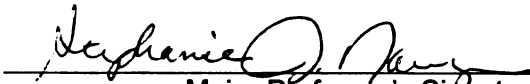This is to certify that the
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PROCESSES OF IDENTITY FORMATION: EXPLORING THE MEANING OF
FAMILY IN THE LIVES OF AFRICAN REFUGEE TEENAGERS

By

Linda Gjokaj

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

# PROCESSES OF IDENTITY FORMATION: EXPLORING THE MEANING OF FAMILY IN THE LIVES OF AFRICAN REFUGEE TEENAGERS

By

Linda Gjokaj

This study explored the way refugee adolescents from Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sudan constructed meanings of family in ways that influenced their identity formation processes after living in the U.S. for at least three years. An after-school photo workshop was created for eight refugee teenagers to tell their stories. The photograph based discussions centered on several themes: family, religion, peer groups, school, pop culture and another theme of their choosing. This paper explores the theme of family and how the family context shapes African refugee youth identity formation processes. The family becomes an enduring institution in the lives of refugee youth who participated in this study through meanings they attach to family: reaffirming the salience of family, honoring flexible family membership and familial expectations. In-depth interviews were conducted with each youth participant in order to clarify the meanings youth attached to family. The results are based on a sample of those photos selected by the participants, group discussions, in-depth interviews, and the researcher's participant observations in the field. This research contributes to our understandings about the social construction of the family and refugee youths' larger socio-cultural assimilation processes. This research also suggests a unique way to engage refugee youth in meaningfully constructing their stories.

## DEDICATION

To my participants, you have taught me so much! Thank you!

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**INTRODUCTION**

Refugee youth are not passive beings in their migration, resettlement and socio-cultural adaptation experiences. Rather, while constrained by their social environments and other proximal influences like family, religion, school and friendships, they have agency to construct meanings and identities within particular social contexts. Research has shown that the immigration experience presents a variety of challenges for youth (McCarthy 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Suárez-Orozco 2000). Some of these challenges include adjusting to changes in family and gender relations, learning a new language, and (re)constructing identities within a racially, culturally, and linguistically dissonant "host" society.

One of ways scholars have investigated the experiences of migrant youth was to focus on family dynamics. This focus has produced a growing literature that has elucidated the social strains imposed on families and how members cope with incorporation into the host society (for example, Zhou and Bankston III). And within this literature there is a focus on mostly second generation youth, that is, U.S-born children of immigrants (for example, Portes and Zhou). This growing body of literature has documented the multiple structures (e.g. racial, ethnic) that shape constructions of identity but is focused on how particular racial, ethnic or immigrant identifications are used as social distancing mechanisms in US society. Based on these findings a curiosity arises regarding refugee populations, particularly contemporary African refugee groups' resettled in smaller communities (singer and Wilson, 2007).

This study examined a group of eight teenagers from Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sudan living in a mid-sized, urban community in Michigan. Having the opportunity to

work with the Africa refugee population, my research question is: How do meanings of family shape African refugee youth identity formation processes? I argue that family becomes emphasized in the lives of the African refugees in ways that are a part of their ongoing processes of forming social identities. By reaffirming the importance of family, forming and maintaining flexible family networks linked to members of the African Diaspora and identifying with familial expectations that incorporate elements of their "home" cultures, we can say that family is influencing how these youth take on a more "adaptive" identity path. "Adaptive" in that my participants take into account both the cultures – the shared values, beliefs they learn from their parents and also those of mainstream US society, without completely rejecting either.

In the following review of the literature, I first set a foundation for identity in general. Then, I detail the extant literature which conceptualizes the identity formation migrant youth and children of immigrants in the United States. After I describe the integration of family structures in youth identity formation processes, I use qualitative data to show how the African refugee participants in my study attach meaning to family as part of their sense of identity. I draw upon theories of symbolic interactionism as well as general theories developed within the field of migration as well. I conclude the paper by arguing that the ways in which my refugee teen participants frame family life suggests that it is inextricably connected to identity formation processes. Furthermore, the framing of family meanings by teenagers with a refugee experience illuminates the influence of family life in the formation of identities as they engage in the socio-cultural adaptation or assimilation processes already documented extensively in the youth and migration literature.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Sociological Foundations of Identity*

Early 20th century sociological thought addressed the notion of developing a self that is built into our symbolic interactions with other people (Mead 1934). As a component of the self, identity has been described by symbolic interactionists in situational (Foote 1951; Stone 1962) and structural (Stryker 1968) terms, challenging the more psychological approaches developed by psychologists such as Erik Erikson (1950; 1968). Vryan and colleagues (2003), for instance, summarized symbolic interactionist conceptions of identity in three general forms: situational, social and personal. Situational identities emerge and change to some extent depending on the social situations in which we find ourselves (e.g., student) and through the course of our interactions. Social identities, however, are more transsituational (e.g., race). Our social identities are our "identifications with socially constructed groups or categories of others and our positions within structured social arrangements" (Vryan et al. 2003:371). Finally, a personal identity, for example, a person's name, defines who one is as a unique individual. These forms of identity are not mutually exclusive, and their salience can change within and between social contexts.

This sociological foundation of identity allows immigration scholars to probe the realities of contemporary immigrant youth's socio-cultural adaptation experiences. For the purposes of this paper I define identity as ones socially constructed meanings of and commitment to a collective social group(s) who share a set of learned values, beliefs and behaviors. One's sense of identity then is formed through one's continued identifications with social groups, and in turn, these identifications shape who we are. Identities are a

reflection of set of socially structured relations as a social person and that, in turn, is a part of who we are. For the refugee youth in my study, their identifications with the family have just as much to say about who they are as do the particular identities they are more or less likely to adopt (i.e. racial, ethnic, immigrant, American or hyphenated). Next I describe how the migration scholars have framed the formulation of identities among immigrant youth and their processes of incorporation in the United States context.

*Migrant Youth Identities and Socio-Cultural Adaptation*

With the growing significance of understanding how contemporary immigrant families and youth adjust to the new society, the last few decades of youth and migration scholarship has focused more carefully on elucidating the processes and effects of forming identities. This has resulted in more nuanced understandings of identities (Waters 1999), and refined conceptualizations of assimilation, such as *segmented* assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993). It is well understood that constructing identities during the period of adolescence is a significant process, and especially for immigrants and refugees who construct identity during a period in the life course where assimilative processes are most intensely experienced (Rumbaut 1994; Rumbaut 1997a).

