

US IMMIGRATION POLICIES: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS WITH FAMILIES

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the  
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US IMMIGRATION POLICIES: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL  
STUDENTS WITH FAMILIES

presented by Vida Nana Ama Bonney

a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

I thank God for bringing me this far. I dedicate this work to all the individuals who have been there through the many ups and downs of this journey. To my husband and ever-supportive partner, Edwin, thank you for the countless words of affirmation and pragmatic support that you provided for me through this process. To Teddy, my ever-present cheerleader, thank you for your child-like faith and words of encouragement for a process you have not yet fully understood. To Bella, my baby girl who is still exploring her world, your presence in our lives has been a constant motivation for me. I also dedicate this work to my mother and my sisters, whose constant prayers and support have pushed me on. To my extended family, especially to my in-laws, Rev. Mrs. Bonney and the late Dr. Bonney, thank you for believing in me. Finally, this work is dedicated to all international students and their families. Your experiences are valid and important.

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## Abstract

Research studies about international students have often focused on the students and their reasons for migration (Abuosi & Abor, 2015), the process of adjustment to the new context (Yeh & Inose, 2003), and the factors that facilitate adjustment (Chai et al. 2020; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Social support facilitates adjustment and family is one of the main sources of support for international students (Aldawsari et al., 2018). International students often migrate with their spouses and/or children as dependents (US Department of Homeland Security, 2021), yet there is limited research on the lived experiences of international students and their families. US immigration policies impact the experiences of international students living with their families in the US. As such, to fully understand the lived experiences of international students with family, in this study I employ life course theory (Elder, 1998) and hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach to explore the ways in which international students and their families make sense of US immigration policies related to their visa statuses and the effects of that understanding on their individual and familial life courses. The findings show that although there are various sources to obtain information about US immigration policies, the understanding that international students and their families have about what it means to have a particular visa type in the US comes from living through the opportunities and constraints of their visa statuses, and the choices and decisions that they make as individuals and as a family unit comes from their understanding of their visa status. Implications of these findings are also discussed in this paper.

*Keywords:* international students, families, sense-making, US immigration policies, visa status, life course theory, hermeneutic phenomenology



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

In 2019, international students made up 5.5% of the total number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the US and contributed \$44.7 billion to the US economy in 2018 (Institute of International Education, 2019). Even though the COVID -19 pandemic led to a slight decrease in this population, 4.6% of the current total enrollment of students at institutions of higher education in the US are international students (Silver, 2021). International students contributed \$39 billion to the US economy in 2020. As they integrate into life in the US and contribute to their new society, the lives of international students are shaped by US immigration policies through the provision of opportunities and constraints on their activities as well as those of their dependents. For example, except for minors who need to be enrolled in schools to meet compulsory basic education requirements, individuals listed as dependents of international students with specific visa categories (e.g., F-1) are not allowed to enroll as full-time students or pursue paid employment in the US. However, dependents are allowed to engage in part-time non-degree eligible studies and engage in volunteer work without financial compensation (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.).

Research about international students has often focused on the reasons for migration (Abuosi & Abor, 2015) and the ways international students adjust to life in a new context (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Even though we know that social support influences the individual outcomes of international students (Chai et al. 2020; Yeh & Inose, 2003) and family is a key source of social support for students (Aldawsari et al., 2018), we do not know much about the experiences of international students who migrate with their families. Given that the experiences of international students in the US are facilitated by

US immigration policies that influence the nature and extent of their interactions and activities within the new context (e.g., professional, and academic development, financial benefits), it is important to understand how international students and their families make sense of these policies and the effects of that understanding on their lived experiences.

The purpose of the proposed study was to learn more about the lived experiences of international college students with families by exploring international students and their families' understanding of US immigration policies, and how this understanding shapes their own experiences (e.g., academic, professional, and social) as well as their family processes. Family processes refer to the practices or actions taken to ensure that the family unit can adapt and adjust to new situations (Samani, 2011). These processes might include changes in family roles, relationships, and dynamics. Through interviews with international students and their families (spouses and/or children), I employed the life course theory (Elder, 1998; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) as a lens to learn more about international students' and their families' understanding of the existing US immigration policy and how it influences their individual and family life. The life course theory was beneficial for this study as it posits that the interaction between societal structures and individual (in)actions shape one's trajectory in life.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Prior research on international students has discussed the reasons they migrate (Abuosi & Abor, 2015) as well as the process of adjustment that they go through in the new context (De Araujo, 2011). However, even though non-immigrant records from the US Department of Homeland Security show that there were 180,084 dependents of international students who migrated to the US between 2018 and 2020 (Department of Homeland Security, 2021), there is not much research that has focused on the experiences of international students with families.

Understanding the lived experiences of international students with families is important because they are often faced with unique challenges as they are bound by immigration policies that not only influence their own experiences but also the experiences of their spouses and children. For example, the Department of Homeland Security website contains clearly outlined guidelines for the dependents of international students, and, specifically for the F-1 visa, these guidelines include limitations on their ability to work in the US while listed as dependents (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). The inability of a dependent to engage in paid employment creates financial strain on the international student who then becomes the primary financial provider for the family in addition to ensuring that they stay on track with their academic duties and meet the necessary benchmarks to maintain their international student visa status (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). It is important to consider the role and experiences of these family members as well because their presence and shared experiences in the US also influence the lived experiences of international students through their shared lives and resources.

