Values in the Negotiation of Educational Barriers: Somali College Students’ Academic Achievement as Investments in Community Success

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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ABSTRACT

Somali refugee families in the United States enter their new communities with a multitude of stressors to cope with, including past experiences of conflict and the need to negotiate conflicting values between their cultural and religious heritage and those of their host environment. When attending public schools, Somali children must mediate the pressures of satisfying their roles and obligations in the home with those in the schools that they attend. The nature of the child’s gendered obligations to their families and community also may affect the way in which the child in and perceives of and participates in of the educational process. With regard to the academic performance of Somali students, Columbus Public Schools have witnessed a trend of failure of state proficiency tests, high rates of absenteeism, drop-out and non-graduation rates, and low rates of matriculation into higher education.

Concerns over how cultural and linguistic barriers have affected Somalis students’ academic performance have evoked an ongoing discourse at the local district and university level. In addressing this issue, this study
juxtaposes the experiences and sentiments of high achieving Somali students at the Ohio State University against available literature on the educational barriers that Somali students face at the K-12 Level. By relating to common themes located within the college students' educational autobiographies, the study will also examine how these students have transplanted a cultural logic of reciprocity and community investment to their values of academic achievement and their time spent at the university. The adaptive responses of Somali young adults in the Somali community geared towards preserving this cultural logic among the next generation of Somalis will also be discussed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first would like to express my gratitude to the various participants of this study, Sagal, Liban, Abdisalam, Said, Sahra, and Ibrahim, for their time and willingness to speak to me about their lives. Each one of these individuals' relaxed, friendly personal manner made me, as a qualitative researcher in training much more comfortable during the interview process, and for that I am most appreciative. I am particularly grateful to Sagal acting as a community guide: showing me around the Somali community, inviting me to Somali Students' Association events, introducing me to other students, and emailing my survey to the SSA Listserv.

I would also like to thank The Ohio State University's P-12 Project, especially Dr. Nancy Nestor-Baker and Christine Murakami, for providing me with the opportunity to work in a supportive and creative environment during my graduate studies. Nancy and Christine's styles of cooperative leadership provided a remarkable model for my personal and professional development as an individual starting out in the field. My time spent working at the P-12 Project has also afforded invaluable opportunity to learn about educational theory and policy in practice.
As a student at Ohio State, I have also had the opportunity to study under three very remarkable individuals and professors, Dr. Cynthia Dillard, Dr. Antoinette Errante, and Dr. Peter Demerath, all of whom have deservedly been recognized as distinguished teachers and mentors of their students. Dr. Cynthia Dillard’s courses were particularly instrumental in guiding me through a process of personal and intellectual renewal at a time when I was searching for a purpose. I would also like to thank my committee member, Dr. Antoinette Errante for the multitude of endeavors that she has helped me with throughout my graduate career. As a result of her course offerings and classroom discussions, I have also learned a multitude of information that has drastically influenced my future academic and career aspirations.

Finally, and most gratefully, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Peter Demerath, who has enthusiastically supported me intellectually, personally, and professionally throughout my graduate studies. As he himself defines the role of a good teacher, Dr. Demerath challenged me immensely in an intellectual capacity while guiding me through the process of realizing and achieving my goals. Because of my time spent in his courses and relating to him about the research process, I feel that I have acquired a wealth of analytical and conceptual tools that I hope to continue develop. My time spent as Dr. Demerath’s student and advisee has been truly inspiring and I am extremely grateful for all of the time that he has invested in me.
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2002...................................... B.A. Anthropology
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Somali Community in Columbus, Ohio

The people of the East African nation of Somalia have been suffering from the horrors of protracted violence and famine associated with the nation's civil war that ensued after the government's collapse in 1991. In order to flee from violence, many Somalis have continued on a journey of instability through forced migration, life in refugee camps, and resettlement in unfamiliar communities around the globe. During the relocation process, many families have been split apart; some members might have been killed as a direct or indirect result of violence, some members may not have been able to flee from Somalia, and others may have been relocated to other countries (Good, 1999). Five hundred Somalis came to the United States as refugees in 1991 and by 1992, when it was estimated that 3000 children were dying each day in Somalia, the number of Somali people entering the country rose to 3500 (Abdi, 1998; Pietras, 2000). As of 2003, Columbus, Ohio has become home to the second largest Somali population in the country with more than 30,000 Somali immigrants living in the area (El Nasser, 2003).
The rapid growth of this new immigrant group has placed a tremendous demand on Columbus Public School's ESL (English as a Second Language) programs. Because many of the teachers and staff working with Somali K-12 students and their parents may have been unfamiliar with their background, the district has provided numerous workshops on the topic of Somali culture. Columbus Public School District has also responded to needs of the growing ESL student population by creating "Welcome Centers" for newly arriving immigrant students with little to no English language background. At the welcome center, students receive support in their native language and learn the rules and processes of school attendance; afterwards they later transition into a local school's ESL program (Zehr, 2001).

Despite the district's efforts to assist in the transition process of Somali students into the American school system, existing cultural, linguistic, and academic barriers persist. Concerns over how these barriers affect Somali students' performance on the state proficiency tests, high rates of absenteeism, drop-out and non-graduation rates, as well as low rates matriculation into post-secondary education have evoked an ongoing dialogue at the local district and university level. When considering academic barriers that Somali students face, the relevance of their cultural background and personal biographies must be taken into account. Although it is important to consider that as of 2004, any Somali refugee arriving to the United States under the age of 21 most likely received no formal education before Somalia's social and educational institutions collapsed at
the onset of the civil war (Zehr, 2001). For females, educational opportunities have been much more limited because what little opportunities may or may not have been available in refugee camps often were disproportionately afforded to males because of cultural norms and gender expectations (De Voe, 2002; Zehr, 2001).

Once they have been resettled, Somali parents often have mixed feelings about their new environment. In one respect, they may anticipate a more stable life than they had experienced in their homeland. However, this sentiment is often accompanied by fear and opposition to changes to their lives, especially among their families in their foreign host communities (De Voe, 2002). The mixed emotions that many Somali parents have about their new communities also shape their sentiments about their children’s educational experiences. While many parents and community members stress the importance of school success for their youth as a means of securing their future, parents also worry about their children’s social integration in schools (De Voe, 2002). Many parents specifically want to protect their children from culturally conflicting values in their new host environments with particular objection to their children’s exposure and incorporation into the highly sexualized popular culture of the United States (De Voe, 2002).

Because Somali youths’ cultural background is rather different than that of dominant American culture, they enter into American school systems and must face a new and often contested arena of cultural transmission and acquisition,
both academically and socially in the school setting. Reed-Danahay (2000) asserts that in the educational process, schools become sites “for the negotiation of social and cultural identity and for the construction of relationships between family, community, and state” (pp. 226-7). With this in mind, this study will examine what non-economic resources Somali students call upon in order to overcome any barriers they face and to achieve in their educational and academic pursuits at the K-12 and college level. I am particularly interested in what the educational autobiographies of high achieving students at Ohio State will illuminate when juxtaposed against available literature on existing barriers to academic success. Specifically, I am interested in how these students make meaning of their multiple identities and roles in the transnational context as a Somali male or female, a Muslim, a student, a family member, a community member, and a new American immigrant in the American educational system. I will then relate their sentiments to the availability of cultural and social capital in the community with the hope that the exploration of these concepts will provide much insight to educators of Somali youth at the K-12 level.