Some scholars describe the relationship between identity choices, and their adaptational or assimilative outcomes, such as the effects of accepting, rejecting or blending mainstream U.S. social institutions, structures, practices and their home cultures[1] (Doucet and Suárez-Orozco 2006; Shepard 2008; Stepick et al. 2001; Suárez-Orozco 2001). Suárez-Orozco (2001) proposed the following styles. First, youth accept

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[1] I use "home culture" to refer to the learned values, beliefs, and activities of enacted and shared by the people from my participants self-identified native countries.

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the dominant culture and reject the culture of origin. She calls this identity style, "ethnic flight." Second, youth may take an "adversarial stance" and construct identities that reflect a "rejection of the institutions of the dominant culture which have already rejected them" (p. 184). Lastly, the most adaptive identity style is that which youth construct identities that take into account both the culture(s) of their parents and that of mainstream society. Suárez-Orozco refers to this identity style as "transcultural." This identity style is most adaptive because youth can draw from both cultural worlds without feeling entirely excluded from either one. It has been documented in the literature that some distance from aspects of mainstream U.S. culture (such, as U.S. urban teen culture), is beneficial to the overall well-being of immigrant children and U.S. born children of immigrants (Padilla 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Categories of difference and exclusion, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and generation influence migrant youth identities, particularly the type of identity they choose to adopt (Espiritu 2001; Hein 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Shepard 2008; Waters 1996; 1999). As post-1965 immigrant groups represent considerable racial and ethnic diversity, immigrant youth's identities, as shaped by the US racialized social structures, are of central concern to current immigrant and youth scholars, and to this paper. Unlike white immigrant youth, immigrant youth of color confront social-structural situations in which they have much less flexibility in defining who they are and to which groups they belong (Waters 1990). African descendent youth, for instance, confront a U.S. racial structure in which their identity "choices" are constrained in ways they did not experience (and would not have experienced) to the

same degree (or at all) in their countries of origin. In other words, they enter into a U.S. social structure in which new markers of identity become important.

Mary Water's work (1994; 1999) exemplifies how identity "choices" are made in the context of U.S. structural constraints and opportunities for a group of West Indian youth growing up in New York. She examined how three identity "choices" - immigrant, ethnic or American – were influenced by multiple, interrelated structural factors, such as race, gender, parental social class background and social networks, type of school attended, and family structure. For instance, youth who identified as American tended to "downplay an identity as Jamaican or Trinidadian and described themselves as American," in large part because they were born in the U.S. (Waters 1994:802) This American-identified group accepted many aspects of Black American culture (e.g., Black English and rap music) they shared among their peers, particularly with their Black American friends which brings them in conflict with their immigrant parents. Identification with a distinguishable ethnic group, however, serves as a "device" for West Indian youth to socially distance themselves from the stereotypical negative ideas and beliefs held by whites about U.S. African Americans. They also stressed differences between Americans and West Indians. Recently arrived youth, however, identified as immigrant. Their accents, style of clothing and behavior distinguished them from native-born kids. As immigrant-identified, they considered themselves strongly Jamaican or Trinidadian or Haitian.

Like Waters, researchers studying adolescent identity formations among youth with a migration experience have recognized that not only relationships between individuals matter, but so do the various social contexts (e.g., family, school,

neighborhood) matter to a great extent in how youth perceive, think and feel about their social worlds (Leadbeater and Way 1996). In his study of Vietnamese youth constructions of identity and education, Centrie (2004:234) viewed identity formation is a "complex, dynamic process that is forged out of individual and collective experiences, the institutions with which they interact, and the economy." Migration and youth scholars have focused research efforts almost entirely on predicting assimilative outcomes (e.g., school performance) and rejecting classical models of assimilation, so much so that we miss the processual and contextual character of migrant youth's lived realities as they see it (especially in the refugee migration context). Although migration and identity scholars would be interested in what I describe in this paper, I keep in mind the contribution this study could make to family, migration and refugee youth research. As Baca Zinn (1999:230) stated, "As minorities become an ever larger share of the U.S. population, the ability to understand the new social diversity will become a central task within family studies."

*Family, Immigrant Youth, and Adaptation in United States*

Maxine Baca Zinn (1999:230) stated, "As minorities become an ever larger share of the U.S. population, the ability to understand the new social diversity will become a central task within family studies." The extant family and immigration literature encompass a broad spectrum of issues. There exists literature which addresses families as social networks (Massey 1990), as "ties that bind" (Rumbaut 1997) and as "decision-making units" (Landale 1997:283) which facilitate migrations. Scholars from across a variety of disciplines have paid increased attention to the experiences children in

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immigrant families (both U.S. and foreign-born), especially since they make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population.

Shepard's (2008) study highlighted the "mechanics of identity formation" among Somali refugee youth who live in the Greater Boston area. Her multi-method study illuminates that identity styles differ depending on the social context, such as family, religion, school, peers, and community for a group of racialized refugee teens. In an effort to refine previous models of identity styles, she showed that Somali refugee youth identity constructions fit into the typology of autonomy and restriction, judgment and acceptance in which Somali refugee youth straddle "blending in" and "standing out" as one strategy for negotiating between different social contexts (Shepard 2008:224-231). Her work focused on school context, but evidences the critical importance of family in youth cultural adaptation processes. She writes, "Among more recently arrived communities, such as Somali's, family life may be the only social support system available. Behavior, relative levels of well-being and long-term adjustment are shaped by factors such as the cohesion of the family unit, adult supervision, response to authority, cooperation, and mutual support within the family context" (p. 209).

Along the same lines of honoring family solidarity, Camino (1994:47) described that refugee and immigrant adolescents from Latin America distinguished Latino and North American identities by asserting the importance of adhering to "Latino values of *familismo* and *respeto*, which made youths different from materialistic, competitive, and violence-prone North Americans." Thus, they retained elements of an ethnic identity that incorporates family factors which distinguishes them, as they see it, from North Americans. Like Shepard, Camino asserted that it is necessary to look closely at the

contexts of refugee and immigrant youth adaptations. She wrote, "While young refugees and immigrant may fervently seek to 'fit in' in some contexts, such as at school, they may also appreciate opportunities which allow them to be apart from members of the dominant society..." (p. 51).