## **What We Know About the International Students' Experiences**

International students migrate for several reasons. Some individuals migrate due to a desire to build or increase social, cultural, and economic capital in their home countries and the global world (Abuosi & Abor, 2015; Efonayi & Piguet, 2014). Others migrate to pursue higher education due to limited academic opportunities or high costs of tertiary-level education in their home countries (Kritz, 2015). For international students with families (spouses and children), they may also migrate due to a desire to provide better opportunities for their children by pursuing higher education to later obtain better career and employment opportunities (Abuosi & Abor, 2015).

Regardless of the reasons for migration, there is a process of adjustment that occurs when the international students and their families encounter the host culture. This process may involve an adjustment of, or a struggle to adjust one's way of life to incorporate the values, way of life, and perspectives of the host culture (Lueck & Wilson, 2010; Sam & Berry, 2010). This process of adjustment is often stressful, especially in cases where the culture of origin is very different from the host culture and there is a perceived lack of social support for the international student and their family in the new context (de Araujo, 2011; Sam & Berry, 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Research suggests that social support from family, friends, and others with whom the students perceive some form of shared similarities is vital for the well-being and successful adjustment of international students (Aldawsari et al., 2018).

International students face several stressors during the process of acculturation to a new culture. These stressors, often include limited English proficiency, lack of social support, perceived or experienced discrimination, and inconsistencies between

expectations and realities of life in the host country (Berry, 1997; de Araujo, 2011; Sam & Berry, 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Such acculturative stressors can negatively influence the academic, sociocultural, and cross-cultural adjustment of international students (de Araujo, 2011; Chai et al., 2020).

De Araujo (2011) distinguishes between sociocultural adjustment (i.e., psychological, and emotional adjustment to the new culture) and adjustment in the academic setting. For international students with families, their involvement in academic and sociocultural domains is often blurred because their emotions and attitudes from one domain often cross over to other domains (Chai et al, 2020). There is a bidirectional relation between their family life and their adjustment in academic and sociocultural domains. Support from their social networks (e.g., family members) is likely to foster their success in academic domains as social support fosters adaptation to the new culture (Chai et al., 2020). However, when international students are faced with academic pressures to do well in school and financial pressures to be the primary income earners for their families within the constraint of US immigration policies, the family dynamics and processes can be negatively affected, which can strain the student's social support system.

Social support is also important for the psychological well-being of international students (Yeh & Inose, 2003), and family is an integral source of support for international students. In a qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of 10 international students (9 females and 1 male) who had left their families (spouses and children) behind in their home countries to study in a foreign country, Harvey and colleagues (2017) found that the process of moving to another country and leaving their families behind led to

feelings of emotional turmoil (e.g. loneliness, isolation, conflict or guilt about leaving family behind), underlying feelings of living in negativity (e.g., negative thoughts of being unsuccessful in their studies and feeling guilty), and the burden of the expectation to cope and be successful despite these difficulties (e.g., not being able to discuss their anxieties or worries with others because of the expectations to do well). For international students who are fortunate enough to migrate with their families, the presence of their family members can help mitigate those negative effects and facilitate the process of adjustment to their new socio-cultural context. In their phenomenological study, Harvey, Robinson, and Welch (2017) explored the lived experiences of international students with families by interviewing the students. However, in their study, family members who are known to serve as a major source of social support for international students were not living with the student in the host country.

### **The Importance of the Lived Experiences of International Students and Their Families**

Although there are various studies on stressors that international students may face, international students with families are often faced with unique challenges because, in addition to coping with the demands of studying in a new context, they also have family roles and responsibilities to fulfill with little to no social network of support in the host country (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2018). Together with their families, the international student's ability to navigate all these different roles is influenced by the immigration policies by which they must abide to continue their stay and studies in the host culture. To have a clearer picture of how immigration policies can shape the lived experiences of international students with families, it is necessary to explore the international students'

and their families' understanding of immigration policies and how this understanding affects their choices and lived experiences.

### **Specific US Immigration Policies Related to International Students**

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, also known as the McCarran-Walter Act, is a system of policies that includes details specific to the issuance, requirements, and expectations for immigration to the US (Office of the Historian, n.d.). International students are classified under the non-immigrant status by the Department of Homeland Security (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.s). Non-immigrants are foreigners who are permitted to come into the US for temporary stays related to visits for business or pleasure, academic or vocational study, temporary employment, among others (Department of Homeland Security, n.d., Non-immigrant Admissions). Depending on the reason for non-immigrant travel to the US, there are restrictions on the amount of time that the individual can stay in the US.

International students are typically classified under the F-1, J-1, or M-1 visa categories, and their spouses and children are classified under the F-2, J-2, or M-2 categories depending on the status of the student (Department Of Homeland Security, n.d., Non-Immigrant Classes of Admission). F-1 visa holders should be enrolled as full-time students in an accredited academic institution (e.g., a college or university) that can grant them a degree, diploma, or certificate at the end of their studies. M-1 visa holders should be enrolled in vocational or non-academic programs other than language training programs (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). J-1 visas are given to exchange visitors who are often enrolled in specific educational programs such as Fulbright as part of the Department of Homeland Security's international education program (Department

of Homeland Security, n.d., Non-Immigrant Classes of Admission). J-1 visa holders are expected to obtain a majority of their funding (51%) from external sources rather than personal funds (UC Berkeley International Office, 2022). These visa categories have implications for what international students and their families can and cannot do while temporarily living in the US. For example, during the first academic year, F-1 students can only work on campus, and after the first year, they can engage in off-campus employment only if it meets one of the three practical training requirements for international students. M-1 students can only engage in practical training after they complete their studies (Department of Homeland Security, n.d., Students and Employment). J-1 students are required to obtain a work permit from their program sponsor to work on or off campus in the US (UC Berkeley International Office, 2022). For this study, I focused on students under the F-1 and J-1 visa categories because these are the most common visa types for international students enrolled in universities in the US, with the F-1 visa being noted as the most common type of international student visa issued in the US (Department Of Homeland Security, n.d., Non-Immigrant Classes of Admission; UC Berkeley International Office, 2022). Table 1 illustrates the differences between these two student visa categories.