Framing the Study

The qualitative study first began when my advisor, Dr. Peter Demerath, suggested that work with the Somali community would be a meaningful project for me as a student of educational anthropology with developing interest in North African societies. While Somalia is located in East Africa, all countries have in
common a various forms and interpretations of Islamic culture and its accompanying kin-based solidarities that deeply influence architecture, other forms of material culture and the overall social order (Charrad, 2005). Dr. Demerath had been asked to serve as a committee member of the newly formed OSU Somali Initiative, comprised of local Somali community organization representatives, Somali students at OSU, representatives from OSU Outreach and Engagement/Extension, the Medical School/Nursing, the Columbus Health Department, and the College of Education. During the preliminary meetings he learned about a Youth Leadership Conference being organized by a local community organization called Strategies for Community Success, which was to be held at a local middle school in June.

My first experience as a participant-observer was to take place at this conference, but unfortunately it was cancelled due to funding issues. However, the title and purpose of the conference initiated dialogue between my advisor and I, which located the concept of social capital within the community as a starting place of theoretical consideration. During the rest of the summer I conducted an extensive literature review of any materials I could find pertaining to: Somalia’s pre-colonial and colonial history; Somalia’s independence and time as a Cold War client state; the Barre regime and the government’s collapse; the civil war and ensuing humanitarian crisis; the quality of life in refugee camps and throughout the relocation process; and finally of the resettlement process and transition of youth into educational systems in the Australia, Europe, and North
America. My research design and theoretical framework result from my findings during the literature review and from my developing interests and orientation within the field of anthropology of education.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Table 1: The Relationship between the Three Forms of Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and concept of cultural capital was developed as a way to explain how cultural disjunctions between the home and
school influence cultural reproduction and structural inequality in educational outcomes (Reed-Danahay, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu (2002) defines habitus as “a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) structures of perception, conception and action” (p. 28). Habitus, unlike personal character, is the product of social conditions. Two people may acquire a similar habitus if they are the product of (and situated similarly in) the same social conditions. The theory maintains that one’s moral values and social status, which are defined by their social class and cultural background, becomes embodied in their everyday life (Low & Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003).

Bourdieu’s (1997) concept of cultural capital is a conceptual tool that can be used to examine the non-economic influences in an individual’s life that influence academic success. Bourdieu distinguishes between three existing forms of cultural capital in the embodied, objectified, and institutional state, which can later be exchanged and converted into economic capital. When evaluating cultural capital in the educational processes, embodied capital directly relates to the theory of habitus, whereby an individual’s social dispositions might affect what their beliefs and values about what they can do or want to do. In the objectified state, cultural capital exists in the form of material goods and resources that might contribute to academic success directly or by informing other forms of cultural capital. In the institutional state, he refers to cultural capital mainly as academic qualifications. While all three forms of capital could
be said to exist in discrete forms, they also continually interact with one another, influencing and transforming the existence of each form.

For the purposes of this study, cultural capital in the institutional state will be conceived of more broadly in terms of cultural competencies in addition to academic qualifications. According to Bourdieu, only certain types of capital are rewarded within specific sociopolitical contexts and can then be converted into economic capital. My findings will show that for the Somalis who participated in this study, such forms of cultural capital may be honored for their investment and exchange value beyond economic capital alone. This is because Somali people, as African Muslims, can be said to subscribe to the ‘African communai ethic’ that is also reinforced by individuals’ position in extended kin networks associated with Islamic societies. In such societies, acts of reciprocity and charity have high exchange values in promoting the good of the community and family. According to Paris (1995), acts of beneficence are highly praised because:

the individual’s disposition is so shaped by the ultimate goal of the community that he or she finds contentment in facilitating the well-being of others. For them, the good of others always assumes priority over their own good (p. 137).

In communal and based systems of kin-based solidarity and reciprocity, individuals can be said to have a vast amount of social capital in their community. Related to the concept of cultural capital, Coleman’s (1997) notion of social capital may easily be understood as the webs of social relations that create trust, establish expectations, and institute and enforce norms. According to Coleman,
the degree to which one is “embedded” within such networks of solidarity serves as the decisive factor in how much social capital one has (Coleman, 81). He further explains that, like all forms of capital, social capital is “productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. 81). Both cultural and social capital are maintained and developed through all agents of socialization, such as family, peers, community, and social institutions and have particular relevance for immigrants from African Muslim societies.

Habitus in the Translocal Context

Bourdieu’s theory of habitus has become thoroughly embedded in the subfield of the anthropology of space in which he applied the concept of habitus and space to examine the Algerian Kabyle house as a gendered space (Bourdieu, 2003). Recent literature by authors such as Appadurai (2003) and others have examined how globalization, electronic media, and the movement of people has resulted in the creation of transnational spaces and translocal identities, where space, place, culture, and identity are no longer confined geographically. When immigrants and refugees find themselves living in new environments (and social conditions), they must learn how to maintain, negotiate, and adapt their acquired social dispositions productively because often the linguistic and cultural competencies of these groups are not only undervalued, but they are also often seen as a deficit.
McMichael’s (2002) study focusing on Somali’s women’s narratives about the stress of war, forced migration, and resettlement applies the related concept of plurilocality, proposing that Islam provides a ‘plurilocal’ home for the women (p. 172). In explaining the experiences of refugees who face the threat of discontinuity in their lives, McMichaels explains:

A broader and more mobile conception of home is necessary, as something ‘plurilocal,’ something to be taken along as individuals move through space and time. For migrants and exiles, home comes to be found in a routine set of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head (p. 172).

Although women’s interpretations of Islam vary (there is no “essential Islam”), McMichaels (2002) argues that the concept of a home is placed in the everyday workings of Islam: in women’s identities, their daily routines, as well as the use of their bodies and social space. In speaking about her experiences of relocation, one Somali woman in the study said, “Everywhere is Allah’s place anyway. Every country that you go, Allah is everywhere. It is not as if we have come to a place where we are disconnected from that” (p. 179). McMichaels found that the Somali women that she worked with in the study had transformed their public housing units into Muslim spaces and the women further employed their understanding of the teachings of Islam in order to provide social and emotional support in coping with their past, understanding their present, and looking toward their future (McMichaels, 2002; Drysdale, 2000).
This study is particularly relevant when considering the social dispositions of Somali refugees because followers of Islam see their faith as an all-encompassing way of life. Forman (2005; 2002) also relates these concepts specifically to the experience of Somali high school students in North America who want to transform their objectified identity as ‘immigrant’ or ‘refugee’ in order to ‘fit in’ with their peers according to their transnational identities. In order to do so, authors such as Pratt Ewing (2004) suggest that immigrants go through a process of identity negotiation between their multiple and often conflicting identities in new social contexts. With the concepts that have emerged in these past research pieces in mind, I am interested in investigating how Somalis students in Columbus at the K-12 and college level’s social dispositions and identity, based in their past social and cultural contexts (including experiences of conflict), is maintained and negotiated in the transnational context of the American educational process.
CHAPTER 3
Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

Designing the Study

During the data collection process, I wanted to immerse myself as much as possible into the Somali community by using qualitative methods in settings where informal education and cultural acquisition was taking place. The ultimate goal of this endeavor was to go through the process of creating a small-scale ethnography: to tell a story about specific events in people’s everyday lives and also to provide relevant understandings about their beliefs in a broader context of cultural representations (Tedlock, 2000; Chambers, 2000). The primary methods used to collect the data was a review of material culture, participant-observation, formal and informal interviews, and the development of a grounded qualitative survey.

