to more household chores on one spouse.

Intentional pre-migration arrangements may include seeking extended family support to alleviate the burden of handling increased household chores for that spouse. New Ghanaian immigrants may locate family members near their place of residence (or work) who could be of some physical assistance or emotional support during their settling. This may be especially helpful to spouses with young children. Policy makers may consider ways family unification can be promoted among immigrant populations and whether immigration policies affect all immigrant groups the same way, before making policy changes.

Future Research Directions

Although participants of this study had children, the study did not

focus on transnational parenting. Future studies will be needed to explore children's perspectives on their parents' transnational living arrangements and how transnational living affects the child's development. What additional challenges and stressors does cross-border parenting bring about? Using a larger sample in a future follow-up study may also reflect variations in respect to tribal or subcultural differences among this population. For instance, in some Ghanaian subcultures, married couples are expected to protect their marriage at all costs by speaking only positively about their marriage to non-family members. In this case, if a participant belonged to a subtribe with this belief, the participant's cultural believe would hinder what he shares about his transnational living experience. In a future comparative study, researchers may also examine other African immigrants in the U.S. and compare their separation experiences for similarities and differences. Similarly, future research could explore the differences and similarities between White and Black African immigrant experiences with a focus on immigration policies and modifications. Finally, the study of separation experiences of Ghanaian transnational couples in other Western countries could be explored in a comparative study with U.S. Ghanaian immigrants.

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