Immigrant families have also responded to life after resettlement by constructing family as an important source of social support to confront the demands of the new society (Zhou and Bankston III 2000). Several studies have also shown how families are systems support and reliance for children in immigrant families. That is, once immigrants arrive to the new society, families operate in ways that ease socio-cultural adaptation processes by creating positive ways of coping with the social and economic constrains of the new society (Haines 1989). As a case in point, Zhou and Bankston's (1998) work illuminated the importance of family as well as ethnic community contexts in the adaptation process of Vietnamese children growing up in New Orleans. They found that, "Vietnamese families continue to be the backbone of the life of the Vietnamese in the United States and attitudes toward the family are related to attitudes toward self, others, and work" (p. 92). In order to cope with the trauma of forced flight, Vietnamese refugees relied on their family and kin for emotional support. The Vietnamese family fosters traditional values such as obedience, industriousness and helping others which remain important elements of shaping lives of Vietnamese adults and their children. Similar findings emerged from a longitudinal, ethnographic study (Reiboldt and Goldstein 2000) of three poor Cambodian families in California. Reiboldt and Goldstein (2000) argued that interdependency and reliance on family and ethnic community members, rather than

formalized systems of assistance help these refugee families survive and adapt to U.S. society.

Questions about what immigrant and refugee youth do to reconstruct, and maintain identities while in the United States and how the family is implicated in this process are too rarely connected. Yet they are more closely related than either popular or scholarly conversations on these issues would suggest. While immigrant youth identities have been studied, the ways youth define and represent the social contexts where they give meaning to their identities after migration is worth further investigation. That is, particular identities fostered and constrained through institutional forces, such as the family can hinder and/or promote immigrant and refugee youth success in more secondary contexts, such as school and work. I maintain throughout this paper Rebecca Erikson's (2003:523) assertion that, "Families are integral to the socialization process because it is through interactions with family member (or early caretakers) that one develops an initial sense of self as well as central identities, values, beliefs, cultural routines, and emotional connections." To explore the meanings of family life and identity among my participants, I draw upon the photo-based discussions, eight interviews, and my own observations in the field.

## METHODS

*Data Collection*

*Photo Workshop.* I collected the first segment of data from an after-school photo workshop. The workshop took place within a local church and refugee center. [2] Workshop sessions were held one day per week for over a nine-week period of which five were devoted to photo discussions. Each session lasted approximately 1.5-2 hours which resulted in approximately eighteen hours for the entire length of the workshop. During this time, participants learned about basic photography concepts, techniques and ethics, interacted with a professional photographer twice, and created their own photographs representing their everyday lives. I provided each participant with a reusable camera and three rolls of 24-exposure film. I asked the kids to take pictures of their everyday lives along at least seven open-ended topics: family, friends, community, school, religion, pop culture or another theme of their choosing. All together, the participants produced over 500 photos. Each participant selected the photographs they wanted to discuss during five workshop discussion sessions.[3] I used the photographs more so to trigger an oral response regarding which contexts and activities the participants identified as important to their lives.

*Group discussion.* After selecting photos, participants engaged in "photo talk." I asked framing questions in order to stimulate participants' thoughts: 1) Why did you take this photo? 2) What is the subject/title? 3) Who or what is in your photo? 4) Why did you include certain things or people in your photo? 5) How does this photo relate to your life?

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[2] At the onset of this project, the Center received a grant to build an educationally-focused youth program. The photo workshop contributed to this growing refugee youth after-school program.

[3] The pictures they chose for discussion were also displayed in front of all participants in the workshop which could have affected which pictures they chose to share because there were many times when participants picked on each other or, as to what some of them referred, "burn" each other.

6) How does this photo relate to the themes of the project? Besides structuring the discussions around the aforementioned questions, they were open-ended in that I followed the kids' thoughts about particular topics.[4] I only posed additional prompts depending on the individual participant and group reactions to particular photos. During each photo discussion, I encouraged participants to ask and answer questions about each other's photos, but I needed to provide minimal encouragement.

*Interviews.* I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant approximately two months after the workshop finished. The interviews lasted between 1-1.5 hours. Following a few of the dominant themes that emerged from the workshop, I focused mostly on dynamics of family and religion, but did touch upon pre-migration experiences and school and peer relations in both their respective countries of origin and in the United States. The interview also provided participants with an additional opportunity to talk about their photos on a one-on-one basis. Using photography as data gathering technique, I was able to build a level of closeness with my participants that other methods would not allow (Gold 2004). Conducting the photo workshop first made the interview process more comfortable for the participants as we had established a comfortable level of rapport.

*Participants*

Ten teen age participants enrolled in my study. However, this paper is based on data from eight of my participants - Kaleb, Kirala, Benjamin, Kayla, Mari, Hanna, Jelani

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[4] For instance, one of my participants mentioned that one of her dreams is to be a Christian missionary. That led to a discussion about each one of the kids' dreams.

and Bashir.[5] The youth in my study emigrated to the U.S. from either Liberia and Ivory Coast or Sudan. Refugees from these regions have escaped political oppression and persecution and civil wars. Four participants identify their native country as Liberia, two identify with both Liberia and Ivory Coast, and two are from Sudan.[6]

At the onset of this study, my participants[7] from Liberia and Ivory Coast have lived in Michigan for almost four years while it has been almost eight years for Sudanese participants. This group is composed of five females and three males. Their average age of arrival in the United States was 10 years old. The average of the participants at the time of this study was 15 years old. Three of my participants are in high school, and five are in middle school. Most of the participants knew each other prior to this research. I was invited by Emanuel, my key informant throughout the project, to attend a birthday barbeque hosted by a Liberian family in which Emanuel directed me to most of my participants. My key informant shaped the familial homogony of my sample, particularly for my Liberian and Liberian/Ivorian participants. I recruited both Sudanese participants by attending a local Lutheran church which has a growing African congregation, and I also met with their father to discuss the project.

*Pre-migration Context.* Liberia is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, and countries of Guinea, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. It consists of 18 ethnic groups and about 97

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[5] I eliminated the data from my analysis on two of my participants– Samira and Aliya. At the time of this project, Samira (born in Ivory Coast) had lived in the U.S. for almost one year. Aliya, however, is a child of immigrant parents. Both participated in this study because of my key informant's strong influence in their lives. In order to maintain good relations with my key informant, and the larger African community within which I had been building rapport, I decided to include them in the workshop and interviews. By excluding that data from the analysis, I could focus my attention on teenagers with a refugee migration experience who have resided in the U.S. for at least three years, giving them adequate amount of time in the U.S. to interact with U.S. social institutions and contexts. Finally, I used pseudonyms to ensure my participants confidentiality.