In order to get more acquainted with Somali youth culture in Columbus, Ohio, I started the process of searching the Internet during my summer literature review for any material that would lead me to social venues such as restaurants, music, and art, as well as to other Somali cultural goods. As result of my search, I learned about the work of Olol Studios in Columbus and I ordered their film,
Rajo (Hope), a drama about how crime and violence affects many Somali males in the neighborhoods in which they have been settled in Columbus. The Internet search also resulted in my first social experience within the Somali community: eating at a Somali restaurant. First experiences as an ‘outsider’ in an ‘unfamiliar environment’ are often described as uncomfortable at best, but I had never expected this to be true of simply going to a restaurant. However, on this particular day I went to the restaurant with a male friend of mine not realizing that seating was separated by gender. Although our pairing posed no noticeable problem for our hosts, I did have to sit on the male side of the restaurant, which admittedly was somewhat awkward for me.

As the academic year at Ohio State started, I became involved in the OSU Somali Initiative at the request of my advisor. At first I worked on developing ideas for a webpage that would serve as a clearinghouse for resources related to the Somali community and the university. Later I also became involved in the education subcommittee which developed a pilot tutoring program for Somalis and other ESL students preparing for the state proficiency test. With my research interests in mind and my general interest in volunteerism, I constantly sought ways to engage in researcher reciprocity while working on these projects. With regard to the first project, I went out into the community and assisted Somali community organizations in recruiting volunteers from the university by registering them on the university’s volunteer matching database. During the second project, I served as a volunteer in the school-based ESL proficiency-
tutoring program. Some observational data from my time spent tutoring in a local high school will be referred to later in this study.

Participant-Observation, Informal Interviewing, and Material Culture

It was after a meeting for the general committee of the OSU Somali Initiative in January that my first ‘research breakthrough’ came about. Sagal, the Vice President of the university’s Somali Student Association and I were brainstorming ideas for a community day and how to develop a volunteer program for the organization. I had earlier contacted Sagal asking her if she knew anything about the Somali music concerts that I had read about and where the area’s ‘Somali malls’ were located. After our discussion, Sagal asked me if I wanted to go on a tour of Somali businesses in the area later that afternoon and I gladly accepted her offer. For the next three hours Sagal and I drove to Northeast side of Columbus, where we went to two malls, had dinner at her uncle’s restaurant, and later had coffee. At the malls, we talked to several of the shop owners about their goods (ranging from food, clothing, rugs, jewelry, art, music, household goods, and so on). I was also able to meet the makers of the film Rajo (Hope), as Olol Studios was located in one of the malls. Throughout the day, Sagal and I also talked at length about her life experiences, her family, her thoughts about the Somali community and ‘Somali culture,’ as well as her academic and career goals.
This trip was the first of many to be made to the Somali malls, which became the first major site for participant-observational data collection, where I engaged in informal dialogue with business owners while taking notice of the social interactions occurring in the environment surrounding me. One morning, while waiting on a scheduled interview, I was able to completely map out one of the malls including details shop contents, spatial relationships, and details pertaining to designated prayer spaces. Throughout the rest of the research process I often would seek reasons to return to these spaces, such as to buy *enjera* bread or to follow up with community representatives and other shop owners with whom I had earlier spoke with.

The second major site for participant-observational data collection was on Ohio State’s campus. Some observations are based on my daily observations as an attending student and employee; others result from my involvement in the OSU Somali Initiative and what I learned there. The majority of my participant observational data from this setting, however, was collected during my attendance to three events of the Somali Students Association: An executive committee meeting in a campus coffee shop; the Taste of OSU festivities at the Ohio Union; and the Somali Student Association’s presidential debates in the basement of the Ohio Union. During the SSA’s presidential debates, I was able to record the questions posed to and responses of the three male candidates who represented themselves as candidates for the office.
Throughout the duration of the research, I also attended other campus and community events such as public viewing of two films: Olool Studio’s *Gabar Haloo Doono* (Find Him a Wife), and the acclaimed documentary, *The Letter* (about turmoil over Somali’s relocation to a small town in Maine). The first film was shown in a local theater and the second was shown on OSU’s campus, where a panel discussion followed. In addition, I attended a session presented by two faculty members who had developed the proficiency tutoring program at a local conference that I helped organize for Columbus Public’s professional development day. Their presentation about the linguistic and academic success of Somali refugee children was an interactive one, including the thoughts and ideas of the audience, which consisted primarily of Columbus Public ESL teachers. In further formulating ideas about this topic, I also had several informal conversations with a faculty member in the university’s ESL department who was interested in learning about barriers to Somali students’ success in the university’s required courses for non-native English speakers.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sagal</th>
<th>Liban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 21 year old female</td>
<td>• 29 year old male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Born in Mogadishu, Somalia</td>
<td>• Born in Mogadishu, Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attended school in Ottawa, Canada</td>
<td>• Attended high school in Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Junior at Ohio State studying English and Biology</td>
<td>• Moved to Seattle, Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Senior at Ohio State studying microbiology (premed)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abdisalam</th>
<th>Said</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 29 year old male</td>
<td>• 30 year old male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Born in Mogadishu, Somalia</td>
<td>• Born in Hargeisa, Somalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attended high school in Mogadishu until grade 11 when war broke out</td>
<td>• Attended high school in Hargeisa until grade 11, when war broke out in the north in 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Moved to Atlanta in 1995; Columbus in 2001</td>
<td>• Family fled to Mogadishu, but was unable to finish high school because the city was under attack by 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Partner of Olo Studios</td>
<td>• Partner of Olo Studios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Director and Producer of Rajo (Hope), Gabar Haloo Doono (Find Him a Wife)</td>
<td>• Stars in Rajo (Hope), Gabar Haloo Doono (Find Him a Wife)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ibrahim</th>
<th>Sahra</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>• 23 year old male</td>
<td>• 18 year old female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Born in Mogadishu, Somalia</td>
<td>• Born in the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attended high school at urban district in Columbus</td>
<td>• Attended K-12 school in suburb of Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Senior studying pharmacy at Ohio State</td>
<td>• Sophomore at Ohio State studying English and International Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Interview Participants
As a result of the time that I spent with members of the Somali Student Association, I was able to formally interview two male undergraduate students and two female undergraduate students. Both of the two male students, Liban and Ibrahim, were born in Somalia and relocated to different cities in the United States before finally moving to Columbus. Ibrahim attended high school in a local urban school in Columbus. Liban graduated from high school in Egypt, and upon arrival to the United States, he worked for several years in a variety of 'labor jobs.' Liban also attended a local community college and then later transferred to Ohio State. Of the two female students, Sagal was born in Somalia and Sahra was born in the United States. Both of them spent the majority of their school-aged years at public schools in Canada.