**Table 1**

***Comparison of F-1 and J-1 Visas***

	F-1	J1
<b>Funding</b>	No restrictions on the source of financial support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>51% of financial support must be from the sponsoring entity rather than from the student's personal funds and the student must show financial support for the</li> </ul>



		entire length of the program when requesting the initial document.
<b>Work Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curricular Practical Training (CPT) employment permission is available for off-campus jobs/internships related to the program of study.</li> <li>• Optional Practical Training (OPT) employment permission is available for 12 months after the degree is earned. A job offer is not required for 12-Month OPT.</li> <li>• OPT extension for an additional 24 months can be obtained for STEM majors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic training is available for off-campus jobs/internships related to your course of study.</li> </ul> <p>Additional possibilities: Maximum of 18 months of Academic Training (or the length of the J program in the US, whichever is <i>less</i>) may be used during and after your studies. An extension for up to 18 months is possible for post-doctoral research. Off-campus work during the degree program reduces the total period of Academic Training available after program completion.</p>
<b>Employment opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No work permit required for on-campus employment</li> <li>• Work permit required for off-campus employment after the first year. Permit obtained through the international office of the university and/or USCIS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any employment on- or off-campus requires a work permit from the program sponsor.</li> </ul>
<b>Dependents</b>	<p>F-2 dependents (spouse, child) are not eligible for any work permit.</p>	<p>J-2 dependent (spouse, child) work permission is available, but not guaranteed. Income from the dependent's employment may be used to support the family's customary recreational and cultural activities and related travel, among other things. Employment will not be authorized if this income is needed to support the J-1 primary status holder.</p>
	<p>F-2 spouses and children may enroll in academic programs for <i>less than a full course of study</i> at an SEVP-approved school.</p> <p>F-2 spouses and children may participate in studies that are "avocational or recreational in nature" (i.e., non-academic hobbies and recreational studies) up to and including full-time. F-2 children may attend full-</p>	<p>J-2 dependents are eligible to study part-time or full-time in the U.S.</p>

	time elementary or secondary school (kindergarten-12th grade).	
<b>Other Policies</b>	No *Two-Year Home Country Physical Presence Requirement No **12-Month Bar	May be subject to Two-Year home country physical requirement  May be subject to the 12-month bar.

*\*Two-Year Home Country Physical Presence Requirement – Some J-1 visitors may have to return to their home countries for two years or obtain a waiver before being eligible for H (temporary employment), L (intra-company transfer), K (fiancé(e)) or Permanent Resident (Green Card) visa categories. \*\*12-Month Bar – If the current program exceeds 6-months, J-1 scholars may not engage in consecutive professor or research scholar programs for twelve months after their current program ends. That is, there should be twelve months between the end of one program and the start of another.*

*Table 1 is an adaptation of the F-1 and J-1 Visa comparison table from the UC Berkeley International Office Website:*

[https://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/students/new/fj\\_compared](https://internationaloffice.berkeley.edu/students/new/fj_compared)

## **How International Students Gain Access to Information About Immigration Policies**

Most universities and institutions of higher education in the US provide new students with an orientation during the first few weeks of school. This orientation help students learn about the institution and how to navigate the new space. For international students, the institutions they will be attending may have a website where the students can find details about how to navigate their arrival and stay in this new space. For example, universities with an International Center may have a resource person students can speak with or a website where they provide students with a checklist or guidelines to prepare for their arrival. (e.g., for the University of Missouri, <https://international.missouri.edu/iss/new-students/arrival-checklists/>). Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security website (<https://www.DepartmentofHomelandSecurity.gov/immigration-statistics/nonimmigrant>), as well as US Consular service websites (<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/study/student-visa.html>), contain information about the requirements for student visa categories.

Although this information is provided, we do not know much about the process through which international students make sense of US immigration policies or how this meaning-making process might influence their choices or life trajectories. Regardless of the student and their family's understanding of these policies, their lived experiences in the US are affected by these policies because they are expected to live within the affordances and constraints of these policies. For example, the dependents of F-1 visa holders (F-2 visa status) are not allowed to work or have social security numbers if they are noted as dependents (Department of Homeland Security, n.d.), which can limit the resources of the family.

### **Why This Matters – Purpose of the Study**

Immigration policies provide opportunities and constraints on the academic, professional, and social aspects of the lived experiences of international students and their families. Prior studies have explored the adjustment process of international students, examined the ways in which social support is associated with the adjustment of international students to the host culture, and explored some of the factors that influence international student adjustment. Most of these studies used quantitative data obtained through online surveys, scales, and questionnaires (e.g., Aldawsari et al., 2018; Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2018; Chai et al., 2020) and did not involve direct conversations with international students. Although quantitative studies are good for identifying general patterns of experience, it is necessary to engage in qualitative studies that can focus on the specific, holistic experiences of international students and capture their own perceptions of their lived realities.

Additionally, research shows that international students sometimes migrate with their families (Efionayi & Piguet, 2014), and these numbers are captured in the fiscal year reports from the Department of Homeland Security. For example, there were 180,084 dependents of international students who migrated to the US between 2018 and 2020 (Department of Homeland Security, 2021). Given that some international students either form or expand their families in the US, these numbers do not accurately represent the percentages of international students with families in the US. These numbers do not also capture or explain the different experiences that international students with families may have depending on their family structure. For example, an international student may have a family member born in the US and that new member will not be listed as a dependent on their visa according to US immigration policy because the new family member is a US citizen by birth.