[6] The two Sudanese participants are not part of the group of Sudanese youth who migrated to the United States known popularly as "Lost Boys." (see, Bates et al. 2005).

[7] Please see Appendix B, Table 1 for individual characteristics of participants.

percent of the Liberian population are indigenous; whereas, 3 percent are Americo-Liberians (Dunn-Marcos, et al. 2005:17). As a result of a 14-year civil war (1989-2003), Liberians forcibly relocated to neighboring countries. Some of my Liberian and Ivorian participants reported living in refugee camps in Ivory Coast for approximately six months before coming to the United States in 2004. Liberia's eastern neighbor, Ivory Coast, experienced its own civil war in 2002 and again in 2004 and "all non-Ivoirians, including Liberians, were targeted by fighting groups..." (Dunn-Marcos, et al. 2005:7).

Bashir and Jelani are brother and sister. Bashir states, "We came as a family" from Sudan, Africa's largest country located in Northeast Africa region. The country's neighbors include Chad and Central African Republic on the west, Egypt and Libya on the north, Ethiopia and Eritrea on east, and Kenya, Uganda and the Congo on the south. Since its independence from Britain in 1956, civil wars resulted from racial, ethnic, religious and political differences between the Arab Muslim North and the African Christian South. Sudan's troubles intensified in 2003 which resulted in another civil war in the Darfur region (Kusow 2007). Bashir and Jelani left Sudan with their mother, father and two younger siblings by train to the border of Sudan and then took a boat to Egypt. After living in Egypt for one year, they arrived in Michigan in 2000.

*Research Setting*

I conducted this study in a mid-sized, urban community in Michigan. The city is made up of 110,990 people where almost 70 percent of the populations defined themselves as white, approximately 20 percent of families are below the poverty line, 9 percent are foreign-born, and almost 15 percent of all households speak a language other than English at home (American Community Survey 2006). Refugees of African origin

have resettled in Michigan in higher numbers as an aggregate group than any other refugee group in Michigan. Between 2002 and 2006, the total sum of African refugees resettled in Michigan exceeded the number of refugees resettled from each of the following continents: Latin America, Middle East, Asia and Europe (St. Vincent Catholic Charities July 9, 2007). [8]

The number of African refugees resettled in Michigan is small compared to more 'traditional' resettlement sites for refugees, such as New York and Los Angeles. However, it is important to pay attention to the emerging presence of African refugee families in states like Michigan. As Singer and Wilson (2007:1) write, "In medium-sized and smaller metropolitan areas, refugees can have considerable impact on the local population, especially if the total foreign-born population is small."

*Analytic Strategy*

I recorded and transcribed all photo discussions and interviews. First, I analyzed photo discussions, interview transcripts and field notes using open coding process by going through each printed transcript line by line. Following this, I engaged in selective, focused coding process (Emerson et al. 1995) in which I have analyzed these data to find connections between general codes and sub-codes using Atlas.ti qualitative software until I developed themes. My strategy is *grounded* in that I gave "priority to developing rather than to verifying analytical propositions" and based on what the research participants have said (Emerson et al. 1995:143). The participants interpreted all photographs with some guidance from me, as noted above.

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[8] View Appendix A-Figure 1

**FINDINGS**

In this section I describe findings related to the main question I raised at the beginning of this paper about how meanings of family influence African refugee youths sense of identity, considering their migration context. I have identified three meanings of family which shape processes of identify formations among African refugee, from the perspectives of the youth themselves. I first describe the way African refugee youth reaffirm the importance of family. My participants' stories suggest that family is expressed as a source of belonging from which they derive a sense of self-love, self-worth and support in a U.S. context where they are sometimes reminded that they do not belong (e.g., neighborhood contexts). Then, I detail how my youth participants honor flexibility of family memberships, a meaning of family that is not indigenous to the United States. Finally I show how familial expectations as defined by my youth participants shape their current experiences and who they define themselves to be in the future.

*The Reaffirmation of the Importance of Family: "They're a Part of Me"*

There is no question that family commitment is emphasized by my participants. Bashir's photo, titled, "Brothers" is most telling of all their stories. During the first photo discussion, Bashir sets the impetus for many of the feelings toward and actions influenced by family as articulated by my participants. He says, "It's like important thing, families is one of the most important things so you just gotta sometimes it might be hard but you just got to push through it and just love each other and just [short pause] don't hate each other." His sister, Jelani reflects on a photo (not shown here) she took of their

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cousin Tommy. Getting closer to the identification of herself with her family, she says, "Because they're like a part of me...and they're always there when you need them..."[9]

A study on the effects of war on ethnic identity for Liberians, Hart (1995) finds that the family is the chief source of identity. In this study, the importance of family for Liberians is reflected in their descriptions of family as a major source of care and support. In my study, my participants' give meaning to family by way of describing in an interactional manner the quality and influence of their relationships that is related to the context of their migration. Mari is best at articulating her inner feelings and is always thoughtful and descriptive. The following quote provides a sense of how the participants further defined family in terms of being a part of them. In the words of Mari,

> If I didn't have parents I wouldn't be here, 'cause they don't accept kids from that program [United Nations], they might but you have to have like an adult here to send for you or someone to come with. So my mom is pretty important to me, and my dad, if he wasn't a teacher I wouldn't learn so much. And my little sister even though she's really annoying sometimes...my family is the greatest thing that could ever happen to me. And if I had to do anything to save my family I would because they're like my whole world, and I need them to grow up. Even when I'm grown up I'm still a little kid to them so

It is clear that Mari felt she needed her family members to "grow up." Sibling relations, in particular, are incredibly influential to maintaining a sense of social identity outside of the relationships they have forged in school, a context more thoroughly investigated in the extant youth and immigration literature. Thirteen-year-old Hanna shares that her sisters (actually one of the girls is her first cousin but refers to her as sister) are very important to her. To tell her story, selects the photo she titles, "Sisters." [10]

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[9] View Appendix C, Figure 2.

[10] View Appendix C, Figure 3. We encountered some issues with some photos. The quality of this photo was not as good as the others, but out of all the pictures she had to choose from she still wanted to talk about this one.

An always exuberant and sometimes facetious Hanna prepares to reflect on her photo by standing up in front of the screen where her photo is displayed, instead of sitting in a chair like all the other workshop participants. The following exchange between Hanna, Mari and me demonstrates in action the reaffirmation of family relationships as giving a sense of who they are.