An additional formal interview was conducted with the two partners who own Olol Studios, Abdisalam and Said, ages 29 and 30 respectively. Both men attended high school in Somalia but were unable to graduate because the educational system collapsed when they were in grade 11. Neither Abdisalam nor Said attended high school in North America and they currently work together producing and starring in dramas and comedies about the Somali community in Columbus, Ohio. All six interviews with Ohio State Students and the Olol Studios partners were semi-structured; four of the five conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed (Fontana & Frey, 2000).
The process of analyzing data took place from the moment of initial research design and literature review through the point of write-up. Typewritten fieldnotes and interview transcripts were manually coded and managed. The interpretive process involved a process of analytic abduction between emergent themes in my data and additional review of available literature and relevant theory (Clifford, 1988). Periodic journal entries were written as an introspective tool that I could reflect upon when examining my own subjectivity as a researcher and to illuminate some issues which I might have otherwise ignored (Peshkin, 1988). As a result of the ongoing data analysis process, a grounded qualitative survey was developed and submitted to the Somali Student Association's email listserv, which is distributed to fifty-six student members at Ohio State. Two female undergraduate students completed the survey.
CHAPTER 4
DATA ANALYSIS

Data Analysis Overview

The bulk of my data is juxtaposed against popular discourse at the university level over concerns about Somali and other immigrant student's social integration into the public school setting, their academic achievement, and matriculation into higher education. In the first part of my data presentation, I examine available literature about common themes in identity performance among Somali youth in urban school settings in connection with my own data that sheds light on this subject matter. The second section shifts its focus to potential 'barriers' to Somali student's academic achievement in high school. Drawing heavily upon my interview with Ohio State students and observational data and field notes from meetings of the Somali Students Association, I then explore the themes and contexts in which these high achieving students have placed value in and adapted to the educational and academic process.
Negotiating Peer Socialization in Schools: 'Fitting in' in the Transnational Context

Murray Forman’s (2005) recently published study, “Straight Outta Mogadishu: Prescribed Identities and Performative Practices among Somali Youth in North American High Schools,” asserts that “Somali youths generally arrive on this continent with limited ‘cultural capital’ in relation to the international cultural repertoires. They consume images and styles of their teen counterparts in acts of symbolic creativity inflecting them with their own relevant meanings in performative mode” (p. 17). Forman further argues that, “Becoming Canadian or American is not, for most Somali teens, as important as establishing a peer identity and participating in the elaborated practices of teen-oriented production and consumption” (pp. 12-13). In terms of this study, Foreman is mostly concerned with how Somali teens react to the hegemony of teen consumption of hip-hop culture in North America, especially in the urban context, and how this in turn may influence their styles of dress, speech patterns, and attitudes.

Because many Somali kids may want to fit in by talking, acting, and dressing like everyone else (while on their own terms), there may be familial, social, academic, and legal consequences depending on the nature of the community in which they have been settled in. *Refugee families are often settled in low income, high crime neighborhoods because they often come to the country with a limited amount of economic capital. Because American pop culture has perpetuated the glamorization of ‘gansta’ life targeting urban youth in low income neighborhoods, ‘fitting in’ may compel Somali youth to subscribe to performative
identities that deviate from the ethical and moral values of their religious and cultural backgrounds (Forman, 2002). However, with this said, it is important to note that hip hop identities traditionally are relatively non-commercial and relate more to African, commural-based urban art forms such as break dancing, graffiti, Mcing or rapping, and DJing (Forman, 2002; George, 1998). Because this popular culture genre encompasses a vast range of symbolism for different people with attached performative roles, there is no way to tell what meaning a particular Somali student may attach to such symbols without asking them personally. However, regardless of form, the incorporation of American pop-culture styles, ways of speaking and acting have sparked generational conflicts in the Somali family unit (Bashir-Ali & Hancock, 2005).

This type of generational conflict is explored in the film, Rajo (Hope) (Aato, 2004). The movie’s two main characters, Dhaquane and Omar, are friends who share in common their position as older brothers of Somali males who become incorporated into drug related crime in their urban neighborhood in Columbus. During one scene, Dhaquane and his younger brother Hakim get into a verbal altercation. Most of the dialogue is in Somali (with no subtitles), but Hakim sometimes breaks into urban lingo and English profanity. When I interviewed with the producer and director, Abdisalam Aato at his studio in the Benadir Mall, he explained what was going on in the scene. He said:

Hakim is the younger brother. Dhaquane is the older brother—he’s like a father figure. In Somali tradition, whoever’s older can tell you whatever. If my older brother tells me to do something
and my parents not there, then I have to respect that. So the conversation goes like, ah, he’s kind of telling his brother to stop doing what he’s doing and to stop hanging out with bad people. And you know, like even telling him about the way he’s dressed is not the traditional way. He’s got like too many stuff on, you know. He’s got a t-shirt, a shirt, jersey, doo rag…. He’s loaded. You know, it’s like summertime. He can’t even walk—his shoes are too big. And the younger brother tells him… you know, he’s been Americanized… so he says to him, ‘you can’t tell me anything. You have no way of telling me what to do.’ He’s like old school… ‘I do what I got to do. I have my own way of coming up in life—you’re not my mother. I have the money, I have the girls...’ (interview March 11, 2005)

Abdisalam said that falling into this “trap” is a problem that plagues many young Somali males who have been settled into high crime neighborhoods and who may lack the discipline of older family members because of the civil war.

In making a movie about this subject matter, Abdisalam could be said to be somewhat of an expert on youth culture in Columbus, Ohio. He’s a fan of comedy shows such as Seinfeld and the Simpson’s and listens to a variety of music including dancehall, funk, R&B, hip hop, rap, as well as traditional Somali music. His production studio produces films and comedy cartoon segments geared towards a younger audience and they also sells all the types of music mentioned above. In addition, Abdisalam and Said promote music concerts periodically through the year, which offer live performances from Somali musicians as a social venue for young Somali adults. A non-Somali student from Ohio University (Kirwin, 2002) studying the Somali music scene attended one of these concerts in 2002. At one point in the evening he conversed with a young Somali man wearing urban hip-hop wear who said that rap was his favorite
music. When the Ohio University student asked him why he didn’t go to a
nightclub where they played rap, the young man told him that he didn’t go to the
clubs because they serve alcohol and he didn’t want to tarnish his reputation as a
Muslim.

Negotiating performative identities and gender roles in the transnational
context also has particular ramifications for Somali females who want to ‘fit in’
with their American peers. Forman’s (2005) study explores how hip hop culture
has become incorporated into many Somali female teen’s dress noting that this,
“Visual style produces an interesting cultural hybrid among Somali teenage girls
who display a sartorial blend of traditional Somali garb (such as the hijab or
wrapped headdress) and hip-hop street wear (including oversized name-brand
sports gear)” (p. 20). According to his data, there are social divisions in
Canadian schools between Somali girls who ascribe to Muslim style dress and
those who adorn themselves in hip-hop regalia. On Ohio State’s campus and in
the high school in which I tutored, the passing observer can easily take notice to
these trends in styles of dress for young Somali women. While some Somali
females do not wear a hijab and may also wear Westernized clothing such as
jeans and so on, the majority of female students wear some components of
Muslim style dress. It certainly was striking to me as an outsider of the Somali
community when I first noticed Somali females on Ohio State’s campus wearing
long skirts and a hijab along with a flamboyantly labeled hooded sweatshirt.
From my own frame of reference, these articles have rather different and somewhat contradictory symbolic connotations.