Also, research shows that family members serve as a source of social support which is a key factor for the academic, sociocultural, and cross-cultural adjustment of international students, and that migration can affect family processes and relationships (Myers-Walls, et al., 2011). However, there are few details about the ways these family processes are influenced by the new context, which includes national immigration policies that determine what international students and families can and cannot do. Even though the lived experiences of international students and their families are subject to immigration policies to which they must adhere, and these policies are available online, the ways international students make sense of these policies and how their understanding of these policies shapes their choices and experiences it is unclear.

To add to the knowledge obtained about international students from prior studies, the purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of international students with families considering the constraints and affordances of immigration policies on their status. I explored how international students and their families made sense of these policies and how their understanding of immigration policies influenced their lived experiences through their choices, actions, and inactions as individuals and as a family unit.

### **Theoretical framework**

The life course theory posits that individuals influence and are influenced by the rules, policies, and institutional arrangements of the societies in which they exist (Wingens et al., 2011). The theory has been used in previous research to explore how macro-level factors (i.e., the dynamics of social structures and institutions) shape the micro-level outcomes (i.e., timing, pacing, sequencing of life events) of an individual's life course by focusing on the interaction between individual agency and societal structure over time (Wingens et al. 2011). This framework allows researchers to evaluate the role of societal constraints and opportunities on the life course, the decisions, and choices that individuals make within the limits of these social structures, and the effects of these choices on the life course (Wingens et al., 2011). There are five main principles of life course theory: *lifespan development*, *agency*, *time and place*, *timing*, and *linked lives* (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003). The principles of *agency*, *time and place*, *timing*, and *linked lives* were relevant to this study because they provide a framework for learning about the understanding that international students have of the existing US immigration

policy in place at the time of their migration and the effects that knowledge has on their life choices and trajectories as individuals and as a family.

The principle of *agency* in life course theory emphasizes the ability of an individual to actively influence their own life course trajectory through their choices, actions, and inactions (Elder et al., 2003; Wingens, 2011). The decision to migrate with family is a choice made by many international students. The principle of *agency* is relevant to exploring the lived experiences of international students and their families because, based on their understanding of US immigration policy, they make decisions that affect them as individuals and affect the family roles, relationships, and procedures (Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

The principle of *time and place* emphasizes the role of context in the life course (Elder et al., 2003). It suggests that an individual's choices and experiences over the life course are influenced by the historical times and places that they encounter and that each of these choices is made within the limits of historical and contemporary social circumstances. US non-immigrant policies are macro-level factors (e.g., rules for educational institutions that have international students) that shape the micro-level outcomes (e.g., psychological well-being) of international student and their families. As such, the experiences of international students with families who move to the US are dependent on the policies in place at the time when they moved to the US and include any policy changes made during their stay in the US. The understanding that international students may have about immigration policies and how that understanding influences their choices may come from their knowledge of the history of immigration policy in the US, the global discourse about immigration in the US, as well as their understanding of

how those policies are presently being implemented. For example, after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, there was concern among academics and universities that international students would choose to pursue their education in countries other than the US because of the hostile immigrant discourse at the time (Bothwell, 2016). The discourses surrounding US immigration policy at the time may have influenced the choices made by international students.

Next, the principle of *timing* illustrates how different experiences may have different effects on the life course depending on the stage of life at which these events occur. In this framework, there are three categories of time: biographical time (e.g., age of an individual and previous life experience), institutional time (e.g., age-related norms in the society), and historical time (e.g., changes throughout the history of an institution or a society). These categories allow for a more in-depth analysis of the interaction between institutional structure and individual agency across history and context. For international students with families, all three categories of time are relevant. First, the age of family members and their previous life experiences can influence their decision to migrate. Regarding institutional and historical time, the age-related norms and the current societal expectations of the society of origin of international students might influence the decision to migrate with their spouses and/or children. Also, the historical timing of the decision of an international student with a family to migrate to the US will affect their lived experiences as individuals and as a family.

Lastly, the principle of *linked lives* acknowledges that individuals' experiences exist in relation to the experiences of others such as their partners, children, parents, friends, and community within a sociohistorical context (Elder, 1998; Elder, Johnson, &

Crosnoe, 2003). The multiple roles and responsibilities of being an international student with a family do not exist in isolation. Rather, the experiences of each family member are inextricably linked to the experiences of the other family members, and individual pathways are shaped by these shared experiences.



## Chapter Three: Method

### Research Design

This study was approached from a phenomenological perspective with life-course theory as a tool of inquiry. Phenomenology aims to explore the participants' experiences by exploring their subjective understanding (meaning making) of those experiences, the role of context (both present and past) in understanding those experiences, and the role of language as a tool to describe, reflect on, and understand those experiences (Seidman, 2013). According to van Manen (2017a), the basis of a phenomenological design is to find out "what is this or that kind of experience like?" (p. 2). To understand a phenomenon, it is important to talk to the people who have been through that experience to find out *what* their experience was and *how* they experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). As such, to understand the effects of US immigration policies on international students and their families, it was necessary to obtain firsthand narratives and perspectives about their own lived experiences.