Hanna: This is my sister [and] this is my sister [she stands up] [laughing].

Linda: You say they're both your sisters?

Hanna: Yeah and [she is interrupted by Kaleb who comments on the poor quality of the photo].Okay, listen now. I took this picture because I think both of them are special to me. But sometimes [short pause] [respondent claps/clasps hand occasionally when making points] she is mean to us, she control our house and stuff.

Mari: I will tell you why!

Hanna: Anything my mom says she'll do it... Anyway and I think I like this one [picture] too because I love my sisters and I'm glad I have sisters than brothers because we can spend more time [with each other] and we go anywhere together and stuff and I spend more time with her [Mari] because she do her homework a lot...

During this same conversation Hanna further explains that she and her sisters are pretty much inseparable and the "three sisters" have "similar minds" and are interested in "almost everything the same." They always go places together (including the Center for Refugees) where they do their homework, spend time together as well as support each other by, for example, helping with homework. On several occasions during the group photo discussions Mari would help her "sisters" better articulate their stories. This is best illustrated in their conversation about how they communicate "inside" and "outside" the home. Mari continues by making further connections between "sisters":

Hanna: I'm not done I got one more thing. We go in order 'cause she [Samira] doesn't talk outside but she talk a lot at home, and she [Mari] talk a lot outside [and never at home].

Mari: 'cause the thing is...I'm trying to be strict at home because when the rules are broken like I don't want to be blamed or any of them to blamed so I'm like protecting them and stuff and my mom feel like well she's the oldest at home so she's following the rule and she have to follow so it's I'm like sticking up for them and I have so much homework and I help them with it...So, my family is very really important to me.

There are contexts, however, where talking is not enough. By investing in family relationships, especially with siblings, some of my participants confront racism, and discrimination. Maintaining commitment to a family identity does not protect these youth from anti-social activities. As Jelani reveals during her interview, "...We [siblings] like always stick together like when we go out, but at home we fight a lot, but when we're outside we're like pretty tight." Unlike the boys in my study, some of the girls responded to racist and discriminatory remarks by engaging in physical and verbal fights in order to defend family. On the one hand, a degree of "strictness" at home is expectation for the older siblings, as Mari clearly articulated, yet, on the other hand, my female participants verbally and physically asserted themselves "outside" of the home. In an altercation with her neighbors, Mari announces how she and her family members responded to the realities of American racism. From this same picture of "sisters", a revealing photo discussion took place:

Mari: When someone pick on one of us like 'cause my neighbor, the kids are so rude so we show them, we teach them. [Hanna is talking at the same time here, shows frustration]. I know this girl...everyday her dad call us African black monkeys so I was like so what are you. Your like the white, dirtiest pig I've ever seen [from Pakistan]...I'm sorry, but you're from another-their um [from] Pakistan [Hanna: Pakistan, white pigs!] [Hanna here is going nuts talking really fast slapping her hands, talking over her

sister, almost reenacting how she would have verbally approach the neighbor]. The biggest, it really hurt my feelings [kids get rowdy here] I wasn't thinking of any white good person 'cause I know a lot of white people who are really nice. I wasn't thinking that day 'cause I was sooo mad he called me like um African black monkey. I always give respect to all the people and I just started insulting…I am soo pissed off right now I could just spit in your face. And then he was like he told me he was like you know what the next day my picture will be in the news that I kill your mom, so I was like dang… And then we called the police…That was months ago so then they stopped doing it, but we beat the girl up twice. I beat her up Sunday and Samira beat her up Monday.

Hanna: And I beat up, remember I beat her up, remember!

Mari: Yeah. Samira doesn't like talking, but when it comes to family yeah we're in, trust me.

This exchange evidences the ways these young girls anchor the meaning of family as important in ways that shape their social identities as they respond to processes of "othering." Mari's reflection is in contrast to most research which documents that boys develop more adversarial behaviors than girls who tend to embrace bi-cultural identity labels and their behaviors are more constrained by their families (Rumbaut 1994, Davidson 1995, Waters 1999). Thus, Mari's and Hanna's story challenges particular U.S. socially constructed gendered expectations that suggests, typically, girls would not engage in such physical confrontations. This anti-social behavior is also in contrast to research which documents that boys develop more adversarial behaviors than girls who embrace bi-cultural identity labels (Rumbaut 1994, Davidson 1995, Waters 1999).

This is not the only case in which my female participants have responded through verbally and physically to racial and discriminatory remarks. It is also a response to maintaining and protecting a pan-African identity. For instance, Kaleb states, the "African crew", mostly the girl's response to "American boys", and

especially, "American girls". With some assistance from her cousin, Kirala reports,

> Kirala: I almost beat up the one girl for saying stuff about Africans. The first time she say it I beat her up [laughing] [name of school] middle school there was like um I don't know what she said but she was saying stuff about African and then the last time...when I went, at [name of high school] the one girl every time I pass her [she] be like African bootiescratcher.
>
> Kaleb: Oh I don't like that. I would knock you out.
>
> Kirala: ...I wait for lunch hour...and then she was like African bootiescratcher African bootiescratcher. I was like come here [she demonstrates by waving her hand as if she was signaling for her to come over so she can kick her ass] [Almost everyone is laughing. Hanna, in particular, is laughing hysterically].

This photograph-based discussed noted above began with describing the importance of sisters to how as a family they confront racially charged, and threatening situations. This discussion was incredibly informative because as Mary Waters (1999:287) influential work on black identities shows that, "The ways in which these youngsters experience and react to racial discrimination influence the type of racial and ethnicity identity they develop." During the workshop, group discussions suggested to me that they had some awareness of systemic aspects of racism and discrimination, but when asked directly during the interviews, they did not always frame it as a systemic issue.

In a context replete with racist and discriminatory confrontations, my participants were able to draw upon family to resist social structural factors that could threaten youth transitions into various social contexts such as school, where they may face pressures to be American, specifically African American. However, maintaining commitment to a family identity does not protect these youth from anti-social activities. No matter what, as

Jelani revealed during the interview, they "always stick together." Family life is embedded in definitions of who one is as a member of a larger socially constructed group, as a part of their set of social identities as a member of a family and as, Jelani expressed above, a part of them in ways that represented their "shared socially constructed affiliations" (Vryan et al. 2003:372). Building on the reaffirmation of family, I was able to further ascertain that family is given meaning through a sense of affection, shared experience, source of social support and feelings of group belonging.