With regard to community norms for female dress, Sagal, the Vice President of the Somali Student Association, told me that females are often judged on a spectrum of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ within the community based on the level to which they ascribe to Muslim styles of dress (field notes January 25, 2005). According to De Voe (2002), the common practice of Somali females wearing a hijab is not only implicitly seen as an essential component of a Muslim woman’s dress, it further serves as a means to establish barriers around and protect women from outside influences. She contends that clothing can communicate common group membership or deny access and this has particular importance for women living in non-Muslim societies. Wearing a hijab constantly reminds girls that their decisions are not just personal; they reflect the values of the community as well as their future as wives and mothers (De Voe, 2002; Brown, 2001).

**Students’ Social Dispositions and Incentives in Learning Social English**

With regard to language, the desire for kids to fit in can also be taken note of when considering their motivation to learn English. According to Dr. Khadar Bashir-Ali (Bashir-Ali & Hancock, 2005), Somali kids prioritize learning social English as opposed to academic English because in learning the former there is an incentive in being accepted by peers. The emphasis on learning social,
spoken English is also strengthened by their linguistic backgrounds in the oral culture of Somalia, where expressive forms of oral poetry are very popular. Somali students’ emphasis on social and expressive language acquisition can be observed all the way through higher education, as an instructor of Ohio State’s required ESL courses explained that most of his Somali students did extremely well when asked to write online journals, however, when asked to write an academic paper, many of the same students failed miserably. One student in particular, he recalled, attended and participated in all of the classes, turned in all of her journaling assignments, but did not turn in the academic term paper which resulted in her failure in the class (field notes April 29, 2005).

Conflicts between Cultural Competencies required in the Home and School

The previous section explored how peer socialization may affect the performative identities of Somali youth and their desire to learn English in the school setting. With regard to language, if Somali parents come to the United States with little to no English skills, their kids most likely acquire these skills more readily because of their embeddedness in American schools. According to Dr. Bashir-Ali (Bashir-Ali and Hancock, 2005), this unique circumstance often places children as the “linguistic caregivers” of their parents, whereby the parent must rely on their children to help in daily communications such as doctor visits and other appointments where they need exact translation from someone that
they trust. If appointments must be scheduled during the school day, parents may need to keep their child home from school in order to help.

Within the home there are different gender expectations that dictate the appropriate roles of males and females in fulfilling familial obligations. Females might miss more school or not have completed homework assignments because once they get home they are expected to take care of their siblings and to help with other domestic chores. According to Somali (nomadic) culture, men do not spend much time in the home. Upon their arrival home from school, parents may encourage their sons to go out and socialize or to get a job in order to help support their family. Little time spent in the home might also affect their ability to complete homework assignments, as parents might be unaware of what is required of their kids in school.

Although past research (Good, 1999; De Voe, 2002) shows that Somali parents highly value their children's academic success, parents may lack direct knowledge of what is expected of their children in school. Because of this, students may lack parental discipline required for performing well. This was particularly illuminating when I spoke with Ibrahim, a senior studying pharmaceutical science at Ohio State University. Ibrahim had attended high school in a local urban school in Columbus. In speaking about his schooling experiences, he explained to me how being pushed to perform in school differed in comparison with schooling in Somalia, where his school had enforced corporal punishment:
Interviewer: It's hard to be motivated to learn in this system?

Ibrahim: Here—you can do whatever. It's hard. Our parents, they don't know the language. They don't talk to the teachers. Basically, the students come home and do whatever. Parents don't know anything about how the kids are doing in school.

Interviewer: Doesn't the school translate student's grades and send them directly to their parents?

Ibrahim: They do that, but it goes through the mail, right? (he smirks) Kids can just get to them first and throw them out.

Interviewer: Do they have translators who make calls to home?

Ibrahim: I don't think so. (interview April 14, 2005)

My data also suggests that because of Somali immigrants’ relatively recent arrival to the United States, there is a lack of available role models and mentors for Somali youth who have graduated high school and matriculated into higher education. During my interview with Abdisalam, I asked him what he thought were the largest factors resulting in decision of some Somali students to drop out. Like Ibrahim, Abdisalam also described it in terms of motivation:

I think one of the biggest issues is there's no motivation. There is no one they can look up to. When I was in Somalia, I was the number one student because I remember seeing others do well and everybody notices. There's no motivation like that in America because most people they (the students) see go to work. So they think that work is better than school. (interview, March 11, 2005)

The value placed on entering into the workforce is also often based in familial obligation and may be the reason why students to drop out or are prohibited from studying at a post-secondary institution when they graduate. Relating back to my interview with Ibrahim, I was somewhat surprised to hear
how difficult he thought it was to be motivated in high school because he was a college student enrolled in an extremely demanding major. When further questioned about why he decided to go on to college, he explained, "I'm from Somalia, you know. And after the civil war, we didn't get any kind of education, and here I am and I have to take advantage of this opportunity" (interview April 14, 2005). After he said this I asked him if most of his friends from high school went to college, to which he replied no. In explaining the different circumstances that allowed him to go on to college, he said:

Basically, like, because of the civil war, Somalia has no central government. So the people in Somalia, they need help from outside—any help they can get. There's no more jobs. They can not survive. So say, one family comes here and they have like, let's say a lot of younger men who can go and work. They go and work jobs, so that they can send their money back home so the rest of their family can survive. When we came here, we go to high school so we can get jobs, right? So we get one or two jobs and send money back. So most of my friends, they were eager to get jobs to send the money back home. So there's few people who get higher education. Some people have other family who get jobs, then they can go. (interview April 14, 2005)

For females, familial obligations that act as barriers to completing high school or going on to post-secondary education often center around on the high value placed as on marriage in addition to her role in her parents household (as discussed earlier). As is true for many Muslims from kin-based patriarchal societies, women gain a considerable amount of status when they get married (Charrad, 2005). While some Somali cultural groups and families may encourage females to get married at a young age and others may not, the high
value placed on marriage and on women’s role in the domestic unit may result in the low value placed on academic credentials for the students themselves (Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003).

Social Networks and Cultural Dispositions Promoting Somali College Students’ Success

The previous section was primarily concerned with potential barriers to Somali students’ success primarily based in Somali youths’ desire to fit in with their peers, conflicts between roles in school and at home, and the low level of communication between parents and educators. This next section will focus on how high achieving Somali students at Ohio State have overcome these barriers while successfully negotiating their multiple roles in the home and educational setting. The primary findings in this section will show that these students have made meaning of the educational process as investments in their transnational communities. The adaptive nature to which students have called upon and created sources of cultural and social capital throughout the process will also be discussed.

Before exploring these topics, I would first like to draw attention to the fact that the only life experiences that the four college students whom I interviewed shared, were that they were Muslim, of Somali ethnic background, and were members in Ohio State’s Somali Students Association and Muslim Students Association. There were vast differences in the levels of their parents’
educational background and social status. With regard to clothing, all females that I came to know through the Somali Students Association wore some type of headscarf (either to solely wrap the hair or as the longer version of the hijab that comes past the waist) with no incorporation of hip-hop brand labels. Males dressed similarly, typically wearing polo or button-down shirt and jeans—also with no incorporation of hip-hop labels on their clothing.