There are several contemporary approaches to phenomenological studies, and I found the hermeneutic (also known as interpretive) approach was best for this study. This approach emphasizes the importance of individual experiences and social relationships in the construction of knowledge (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Specifically, the foundation of hermeneutic phenomenology is credited to Martin Heidegger who posits that our experiences and the meanings we make of those experiences are influenced by our *life worlds* or the contexts in which we find ourselves (Neubaer et al., 2019; Vagle, 2018). Additionally, Heidegger proposes the concept of *situated freedom* which means that we are free to make choices within the opportunities and constraints of society

(Neubaer et al., 2019). Hermeneutic phenomenology involves gathering information about the individual and their context to get to the essence of their experience (Vagle, 2018), and it focuses on an interpretation of the subjective narratives of individuals and groups in order to understand their experiences (Kafle, 2011). Theory is also fundamental to hermeneutic phenomenology because it helps the researcher plan how to structure and focus inquiries and select research participants that would be most critical in understanding the phenomenon and addressing research question(s) (Neubauer et al., 2019).

To capture the lived experiences of international students and their families within the affordances and constraints of US immigration policies, the hermeneutic approach allowed me to explore the experiences as well as the meanings that international students and their families made of those experiences. I engaged in phenomenological interviews with participants to gather their subjective narratives of their lived experiences and to learn their perspectives about how they made sense of their lives as international students (and families) in the US. Additionally, the life course theory informed the hermeneutic phenomenological design of this study because it served as a guide for me to explore the complex interplay between context, sense-making, individual choices, and subsequent life-course outcomes. Specifically, the principles of *agency*, *time and place*, *timing*, and *linked lives* from the life course theory (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003) were beneficial because they allowed for an in-depth inquiry into the *what* and *how* of the lived experiences of international students with families in the US, understanding the complexities of the context they live in (i.e., the affordances and constraints of US

immigration policies), and the choices that they make based on their understanding of that context.

Hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the role of the researcher as an interpreter of the narratives of the participants considering the structures within their macro- and micro-contexts and the choices that they make within those contexts (Neubaer et al., 2019). Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that the researcher approaches each study from a subjective perspective as they bring in elements from their own *lifeworld* (e.g., past experiences, knowledge, training, etc.) and those elements are often the motivation for their engagement in research about a particular phenomenon (Bynum & Varpio, 2017; Neubauer et al., 2019). As such, a researcher is never fully capable of bracketing their own experience and is rather encouraged to acknowledge and constantly reflect on how their preconceptions are present and influential throughout the process of analysis (Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **Positionality**

In line with the idea of researcher openness in hermeneutic phenomenology, I acknowledge the role of my own *lifeworld* in my decision to explore the lived experiences of international students with families. I have been an international student in two different countries: Cuba and the US. I traveled to these countries at different life stages and my experiences in both countries were different. My experiences in those different contexts also stemmed from an interaction between the affordances and constraints from the immigration laws and policies of the respective countries and the different stages of life in which I found myself. As an international student who is currently living with her spouse and children in the US, I am a member of the population

that I collaborated with in this study. Having a family while being an international student has created unique challenges for me including those related to childcare, the timing of courses I could pursue, whether I could have time off after childbirth and how that would affect my legal status as an international student, among others. Because of my own experiences and private conversations with other international students, I was drawn to learning more about the experiences of international students living with their spouses and/or children by exploring the effects of their understanding of US immigration policies on their lived experiences as individuals and as a family unit.

Patel (2016) suggests that it is essential for researchers to acknowledge and accept the fluid nature of individual roles, contexts, and the understanding or definition of knowledge. My previous and current experiences as an international student in different contexts have influenced my thoughts, desires, and approaches to this study, and even through process of collecting and analyzing the data for this study, I experienced constant change in the ways I perceive or approach my own experiences and the experiences of others. These changes were evident to me in the memos that I made as I collected data and engaged in conversations with my partner about our own lived experiences as a family in the US.

Hermeneutic phenomenology encourages constant reflection on the effects of my own experiences on my research (Neubauer et al., 2019). As the main data collection tool for this study, in line with the emphasis on interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology (Neubauer et al., 2019; Vagle, 2018) and Patel's (2016) call for answerability, I acknowledge that I engaged in some interpretation of participants' responses in the data analysis process. In line with the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology (Neubauer et al.,

2019), my interpretation and (re)presentation of their experiences in this study was created through the framework of the theory, a constant reflection on my own experiences prior to and during this process, as well as the process and nature of my interaction with the participants (Seidman, 2013).

### **Rationale for Hermeneutic Phenomenology as the Research Design for this Study**

There are similarities between phenomenology and other qualitative research designs such as case studies and narrative inquiries. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe case studies as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p.37). Similar to phenomenology, case studies emphasize the role of context in understanding or creating knowledge about a particular event, individual, or group. One way to distinguish between a case study and phenomenology is the unit of analysis. Specifically, the unit of analysis in a case study is bounded by limits such as a finite number of people who could be interviewed, a finite number of documents that can be reviewed, and/or a finite amount of time for observations to allow for an in-depth study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Additionally, in a case study, it is important to explore and provide details about the context (e.g., social, historical, political) of the unit of analysis in order to have a detailed description of the case or cases being studied within that context. Even though I engaged in some exploration of the US context to find out some details about US immigration policies, I focused on the ways in which international students and their families make sense of these policies. I did not delve into the history or sociopolitical background of these policies.

Narrative inquiry designs emphasize the stories of a few individuals to highlight their experiences and the experiences of less dominant/studied groups (Creswell, 2007;

Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers who employ narrative inquiries as an approach use stories as their data and there is an emphasis on the writing and organization of data to construct a story (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Context is also important in a narrative inquiry as shapes the presentation and understanding of the stories that highlight an individual's experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because of my focus on the sense-making process and the effects of that sense-making on the lived experiences (e.g., the choices and decisions based on this sense-making) of my participants, I chose to use phenomenology as the research design.