*The Flexible Family Form: "It Feels Like Family"*

Marilyn Halter (2004:286) documents that African youth (particularly West Africans), " may grow up having 'cousins' and 'aunties' who are not actually related but whose familial roles mirror those of true kin." Mari announces, "We still do that!" One of the ways my participants try to maintain a sense of social identity while growing up in U.S. social contexts is by incorporating an aspect of family life that is historically related to peoples of African descent, that is, flexible family relationships. This aspect of family fits into their sense of collective identity by way of maintaining a way of family life that can be distinguished from most of the kids they interact with in U.S. school context. It also shows their strong sense of inclusivity – including people into their family that were not part of their family when they lived in their countries of origin.

This idea is best reflected in a photo workshop discussion prompted by Kirala's photo of her grandmother.[11] From this photo Mari and Kirala's (who are not biologically related) defined flexible family membership as tied to the value of respect, and also has been documented to be a "very important cultural value in Liberian society (Dunn-

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[11] View Appendix C, Figure 4

Marcos et al. 2005:30). After Kirala describes how her grandmother loves and takes care of her and her siblings/cousins, Mari adds, "...when we gonna respect like older person who is an adult...we call them auntie even if they're not your blood aunties you still call them aunties. Like we call them we call them cousin even if we not blood." Flexible family relationships are tied to cultural and also religious understandings of the family. A clear example of this is illustrated in the following quote. During the workshop Mari says to me,

> You know like Adam and Eve and how they're in the garden the one woman borne all these kids so in Africa we think when you call them sister you feel close, you feel like your sister and it feels like family when they come over and like when somebody ask is this your sister, yeah this is my sister. It kind of feels like wow they go whoa you have a large family but actually they're not [blood related].

In Mari's own words, we can see how family is constructed as an expression of Pan-African identity, framing family that is not unique to their particular country of origin, but to African descendant families. My participants honor the flexible family form that is not indigenous to the United States. This aspect of family fits into their sense of collective identity by way of maintaining a way of family life that can be distinguished from most of the kids they interact with in U.S. school context. Their identifications with a broad sense of family show their strong sense of inclusivity – including people into their family that were not part of their family when they lived in their countries of origin.

Family membership continues to be flexible in ways that encompasses people from the African Diaspora who have been in the United States for a longer period of time. For instance, four of my Liberian participants explained that they met their uncles Emanuel (from DR Congo) and John (from Liberia) after migrating to the United States. They talked about how they have received considerable help from both of these men,

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such as assistance with school and transportation. Throughout the course of this project, I observed how Emanuel is involved in the some of my participants' lives. Kaleb who came to the U.S. with his mother, grandmother, seven siblings and cousins states,

> Emanuel is very supportive like if you need something he always there for you, medical bills and stuff he help you, he take you to the hospital and bring you back, if you have game he drop you off, if you have teacher conferences he go there, if you have any trouble with the teachers he go and have a negotiation with the teachers. And solve the problem. Yeah he the problem solver and helper, and they have been, and Uncle John he's helped me out with the house and helped with the same thing Emanuel do.

Although supportive, some of my participants are under intense supervision in particular contexts. There were a few times even at church when I noticed Emanuel standing in the back of the church in order to keep an eye on some of my participants in order to monitor their behavior. On one occasion, he ordered a few of my female participants to sit at the front of the church because they talked during the previous week's service (and they complied). Emanuel would check with me to make sure my Liberian and Ivorian participants were on their best behavior during the project. For instance, one evening after the workshop Emanuel came to the Center to pick up several of my participants. I approached the car to say hello and he asked me if the kids were being respectful, if they raised their hands to ask a question or make a comment, and if they were talking while I was talking. If they were not behaving respectfully, he was going to talk with their mothers.

My study confirms previous studies that show, "Unlike the conventional Western model of a two-parents nuclear family, the notion of 'family' for these students was more fluid and inclusive of extended family members and in some cases unrelated friends of

the family" (Camino 1994; Shepard 2008:210). Flexible family memberships are a part of their sources of meaning and experience in ways they feel a sense of belonging to and connection with a larger system of support as they navigate U.S. based structures. These familial ties are only a source of support, but are also about maintain aspects of an identity rooted in a particular cultural orientation, a social identity that also distinguishes them from their American peers. Taken together with the issues I discussed above, familial expectations channel them into a more adaptive identity style. That is, one in which they are - like in many migrant families - seriously encouraged to take advantage of the "land of opportunity", but also are encouraged not to abandon elements particular to the cultural orientations of their native countries.

*Family Expectations: "So You Can Become Somebody Tomorrow"*

Familial expectations emerge as another aspect of the family-based identity. The strong expectation for academic and career success fostered by close family ties and internationalized by my participants puts pressure on them to be a certain way and to embrace the so-called "American Dream" within, what a few of my participants have called, the "land of opportunity." These expectations protect them from alternate sources of identity outside of the family (such as urban, youth gangs).

I asked my participants during the interview about parental expectations, and whether they agreed with their family member's attitudes toward topics such as school, and work. My respondents share common familial expectations relating to school, work and mutual respect and support for one another. Kaleb states,

> She [mother] expects us to take of care of each other and be respectful and
> do good in school. And tomorrow so you can be, so you can become
> somebody tomorrow, 'cause she doesn't want us to leave Africa and come
> over and mess around, get bad records and stay over here, we want to go
> back over there [Africa] and help people over there.

It is in this sense that the youth talked about the expectation to take care of each other, be respectful, and "become somebody." As Kaleb explains, becoming somebody is not entirely an individual-based aspiration. Rather, he expresses his responsibility to a larger social group based in Africa.

Despite their socio-economic backgrounds[12] and experienced racial discrimination, it is evident from the data that my participants have accepted the notion that America is the "land of opportunity." Almost all of my participants express this notion when they describe their reasons for migration. In addition to migrating because of the war, coming to the United States was an opportunity to achieve great things – a good education and a good job. They conceptualize the reason for their migration as an opportunity to build their futures, and increase their standard of living through education and careers of their choice, as influenced by familial expectations. Bashir states,

> My dad always talks about how it's like better here, and how it's like opportunities, like everybody will have better opportunities, land of opportunity. It is actually, in some ways that is, if you just work hard, get lucky a little bit, you can go out and sometimes you know how you get lazy when you come here, it's natural. Sometimes you get lazy. But, it's really a land of opportunity, you have a lot, if you have good knowledge and, good study skill, you know like you just focus I guess and you'll be fine.