Factors Affecting Students Decision to Attend College

When discussing what made them go on to higher education, students’ desires to meet the expectations and desires of their families were central themes. The educational autobiography of Liban, a senior biology (premed) student at Ohio State made this point particularly clear while also locating the family as a support network contributing to his success. After leaving Somalia, Liban’s family moved to Egypt for several years, where Liban finished high school. Upon moving to Seattle, Washington, Liban and the majority of his siblings of working age could only find employment in various ‘labor jobs’. In explaining the types of jobs he was working, Liban said, “I worked for a company that built equipment, like ah, construction equipment and I worked for a gas station. I worked for….you name it, I worked for it (he laughs). I worked for McDonalds, I worked for Dairy Queen, and ah, Subway” (interview March 7, 2005). His family decided to relocate to Columbus after his mother spoke with a
close friend’s daughter (also Somali) who was pursuing her Ph.D. at Ohio State. At the time, he explained,

My mother was frustrated that we were all doing labor jobs because she wanted her kids to become professionals and to go to school. And she told us of what we were doing in Seattle, ‘no, this isn’t what I want for you.’ And we were all frustrated at the same time. So, my older sister got here before we did, like um, two months, and she got into Ohio State, and we all moved to Columbus. We were working jobs, but at the same time we were all going through the process of, supporting eachother, and learning stuff like school. (interview March 7, 2005)

Liban’s oldest sister remained in Seattle with her husband and children and worked as an accountant. However of the rest of his four sisters and three brothers, all have either graduated from Ohio State, are currently attending, or plan to attend the university upon graduation from high school.

In the process of supporting one another into going to college, Liban explained:

My parents are very, very, you know, have influenced my siblings about the value of education. They care a lot about education. My father didn’t have a college degree, but he went to an institute.... My mother, she always wanted to be a doctor (he smiles)” (interview March 7, 2005).

He explained that his mother was accepted into the University of Mogadishu, but she did not attend because of the encouragement of her grandfather (who also wanted to be a doctor) to wait to go medical school. At the time, they were building a medical school, but she then had kids and was unable to attend. I asked him if his mother was proud that he was intending to go on to medical school and he continued to smile and repeatedly say ‘yes.’
During my interview with Sahra, a sophomore student at Ohio State, majoring in English and international studies, she also explained her reason for attending college in comparable terms. Sahra’s parents were from Mogadishu, but she was born in the United States and raised in a suburb of Toronto where she attended a privileged public school that she described as “multicultural”. When asked what influenced her decision to go on to higher education, she said:

Um, well both of my parents went to university. It wasn’t even an option not to go. Not to say that I was pressured, but um....I guess with my ambitions, I wouldn’t be happy with myself if I didn’t go to university. Not to say that there weren’t other options, but, um, I always wanted to go. My dad always talked about me getting a Ph.D. while I was growing up. (interview April 21, 2005)

For Sahra and Liban, family expectations were a large factor in their decision to go on to higher education. Interestingly, of the two female students who responded to the survey, they also named their family as a source that helped them go to college.

“Giving Back”: Education as Reciprocal Investments in Community

Beyond wanting to meet their families’ expectations, Somali students at Ohio State often related the educational process and academic achievement as an investment towards the needs of their community as well as their family. The reference to investment was a common theme throughout my study. In her presentation at the P-12 Project’s professional development conference, Dr. Bashir-Ali (Bashir-Ali & Hancock, 2005) explained to attendees that she has been in the United States for 30 years and she doesn’t have savings because she is
obligated to invest in her community. She said, “if I invest in the community, I will be taken care of when I’m older” (field notes April 27, 2005). This was also true of the student’s choices to go on to higher education. Referring to my earlier conversation with Ibrahim about his friends motivation to enter straight into the workforce in order to send remittances to their family remaining in Somalia, Ibrahim explained his choice to go on to college in terms of an investment. He said, “I’m in higher education and after a few years, I’ll make higher money” (interview April 14, 2005).

Liban also included similar references to investment and giving back to the community while further discussing the reasons why he was at school studying to be a doctor. He said:

I must study first and then I can help others. I can’t help others if I don’t have training. I have to do something on my own first. But, I want to help not only Somalis, I wish to help Americans too because I will be an American in the future. So, I want to give back. (interview March 7, 2005)

Later he also added, “In America, I come here, I go to school here, I take financial aid here….I feel that I have to give back something when I graduate” (interview March 7, 2005). This central theme of reciprocity was also found in each one of my interviews and both of my survey responses.

The students that I worked with at Ohio State also related their academic and career pursuits to the future development needs of Somalia. When asked what influenced his choice to study pharmacy, Ibrahim explained, “Pharmacy (pause). Ah, in the third world…. pharmacists are the most important jobs you
can get—to provide medicines for people. There are not a lot of doctors and pharmacists there. Even in the United States, there are a lot needed” (interview April 14, 2005). In saying this, Ibrahim explained that no matter if he returns to Somalia for some period of time or stays in the United States permanently, his time spent at the university will enable him to enter a career that will contribute to the needs of his local and global communities.

The two female students involved in this study were also made clear connections between their choice of study and the welfare of Somalia. The Vice President of the Somali Students Association, Sagal, who studies English and Biology at Ohio State, explained to me that she was studying those subjects because of her interest in working in Somalia in the area of human rights and public health (field notes January 25, 2005). Sahra also said that she chose to double major in English and international studies because, “My favorite subject in high school was English and writing. That’s what I enjoy doing. But I took international studies because I wanted to apply it somehow to, um, international development. So I guess that it’s a way for me to apply my skills” (Interview April 21, 2005). Later in the interview, she continued, “one of the reasons actually that I got into international development was because if I ever did go back to Somalia and the government was reinstated, I wanted to have something to offer and something to give back to Somalis” (interview April 21, 2005).

The explicit cultural, religious, and sociopolitical basis of these students’ choice of study became ever more apparent after I attended the Somali Student’s
Association's presidential debates. The debates were organized so that all students who had paid their membership fees for the next academic year could submit questions by secret ballot in order to inform their voting decision the following week. The moderator for the session (a friend of many of the students from the Muslim Students Association) would then ask the same question to each of the three males who were representing themselves as candidates for the office. Out of the sixty-seven undergraduate Somali students who attend Ohio State, approximately thirty-five students attended the meeting. Before the debates commenced, each student in the audience took turns introducing themselves and their major. Only one student introduced themselves as "undecided" in their major while the rest of the room was overrepresented primarily by microbiology (premed) students, followed by pharmacy, then nursing, engineering, English and political science. The chart below illustrates the concentration of Somali students in majors is allied medical professions and biology as well as in engineering.
Table 3: Enrollment of Students with Citizenship of Somalia

When I referenced my interview data for the reasons why students were studying these fields, I realized that all of their reasons related to public health and national development. Because of this, I do not find the overrepresentation of these majors to be merely coincidental. Although some of the students may be studying these subject areas for reasons that deviate from this pattern, I believe this finding stems from students’ past experiences of conflict and their concern for the welfare of family members remaining in Somalia. Because of these concerns, when students chose a major they tend to transplant a cultural logic of education that places a higher value on careers that would serve a greater good for their family and community over prospects for personal financial gain or prestige. In reviewing my data, I must also note that the only student I
interacted with who was studying business responded in her survey that she intends to “get a job gain experience then move to the Middle East somewhere” (survey response May 3, 2005). Because of her desire to leave the United States, it can also be assumed that this student has transnational loyalties that supercede potential success in American capitalist culture.