Phenomenological designs employ a combination of some aspects of other qualitative approaches to get to the essence or the basic structure of an experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and explore the individual's perception of what an experience feels like (van Manen, 2017a). Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology involves gathering information about the context and an experience within that context from the subjective narratives of participants about how they make sense of that experience. (Vagle, 2018). Hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology also emphasizes the role of inter-subjective interactions (e.g., between the researcher and the participants), reflexivity, and context (van Manen, 2017a, 2017b). This approach acknowledges the fundamental role of theory in guiding the researcher to appropriately focus and structure their inquiries (Neubauer et al., 2019). A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was important for this study because it allowed me to employ the life course theory as a tool of inquiry to explore the lived experiences of international students with families. Hermeneutic phenomenology also emphasizes the need to understand individual experiences in order to understand the world we live. It focuses on how people make

sense of their experience in a particular context (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The emphasis on reflexivity to make meaning of how a particular phenomenon is experienced (i.e., getting to the essence of the experience) differentiates a hermeneutic phenomenological approach from other methods such as case studies and narrative inquiries which also focus on the lived experiences of a specific individual or group.

Even though there are other qualitative research designs that could have been used in this study, hermeneutic phenomenology was appropriate for this study as I sought to learn how participants made sense of their lived experiences because of their visa status. This sensemaking process captures the essence of their lived experiences as they interacted and engaged in conversations and interpretations of their experiences with me and with each other. Hermeneutic phenomenology involves an interpretation of an individual's experience of a phenomenon and involves reflection on the experience and an engagement with those reflections in order to explore the meaning-making surrounding that experience (Van Manen, 2017b). Although reflexivity is/should be an important part of any research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patel, 2016), it is a fundamental part of hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology because the process of reflection facilitates the interpretation of the experience. Additionally, hermeneutic phenomenology allows for a process of intersubjective meaning-making (e.g., through the interactions that occur between the researcher and the participants). Reflexivity from the researcher and the participants is necessary to sense-making, and hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach encourages researchers to acknowledge and accept the role that their own experiences play in the interpretation of data (Groenewald, 2004; Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Neubauer et al., 2019).

The emphasis on the role and nature of reflexivity in sense-making is what led to my choice of hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach. As a researcher whose decision to study this topic stemmed from my own personal experiences (Bynum & Varpio, 2017), I found this approach to well-suited for this study as it allowed me to explore, understand, and accept that my experiences may be similar yet different from other international students with families. This process of reflexivity also allowed me to understand the experiences my participants without having to ignore my own experiences. Taken together, my experiences and the experiences of my participants are vital to a complete understanding of the lived experiences of international students with families and reflexivity, which is a key component of hermeneutic phenomenology, is important to get to the essence of our lived experiences in relation to US immigration policies.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching question that guided this study was: *“How does the understanding of immigration policies shape the lived experiences of international students with families?”* To further explore the lived experiences of international students with families, there will be two sub-questions guiding this study:

1. What do international students and their families know about immigration policies related to their status in the US?
2. How does the understanding of these policies influence the choices and decisions that international students and their families make as individuals and as a family unit?



- a. In what way does their immigration status influence family roles, relationships, and processes? (Exploring the life course of the students and their families)

### **Data Collection**

To address the research questions above, the data for this study was gathered from interviews of international students and their spouses. Participants were international students who are currently enrolled in universities in the US and had the F-1 or J-1 visa. All participants had spent at least one full semester in the US and had dependents (spouse and/or children) living with them as family in the US. As noted in previous paragraphs, I was interested in students with these visa statuses because the F-1 student visa is the most common student visa in the US. Also, although the J-1 exchange student visa category is quite similar to the F-1 category, there are some differences in the opportunities provided by that visa status (for examples, see Table 1) and I wanted to explore the effects of these different opportunities on the lived experiences of international students and their families. The rationale for selecting individuals who had spent at least one semester in the US was that this time frame provides students with an opportunity to experience and/or have a perspective about what it means to be an international student with family in the US.

### ***Recruitment and Sampling***

I selected initial participants through maximum variation sampling, a form of purposeful (sometimes called purposive) sampling. This process involves selecting participants and sites that are representative of the diversity in the population of interest so that each participant contributes unique information about their individual experiences

to help us get to the essence of (the *what* and the *how*) of living as an international student with family in the US (Etikan et al., 2016; Seidman, 2013). Given the diverse nature of the international student population in the US in terms of country of origin and places of study (Migration Policy Institute, 2021), this method was ideal for this study because it allowed me to investigate the lived experiences of international students and families from different countries, with different family structures (e.g., students who migrated with spouses and children, those who migrated only with their spouses, families with children who were born in the US, families without children, those with different visa types, etc.), and at different stages in the life-span (e.g., families with older or younger children, young couples, etc.).

Maximum variation sampling was also ideal because it allows for the recruitment of participants from various sites. To further explore the role of context on the meaning-making process and subsequent life-courses of the participants, I tried to recruit participants from five university campuses in the US to gain insight into the contexts of the university campuses where immigration policies are implemented for international students. To accomplish this, I contacted at least one international student from my social network on three campuses (via text message or in person) to find out if they would be interested in participating in this study. I also employed snowball sampling in my recruitment of participants. Snowball sampling is an effective method for reaching participants by asking initial participants to recommend others who can be contacted for additional information (Groenewald, 2014). This technique was useful because participants were well positioned in their own networks to identify other international

students who might fit the criteria for participation, and participants also helped me to identify other individuals on the remaining two campuses.