This thread is also apparent in the way some of my participants have made social comparisons between their countries of origin and the United States. Kaleb, 14-year old from Liberia, explained why he and his family left Liberia first and then Ivory Coast. He says:

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[12] These kids arrived in the U.S. as refugees from war-torn countries, leaving with little material and financial capital. Moreover, these youth and their parents continue to experience the context of low-socio-economic status – their parents and/or caregivers occupations can be defined as working class (school janitors, factory work). And, none of my participants were in the labor force.

We lived in Liberia, there's a company in Africa it's called the UN [United Nations], so my mom and my dad thought about, because my dad passed away in the war so my mom thought, she asked everybody if we wanted to come to the United States because it might be fair that, because we never go to school before. So, we better come over here and go to school and get a better education then I want to go back and help out our family. So, that's the reason that we came over here, and number one reason that we came over here is go to school, stay out of trouble, and able want to go back to the homeland and help whoever we can. Right here, I like here better because here you have the opportunity to do whatever you want to do, like do some jobs, and get money, and take care of yourself and your family. But over there you don't get enough money like here's. So here you have the privilege to do whatever you want to do, but over there it's not [like here], over there's like you do work but it's hard to get a job. And in [name of current city] too, it's hard to get a job in [name of current city]. So my mom she first of all when we came she decided to move and she didn't', she said she don't want to move because if we move to a different state maybe our behavior is going to change, we're going to be acting different ways, so she wants to be here in [name of current city in Michigan], she feels safe here.

Some of my participants articulated certain cultural expectations that are reinforced through close family relations in which they engage in without much question. With some changes, values of respecting elders, language preservation, household responsibilities and religious engagement are some ways my participants connect with the cultural orientation of their countries of origin. I asked Kirala in what ways does she and her family maintain (or not) culture. She explains,

Kirala: We eat African food a lot, almost everyday we eat rice. We have to speak our language every time we around our grandma 'cause she want us to speak it um [short pause] let's see [short pause] we have to respect your elders no matter what. Every time you see them you have to say hi even if they're far away you have to say hi, why because that you have to do it. Yeah. If you didn't do it my grandma gonna be mad at you if she find out.

Linda: She's gonna be mad at you?

Kirala: Yeah. Real mad.

Linda: What would she say?

Kirala: She might, I don't know, she might do something to make to like she tell you to tell my Auntie to do stuff that gonna make you mad and stuff [chuckles]…And gotta cook, in Africa cause girls do the cooking and boys do the working like have a job and stuff but now [since] we come my auntie make the boys cook too….Yeah, boys cook, girls cook, everybody clean in the house. But in Africa we be waking up, like sweep around the building and cook, go get water for everybody to take shower and stuff, but now…the boys doing it [too].

Through the family one can also see that refugee youth in my study are not shedding the influence of their home cultural orientations and fully embracing an American identity. That is, they are also not completely rejecting the dominant U.S. culture, particularly mainstream, middle class ideals. The meanings of family and the identities they foster are guided by more than what families *do* to youth than the elements of family life they construct as meaningful. As part of the workshop, each participant shared their stories about dreams and aspirations in ways that suggest to me that that they have internalized these expectations, but in some ways are also constrained by them.

Some of my participants spoke of engaging in sports, but at the cost of familial support as the family's strongly foster educational and career success. Most of my participants engaged in sports despite their parents reservations about it. My interview with Bashir best illustrates how my participants make choices about and also resist familial expectations.

[My mom says] Yeah, you can play, but like my dad he's just not into [sports], like if I told him I'm going to go watch, support my friends in basketball he's like no you're not playing so don't go. And then like if I'm like playing, probably he's just won't show up I guess, he's not into sports I guess. So not that much sports, but school yeah….he'd rather me having school like do school and no sport, and like school is like I don't know,

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sport is like my way out of school kind of…that's my fun time and then school is like to work and I get my work done I guess, yeah.

Disagreements over expectations emerge when it comes to dating, especially female participants dating boys. Through the interviews was clear that they were not happy about it, but they have found other ways of interacting with boys in school, parties, and over the phone. During the photo workshop when some of the girls ever mentioned boys, they had asked me not to tell the patriarch of their family, uncle Emanuel, that they talk about boys. It seems as if when they are not within the family context and under the surveillance of particular family members, they can embrace a United States teen identity. In other words, they do engage in all the things they learn from their families, but find safe and socially acceptable ways of expressing themselves as they continue their socialization processes in the United States context.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have made the claim that African refugee youth's continued processes of identification with family influence who they are and how they relate to others in a social way as they navigate US-social contexts. I showed this from the perspectives of the youth themselves, through their reflection of photos and individual interviews. Given the opportunity to explore and engage in more subversive groups and activities, these youth tend to rely of family for a sense of identity, and family becomes their "center of gravitation" (Fernandez-Kelly and Schauffler 1994).

These findings are limited in terms of generalization because they are a small, self-select group from particular geographic locations, with wide range of teen ages and length of time in the United States. However, there is little question that family is important to the African refugee youth in my study. First, the youth in my study perceive family relations as salient in part because it takes precedence of over other relationships, as a part of who they are in relation to a larger social group. In addition to this, what the data reveal is a situation whereby African refugee youth's commitment to family does not protect them from engaging in anti-social activities in honor of always "sticking together" no matter the impositions of the dominant host society. The way they incorporate an aspect of family not indigenous to the United States is very telling of the way they express a pan-African identity. Flexible membership is an aspect of family life that is symbolic of their choice to retain an identity that is linked to the values of families of African descent. They also incorporate clearly defined familial expectations into their meanings and experiences. Built into their family relations are a set of expectations that are not divorced from particular cultural scripts about how to behave in a racially,

culturally and linguistically dissonant society and thereby influencing their identity formations. Anchoring their sense of identity in family, however, also limits their full autonomy, but they find safer ways to express themselves.