**Outreach with Younger Peers as Investments in Preserving the Somali Cultural Logic**

Somali students' personal investment in the needs of the community also is also enacted through their large concern over the religious, academic, and social welfare of their younger peers. This also became particularly clear through my time spent with members of the Somali Students Association, many of whom were also volunteers in the proficiency-tutoring group. During the presidential debates, the expressed interest in providing outreach to high school students was also a prevalent theme. The first question to which the candidates responded, 'Why are you running for office?,' received varied responses about ideas for the organization's future. However, there was one striking similarity between all of the responses: Each candidate prioritized the need to create a "network" between SSA members and Somali students in high schools. Two additional questions out of the eight total posed to the candidates focused on problems that young Somalis face and how to help them. Interestingly, each

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candidate responded to the questions with action-oriented ideas for outreach targeted towards Somali high school students.

When responding to this question, the three candidates shared common themes in their responses. Two of the candidates spoke of the need to recruit high school students and Somalis students enrolled in community colleges to Ohio State in order to strengthen the Somali Community at the university. All candidates additionally wanted to create network of available volunteers that would “offer resources about OSU” to high school students that would help them transition into higher education and into the large university setting (recorded response, field notes April 8, 2005). The volunteer network would also be used as tutors for local Somali K-12 school students who needed additional academic help.

In the process of helping young Somalis and fellow students, the Somali Student Association has become a social venue where Somali students can promote their collective nationality and religious identities within the community and on Ohio State’s campus. The questions posed to the candidates and their responses support this finding as well. One candidate defined the Somali Student Association as having two primary purposes: To help one another academically (through knowledge exchange) and to promote Somali nationality. Another candidate later added, “the Somali Student Association represents the country of Somalia.” Because of this, he wanted to work with Ohio State Somali faculty members in the future to create a ‘Somali Day’ on campus. The
candidate also wanted to work with the African Youth League and the Muslim Student Association to bring Somali intellectuals to campus and to host a dinner during Ramadan. In focusing on the national and social aspect of the Somali culture, this student also wanted to create a Somali Students Association soccer team.

These themes ran throughout the entire session but were most poignant when another attendee asked how they will you promote religious affiliation and help young Somalis on the street. In answering this question, one candidate highlighted the need to help these students achieve in high school, so they will not be on the streets. All three candidates also wanted to strengthen the relationship between the SSA and the Muslim Student Association in planning both outreach related programming and social events, because as one candidate stated, “everyone needs a reminder sometime about religion,” and he also added, “if you can not help yourself, you can not help others” (recorded response, fieldnotes April 8, 2005). The final candidate to speak also addressed the importance of incorporating religion in all efforts, because he urged, “We are all Muslims. We can not leave our religion. If we do, we leave our identity” (recorded response, field notes April 8, 2005).

Abdisalam Aato’s (2005) most recently completed film, Gabar Haloo Doono (Find him a Wife) also hopes to provide a medium to promote national and religious identities among younger Somalis. The main character in the film became a millionaire after living in the United States. One day his mother from
Somalia shows up on his doorstep unannounced and, through a series of comical scenes pressures her son into finding a wife. His friends make up a flyer and start interviewing American girls from all ethnic backgrounds as potential wives for him, but he wants to marry a Somali woman. At the end of the movie, he ends up falling in love with an American-born Somali woman. Abdisalam explains the reason why he did this:

And the girl, she's Somali but she doesn't speak Somali. So the reason that I did that was, ah, to get the younger generation to show their, you know, Somali national background. She's born here, but she knows everything about Somalia. She knows better than people that are Somali—these guys speak Somali but they don't know nothing. (he pauses) So, I just wanted to show people, you know, it don't matter if you speak Somali or not, but what matters is the culture, you know? (interview March 11, 2005).

Cultural Resilience in Combating Moral Decline

Concerns for the resilience of younger Somali's national and religious identities were overwhelmingly associated with the decline in moral values that they associated with assimilation. In a quote referencing his project, Rajo (Hope), earlier provided in this paper, Abdisalam related 'Americanization' with Somali youth's developing lack of respect for elders. Ibrahim expressed the same sentiment when discussing the changes in family life for Somalis who have moved to the United States. In his words, "The first thing you realize is children are changing. Like, they talk back to their parents, you know. I think, like, they're losing respect for older people. That's the major difference here." In further developing his thoughts he said, "and then the culture is changing in some ways."
A lot of people are learning from one culture while being part of another culture. You’re stuck in the middle. So you’re going to be like, ‘is this guy crazy?’” (interview April 14, 2005).

**Words of Advice**

The central theme of concern for Somali youth in the United States by all participants involved in this study emerged early on in the data collection process. Further, the outreach related actions of the Somali Students Association and the partners of Ool Studios seemed to be geared towards preserving and maintaining the Somali cultural logic compelling youth to take on the performed identities needed to make personal investments in the success of the future development of Somalia, and the Somali community in Columbus and throughout the Somali diaspora. Because of this, the last question that I asked Sahra, Abdisalam, Ibrahim, and Liban during our interview was, “Knowing what you know now, what advice they would offer a young Somali moving to the United States?” For this final section I would like to list each student’s responses.

**Sahra:**

Well, I guess that I would tell them, even thought the first instinct is to assimilate, to try to fight that instinct. I would say in many instances assimilation is accompanied by a loss of moral values.

Second, at first when they immigrant here, talking from personal experience with my friends, the language barrier seems almost
unsurpassable and sometimes people don’t value their education and they just want to go into labor because they don’t think that they have to do anything better. But, I guess I would tell them to ignore the discouragement they receive from people who don’t know any better and to continue to work hard and to keep their religion most important of all. (interview April 21, 2005)

Abdisalam:

Obviously one thing, ah…When you come here, have a plan. You have to work as planned. You’re going to have to do something—a goal, you know. You can be anything you want to be. If you are here and want to be a doctor—in America, you can be a doctor. But, you gotta have something in your mind. That’s the good thing about America cause all of the other Somalis in Europe or Australia, they don’t have that opportunity. So we have to take advantage of this. This is the best place that we can be—in America. (interview March 11, 2005)

Ibrahim:

Firstly, I would say, if you can finish high school in less than four years, do that. I would also tell them to always do extra studying by yourself—it’s the only way you can catch up and survive.