### ***Participants***

In comparison to other research designs, there are generally only a few participants in a phenomenological study because the goal of a hermeneutic phenomenological study is not to generalize but rather to describe and interpret the lived experiences of participants (Kafle, 2011; Seidman, 2013). To achieve maximum variation in the sample, ensure sufficiency, and avoid over saturation of information, my goal was to interview up to ten international student families (10-20 individuals). During the process of recruitment, I reached out to 12 international students from various countries on the five campuses (3 universities in the Midwest, 1 on the East Coast, and 1 in the Southeastern region of the US). After, I conducted interviews with these seven families from two universities in the Midwest, but due to a language barrier, the data from one of the families was not included in my final analysis. In Table 2, I present the demographic details of the 12 participants in six families. To protect their identities, I have used pseudonyms for the families as a unit and for the individual members.

**Table 2**

### ***Demographic Details***

<b>Name of Family</b>	<b>Partner 1 (Respondent for Survey) + Age &amp; Gender</b>	<b>Partner 2 (Relative)</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Visa Categories</b>	<b>Degree Level</b>	<b>Number of other family members + Ages</b>

Agyeman	Simon (34, M)	Dorothy (32, F)	Ghana	F1/F1	PhD	1 (7 months)
Bukari	John (39, M)	Grace (32, F)	Ghana	F1/F2	PhD	2 (6, 2)
Nellawati	Netra (30, F)	Aditya (34, M)	Indonesia	J1/J2	PhD	2 (6, 9)
Rathnayaka	Prasanna (36, M)	Kiyoma (36, F)	Sri Lanka	F1/DV1	PhD	1 (4 months)
Tsehay	Menelik (35, M)	Negassi (35, f)	Ethiopia	F1/F2	PhD	2 (6, 2)
Wu	Xia (30, F)	Jinhai (30, M)	China	F1/F1	PhD	N/A

I sent the consent form (see Appendix A) to all participants via email and asked them to respond to the email to indicate their consent. Also, at the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to provide consent for the interviews to be recorded. Participants did not receive any financial compensation for their participation in this study.

### ***Interview Approach***

The data for this study was gathered through an adaptation of Seidman's (2013) three interview series for phenomenological research. This approach involves an initial interview conducted to contextualize the participants lived experience in relation to the topic of the study by obtaining enough background information from the participant (*focused life history*). The second interview focuses on the participants present experiences in relation to the study's topic (*the details of experience*). The third interview

entails asking questions that help the participant to make sense of their experiences - a reflection of how the past experiences (e.g., choices, actions, inactions) they discussed in previous interviews have led to their present situations (*reflection on the meaning*).

Ideally, each interview should last for about 90 minutes and there should be about three to seven days between each interview (Seidman, 2013).

This approach was helpful for this study framed on hermeneutic phenomenology and the life course framework as it allowed me (the researcher) to build rapport with the participants as I learnt about their experiences at different times. It also provided a structure for the data collection and subsequent data analysis. In addition, the structure of these interviews allowed me and my participants to explore our individual experiences, and the context and meanings of those experiences through a process of reflection (Seidman, 2013).

I adapted Seidman's three interview process to fit the nature of this study. After obtaining consent from participants through emails, I sent the international students a survey to elicit background information about the students and their families. The survey included demographic details and questions about prior experiences related to the focus of this study. I sent the survey to the student specifically because I asked questions about the international students' program (e.g., program of study, source of funding). In cases where both partners were students, the survey was completed by one partner. I captioned this survey as an email interview, and all participants were asked to send me the responses of the survey prior to the second interviews. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix B.

The second interviews were conducted via Zoom separately and at different times with the international student and their spouses. These interviews involved questions about their present experiences and each interview lasted for about an hour. My rationale for conducting these interviews separately for each individual was to explore their individual perspectives of their lived experiences. Before conducting the second interviews, I reviewed the survey data from the participants and asked for clarifications and more specific details as needed. For example, when talking to the spouses of international students, I asked them to provide details about their own backgrounds (e.g., languages spoken, prior educational background, specific places of origin in their home countries). In these interviews, I asked participants to share their day-to-day experiences, their perspectives on the transition, and their views of their lived experiences. Additionally, identify what international students and their families knew about US immigration policies, how they obtained their information about these policies, and what they understand about their immigration status, during the second interviews I asked participants to share some of resources (e.g., flyers, websites, etc.) that helped them to learn more about their visa status (Appendix B includes the second interview protocol).

For the third part of the interview series for data collection, I conducted joint interviews with each couple. These interviews were also conducted via Zoom and each one lasted for about an hour to an hour and a half, depending on the couple. My goal for the third interviews was to seek clarifications on the details provided in the second interviews and explore the collaborative lived experiences (linked lives) of the participants as a family. During this interview, I asked questions about changing roles, relationships, and family dynamics to help participants to reflect on and share with me

some details about their family lives in the US and their perceptions of the ways in which US immigration policies may have influenced those experiences. Before the third interviews, I also reviewed portions of the audios for the second interviews that were related to participants' responses to questions about linked lives. To ensure that I captured the participants' experiences accurately, during the third interview I narrated my understanding of some of the responses provided by the individuals in previous interviews and asked them for clarifications or corrections if my interpretation was not reflective of their experiences (Appendix B includes the third interview protocol).