Rather than edging out family and embracing Westernized patterns of individualism, and identity development, my participants' incorporation of family into their sense of identity grounds them more in their home cultures, and into a more adaptive identity style. As previous research suggested, combining the host and home socio-cultural orientations is better for youth's overall well being than rejecting one all together and accepting the other. After living at least three years in the U.S., the youth in my study are not alienated from their families and their home cultures but instead are tied to particular aspects of the family life that suggests these teens do not completely reject their cultures of origin or the dominant culture. Their family stories indicate that they do not seek to gain independence from family, and deny aspects of themselves related to being African. When it comes to family, the participants in my study do not downplay being African – from Liberia, Ivory Coast or Sudan. In contexts where they now have the opportunity to "become American", they honor aspects of family life in a way that influences the development of a pan-African identity. This research adds to the growing literature related to our sociological understandings of migration, family, and social identity because it shows that refugee teenagers sense of identity do not necessarily have to be based in race, ethnic or immigrant identification, but can also be grounded in other structures, such as the family in which their shared meanings of family undergird who they are as in a social way. Study youth with a refugee experience adds to the literature as well because being as refugees they have faced additional disjuncture such as the effects

of war, prolonged separation from family, loss of family members, experiences in resettlement camps can shape meanings of family and how family is defined.

Following this, these findings shed some light on a popular debate surrounding youth incorporation into the dominant society. My participants did not tell stories of ethnic flight. They do not respond by rejecting institutions of the dominant culture and thus adopt an adversarial identity. Rather, their stories reflect what scholars have called a transcultural or bicultural style of identity where youth take into account both their culture of origin, and that of the dominant host society. Like immigrants, refugees do not leave their cultures behind and automatically assimilate into the mainstream. However, my participants were largely socialized in their countries of origin, and were part of a migrant group legally and politically defined by governmental bodies as emigrating because of violence and fear of persecution. Then, they arrived to a mid-sized town in Michigan with a small foreign-born population. It is in this context that refugee youth in my study also bring with them a distinctive culture – learned values, beliefs and ways behaving to the host society that they have incorporated into their identity constructions.

My research also addresses the broader question that researchers will continue to contend with, that is, whether or not (and in what ways) family remains salient to migrant children. In addition to this, researchers will continue to ask whether migrant children will incorporate family into their identities in an individual or a collective sense. Further investigation of this could more strongly bridge family and migrant youth identities with their socio-cultural adaptation experiences. What the data reveal are that family life has to be socially constructed in new contexts, and relationships are to some extent reconstituted in the United States. My paper suggests one of the ways family and migration scholars

could illuminate the socially structured nature of family that is grounded in the lived realities of refugee and immigrant youth. Using both photograph-based discussions and interview data I was able to draw some rich, meaningful information about the meanings that are at the forefront of family life for the participants in my study. As a location where they seem to anchor their identity, adapting to life socially and culturally in Michigan would have been much more difficult.
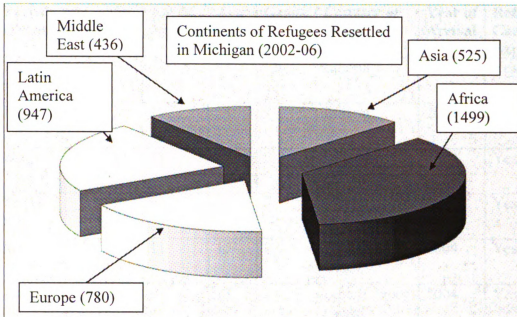
An important area to explore is the extent to which these youth embrace a U.S. urban, teen identity along intersections of race, class and gender. The photos that my female participants made were different from the boys mostly along the lines of gender. Although I have not made this the subject my paper, I should explore the more performative and expressive aspects of North American teen identity, such as is evidenced in the work of Forman (2002). He documented how Rap and Hip Hop culture and mass media influence the identity formations of the Somali teen participants in his study. Some of the girls' in my study took photographs of teen magazines that included posters of African American female Rap and Hip Hop artists, especially male artists with "six-packs", as one of my participants noted. In addition to this, my research raises a question regarding the physical response to racism and discrimination evidenced by some of my female participants. Another study could interrogate further what social and cultural factors influence this physical assertiveness among racialized immigrant and refugee girls as they construct identities in a U.S. context.

As we know from the existing literature, identities are influenced by a variety of social contexts, such as family, school, and peer groups. However, my data reveal that for African refugee youth, identity is a central conceptual tool from which to begin to think

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about the enduring influence of familial institutions. Rather than focusing on a set of predictors of refugee and immigrant youth's identity "choices", I prioritized the institutional contexts of family with which my participants have identified as important, as part of their everyday experiences of identity formations. Clearly, much more work needs to be done to clarify the way refugee and immigrant youth give meaning to family and their identities. I have set forth research findings here that will move us further along the path to that understanding.

*Appendix A: Figure 1*



Middle East (436)

Continents of Refugees Resettled in Michigan (2002-06)

Asia (525)

Latin America (947)

Africa (1499)

Europe (780)

*Michigan Refugee Resettlement, 2002-2006*
(Source: St. Vincent Catholic Charities, 2007.)

*Appendix B: Table 1*

| Participants (Pseudonym) | Sex | Age of Arrival | Age * | Grade ** | Country of Origin | Year of Arrival | Refugee Camp Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kirala | F | 13 | 17 | 11 | Liberia | 2004 | Yes |
| Kaleb | M | 10 | 14 | 7 | Liberia | 2004 | Yes |
| Benjamin | M | 11 | 15 | 9 | Liberia | 2004 | Yes |
| Kayla | F | 9 | 13 | 7 | Liberia | 2004 | Yes |
| Mari | F | 11 | 15 | 8 | Liberia/Ivory Coast | 2004 | Yes |
| Hanna | F | 9 | 13 | 7 | Liberia/Ivory Coast | 2004 | Yes |
| Jelani | F | 8 | 15 | 9 | Sudan | 2000 | No |
| Bashir | M | 10 | 17 | 11 | Sudan | 2000 | No |

*Individual Characteristics of Participants*

*Age at onset of project, October, 2007.
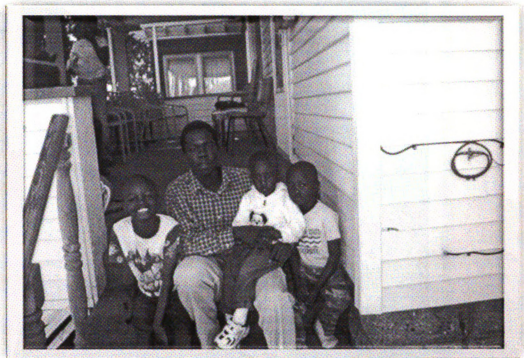**Grade-level at onset of project, October 2007

Figure 2: "Families Is One of the Most Important Things"



Figure 3: "Sisters"

Figure 4: "The Best Grandma on Earth"

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