

Making Meaning of Mental Health: Sub-Saharan African Immigrants’ Cultural and Social Understandings

Navya Mohlajee, B.S.¹; Betty C. Tonui, Ph.D., M.S.W.²

¹ Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine

² Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work and Criminal Justice, Oakland University

Introduction

- Sub-Saharan African immigration in the U.S. has grown to ~2.5 million individuals [1]
- This population remains understudied in mental health research [2]
 - Existing studies primarily focus on barriers to service utilization, including:
 - stigma
 - cost
 - language
 - distrust of healthcare systems [3,4]
 - Cultural beliefs and informal supports influence help-seeking behaviors [3,7]

Research Gap

- Limited research examines how sub-Saharan African immigrants define and make meaning of mental health within their cultural and social contexts

Study Aim

- To explore how sub-Saharan African immigrants understand and interpret mental health within their cultural and social contexts

Objective

- To identify culturally grounded meanings and definitions of mental health
- To examine how cultural, social, and migration-related factors shape mental health perceptions
- To explore how these understandings influence help-seeking

Methods

Study Design:

- Inductive qualitative approach

Participants:

- Sub-Saharan African immigrant adults (n = 10) in the United States

Inclusion Criteria:

- Self-identified sub-Saharan African immigrants
- Aged 18 years or older
- Residing in the United States
- English-speaking
- Able to provide informed consent to participate

Sampling:

- Purposive and snowball sampling through community networks

Data Collection:

- Semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom or telephone; audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

Analysis:

- Inductive coding conducted manually
- Transcripts were reviewed iteratively to identify patterns and themes using Braun and Clarke’s six-phase thematic analysis [5]
- Data saturation was reached across interviews [6]

Ethical Considerations:

- Study procedures were approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Results

Theme 1: Stigma-Driven Nondisclosure

- Mental health highly stigmatized
 - Distress often concealed to avoid judgment
- “A lot of people would hide because of stigma”

Theme 2: Negative Perceptions of “Mental Health”

- Associated with instability or “craziness”
- Language perceived as stigmatizing
- Need for reframing terminology

Theme 3: Family and Faith-Based Supports

- Preference for:
 - family
 - community leaders
 - faith-based support
- Greater trust than formal mental health services

Theme 4: “Land of Milk and Honey” Expectations

- Pressure to succeed post-migration
- Reduced willingness to disclose struggles

Theme 5: Community Outreach and Education

- Need for culturally relevant messaging
- Suggested approaches:
 - social media
 - community-based education

Discussion

- Mental health perceptions are shaped by stigma, language, and cultural expectations, influencing disclosure and help-seeking behaviors
- Use of culturally appropriate and non-stigmatizing language may improve communication and engagement with mental health services
- Strong reliance on family, faith, and community supports highlights the importance of integrating these systems into care
- Community-based and culturally responsive outreach strategies may reduce stigma and improve access to services

Conclusions

- Mental health understandings among sub-Saharan African immigrants are shaped by stigma, language, and culturally grounded trust systems, influencing help-seeking and service use
- Culturally responsive, community-engaged approaches are needed to improve mental health engagement and access

References

1. Migration Policy Institute. *Sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States*. 2025.
2. James PB, Wardle J, Steel A, Adams J. Post-migration mental health of sub-Saharan African immigrants: a systematic review. *Psychiatry Res*. 2022;317:114899.
3. Omenka OI, Watson DP, Hendrie HC. Understanding the healthcare experiences and needs of African immigrants in the United States. *BMC Public Health*. 2020;20:27.
4. Derr AS. Mental health service use among immigrants in the United States: a systematic review. *Psychiatr Serv*. 2016;67(3):265-274.
5. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol*. 2006;3(2):77-101.
6. Saunders B, Sim J, Kingstone T, et al. Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Qual Quant*. 2018;52(4):1893-1907.
7. Faulk NK, Ward PR, Hawke K, Mwanri L. Cultural and religious determinants of mental health help-seeking among African migrants. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021;18(17):8906.
8. Mwanri L, Ward PR, Ramjan L, et al. Factors influencing mental health service utilization among African migrants. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022;19(13):7914.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Tonui and the study participants for their support