Second, don’t leave your culture. Your culture is your identity and… stick with who you are always. There’s no way you can completely adopt the other culture, so have people respect you for who you are. (interview April 14, 2005)

Liban:

I would tell them to build their future so that they can give back later. They have to work hard. They have to…ah, a lot of people back home, you see these houses, you know, like cars and everything. You think you just get these things, but that’s not true. When you come to the US from Africa, you have to work hard, you have to learn the system. You have to learn exactly what you’re dealing with.
I would definitely encourage them to, um, know the society, know American culture. You have to know the language and the culture very well. It’s very important. I would encourage people to take classes in law, you know like, legal procedures class because I think it’s very helpful—it protects your rights. (interview March 7, 2005).
CHAPTER 5
Conclusions: Implications for Educators of Somali Youth

Table 4: Forms of Cultural Capital Specific to the Somali Community of Columbus, Ohio
Despite the existing linguistic and cultural barriers that many Somalis face in their ascendency through primary and secondary education, there exists a great deal of cultural and social capital within their communities that Somali students can call upon throughout the educational process. Much of the social and cultural capital of the community directly relates to religious beliefs and close bonds that students have to their extended families and strong sense of community solidarity. In the above diagram, I highlighted the themes that emerged in this study that directly relate to the transmission and acquisition of cultural capital through its various forms in the Somali community in their transnational context of Columbus, Ohio. Often these various forms of cultural capital can be at conflict with the dominant forms of legitimized capital in the United States, as discussed earlier in the sections on the negotiation of peer identities and existing cultural disjunctions between roles in the home and school.

However, what the findings of this study have shown is that Somali students at Ohio State have been able to successfully transplant a socio-cultural logic of investments in community in their appraisals of their time spent in education in the American K-12 and university systems. It seems that these students and other community members, such as the partners of Olol Studios, hope to maintain this cultural logic among their younger Somali peers. With respect to religion, there exist tenets compelling followers to do good deeds, which is often translated by students to as the need to give back to their communities and to help others. As Liban explained, “if you study, that’s an
Islam thing to do. If you help people, that’s an Islam thing to do” (interview March 7, 2005). When these morals are combined with the lived experiences that brought many of these students to this country as refugees, students often want to invest their time in academia towards pursuing a career that would enable them to be an investment in the promotion of their local communities and transnational context.

Students, caregivers, and educators alike can utilize existing sources of social and cultural capital in the community throughout the educational process. Educators can help students and parents make lineages between their time spent in education and their personal, familial, and communal goals. The first step in this process is that educators must become familiar with the public aspects of the cultural and religious background of that many of the students share. However, they must also get to know the particular circumstances of the life experiences of each individual student and their families. Because language barriers commonly exist, parents may only have the perspective of their children about what is expected in school. Meeting and talking to them will help open channels about the expectations of the child in their roles at home and in the school. This process might also help illuminate the child’s developing belief system and aspirations, which can then be applied to their classroom goals.

If language barriers do exist and there are inadequate resources within the school to assist in communication, educators can contact local community organizations and associations like the Somali Students Association who might
be willing to help mediate these issues. Educators should also connect with similar types of student organizations and associations at the university and regional level if they suspect that their students lack the example of peer mentors who went on to higher education in the United States. Potential volunteers can also contribute ideas about resources needed by the students and their parents about requirements related to applying to post-secondary institutions, applying for scholarships and financial aid.

With the gender expectations of many Somali females in mind, if a student places a high value on their role as a future wife and mother that ought to be received positively. However, educators can make connections between her role in the home and future child rearing practices and education. For instance, even in privileged communities where children have access to a wealth of educational resources, there continues to be a positive relationship between the level of education of the mother and the level of academic performance of her child (Demerath, 2005). Although higher education does not have a place in the values of every student, every child should be held to the expectation of graduating high school. As Dr. Bashir-Ali stated (Bashir-Ali & Hancock, 2005), "if these kids can survive war, refugee camps, relocation...trust me, they can handle high school." The students involved in this study further exemplify the ability of Somali students to excel in academic settings by making relevant connections of the educational process to their past, present, and future social contexts.
Appendix A: Interview Questions for Somali Students at Ohio State

How old are you?

What part of Somalia are you from? (urban-rural?)

What was the area like?

Did you attend school in Somalia?

What was it like?

How long ago did you move to North America? (Where?)

Did you attend school here?

Can you describe your educational experiences?

What was transitioning into the American school system like for you?

Can you describe the school that you attended?

Were there many other Somali students at your school?

What did you most like about school? What did you most dislike?

What did you think about your American peers?

Did you participate in many school activities?

Did you like your teachers?

What did you think of the rules of the school?

Were you treated fairly at school?

Do you have any particularly fond memories of school?
What made you decide to go on to college? What made you decide to enroll at Ohio State in particular?

What is your major? What influenced your decision to study ________?

How would you describe your attitude towards school and attaining a career?

What are your plans for after you leave Ohio State?

Can you tell me a bit about your family?

Have you seen many changes in family life since leaving Somalia? (yours or others)

Can you describe the Somali community in Columbus?

Are the daily lives and traditions of Somalis in Columbus much like they were in Somalia?

Do you ever go to the Global or International Mall? What do those places mean to you?

What does it mean to be a member of the Somali community in Columbus?

What types of community activities do you participate in? (Do you enjoy being involved?)

What is expected of you as a member of the community?

Do you feel as though there are particular expectations of you as a male/female? (How do your experiences differ from males/females?)

Are expectations and rules different for males and females from what they were like in Somalia?

What is your life like?

If you were writing a list describing who you are, what are some of the words that you might use?

What qualities do you feel that it is most important that a person possess?

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a young adult moving from Somalia to the United States?
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Oloé Studios (makers of the film, Rajo):

Can you tell me about yourselves?  
Did you attend school in the United States?

How did you become interested in owning a record shop and making films?

Can you tell me a bit about the mission of Oloé Studios?

How did you decide on the title Rajo (Hope)?

What was your goal in creating the film?  
What story did you want to tell?

As I watched the film, I noticed that Ayan occasionally wore a guniffino dress, but none of the female characters wore a hijab. Is there any particular reason why?

In the film, there are concurrent stories about young Somali males being pulled into lifestyles of crime and violence. Does crime and violence play a significant role in the lives of young Somali males? (How?)

It seems as though Dhaqane is looking after young Hakim throughout the film. Can you please explain what takes place in the conversations between Dhaqane and Hakim throughout the film?

At the end of the film, we are told that Hakim realizes all that is important in life and graduates from high school with a 4.0 GPA. How important do you feel school achievement is for Somali youth in Columbus?

Can you tell me about the Somali community in Columbus?

What does it mean to you to be a member of the community?

Do you feel as though there are particular expectations of you as males?

What qualities do you feel that it is most important for a person to possess?
Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to a young Somali individual who has just arrived in Columbus from Somalia?
Appendix C: Grounded Survey

Academic Survey for Members of the Somali Student Association

How old are you?

Are you a male or female?

How long ago did you move to North America?

Did you attend school in North America?
  • If so, where?
    • Was your school district urban, suburban, or rural?
    • What sources and/or people helped you graduate from high school?

What sources and/or people helped you go to college?

Did you attend Ohio State right after attending high school or moving to the United States?
  • If not, what did you do in the meantime?
  • If not, did you attend another University prior to OSU?
    o If yes, which university did you attend previously?
    o If yes, what influenced your decision to transfer to OSU?

What is your major?

How old were you when you decided what you were going to major in?
What sources, people, and/or experiences influenced your decision to study your particular major?

What do you plan to do with your degree?

Do you work while attending school?

Were you required to take ED T&L 106, 107, 108.01 or ENG 110 at Ohio State?

- If so, did you pass these courses the first time that you enrolled in them?

- If not, what were some of the issues that hindered your success in the course?

*Please send all survey submissions to Hillary Hardt at hardt.5@osu.edu*
References


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