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I engaged in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This process involves a cycle of reading and re-reading the data, reflective writing, and interpretation of the data to identify patterns (themes) that appropriately reflect participants' lived experiences (Kafle, 2011). Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) involves a detailed analysis of the lived experience of participants (Eatough & Smith, 2020) and includes the hermeneutic circle which "encourages researchers to work with their data in a dynamic, iterative, and non-linear manner, examining the whole in light of its parts, the parts in light of the whole, and the contexts in which the whole and the parts are embedded and doing so from a stance of being open to shifting ways of thinking what the data might mean." (Eatough & Smith, 2020, p.12). Additionally in IPA, bracketing, which is the process in which the researcher temporarily sets aside any preconceived notions, beliefs, and background knowledge about the phenomenon (Gearing, 2004) is a fundamental piece of the data collection and data analysis process to allow other perspectives to emerge.

### **Bracketing, Reflexivity, and IPA**

In line with the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective that complete bracketing is not attainable (Chan et al., 2013; Neubauer et al., 2019), I was aware of the ways in which my experiences influenced my perspective during this process. To ensure the trustworthiness of the information that I present below about the lived experiences of my participants, and in line with the hermeneutic circle of IPA, I engaged in constant reflexivity by memoing during the data collection and data analysis process. After each interview was conducted, I made a memo of my thoughts about the process of the interview, the nature of my interaction with participants, and the information provided from the interview. I also made memos of the conversations that I had with my partner regarding our own experiences. This was part of my reflection on the process of data collection and analysis, and it was also beneficial to help me focus on/filter through the narrated experiences of my participants and my own experiences. I engaged in the non-linear process of the hermeneutic circle in IPA throughout the data analysis and the data collection process as I engaged in reviewing of the data at different time points, note-taking on emerging themes before and during the coding process, and a constant reflection and memoing throughout this process.

### **Data Handling/Preparation and Initial Notes**

After receiving the survey responses from participants, I created a spreadsheet in which I filled in their responses to each of the questions. This was to give me a clear picture of the background of each participant. To correct the errors in the auto-generated transcripts of the recorded interviews, I uploaded the audios of all the recorded interviews into a transcription software (Otter.ai). This software allowed me to edit the transcripts



while listening to the audios. During this process, I made hand-written notes of some of the topics/themes that kept coming up as I reviewed the transcripts.

### **Codes and Coded Segments**

After reviewing and correcting the transcripts, I uploaded my data into another software (MAXQDA). In the software, I created folders for each family and uploaded the transcripts for the individual second interviews as well as the third interviews for each family into the respective folders. I then engaged in line-by-line coding for each of the transcripts. In line with the hermeneutic circle, and the recommendation to “examine the whole in light of its parts, the parts in light of the whole, and the contexts in which the whole and the parts are embedded and doing so from a stance of being open to shifting ways of thinking what the data might mean” (Eatough & Smith, 2020, p.12). Also, in an effort to understand the lived experiences of each family, I coded the transcripts for each family unit by first coding the individual transcripts from the second interview and then coding the couples’ transcripts from the third interview. In all, there were 30 parent codes and 32 sub-codes. In Table 3, I present the number of coded segments for each family.

**Table 3**

#### *Coded Segments*

	<b>Family</b>	<b>Individuals</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Number of Coded Segments</b>	<b>Total Number of Coded Segments</b>
1	Agyeman	Simon	2	43	
		Dorothy	2	45	
		Both	3	32	128
2	Bukari	John	2	31	
		Grace	2	31	

		Both	3	30	92
3	Nellawati	Netra	2	27	
		Aditya	2	23	
		Both	N/A	N/A	50
4	Rathnayaka	Prasanna	2	29	
		Kiyoma	2	28	
		Both	3	30	87
5	Tsehay	Menelik	2	42	
		Negassi	2	34	
		Both	3	40	116
6	Wu	Xia	2	25	
		Jinhai	2	22	
		Both	3	18	65

Next, I reviewed the coded data in light of my theory, research question, and the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore which specific aspects of the data would best address my research question “*How might the understanding of immigration policies shape the lived experiences of international students with families?*” Specifically, from the four principles of life course theory employed for this data (i.e., *timing, time and place, human agency, and linked lives*) and the foundational concepts of hermeneutic phenomenology (i.e., *life worlds and situated freedom*), I reviewed the data to identify the ways in which the individuals’ lived experiences were by influenced the contexts (i.e., *life worlds, time and place*) in which those experiences occurred and the choices that they made in regards to their understanding of these contexts (i.e., *situated freedom, timing, human agency, and linked lives*). I created three sets of folders with the research

questions and then reviewed the codes and coded segments in order to find details that were best representative of the participants experiences with respect to the research questions. Table 4 contains details of the parent codes/categories that I found to be most relevant to the research questions.

**Table 4**

*Research Questions and Representative Codes*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Representative Codes</b>
RQ1 - What do international students and their families know about immigration policies related to their status in the US?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understanding of individual visa types.</li> <li>2. Views/Experiences with other US visa types.</li> <li>3. How participants obtained knowledge about their current visa types</li> <li>4. Pathway to the US (e.g., decision to migrate to the US instead of other countries);</li> </ol>
RQ2 - How does the understanding of these policies influence the choices and decisions that international students and their families make as individuals and as a family unit?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Effects of visa status on decisions (planning).</li> <li>2. Decision to move with family.</li> <li>3. Perspectives on migrating with family</li> </ol>
RQ2b - In what way does their immigration status influence family roles, relationships, and processes?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Description of family life in the US/Differences between family life in home country and US.</li> <li>2. Challenges/Ways of navigating different roles in the US.</li> <li>3. Migration (&amp; visa) changes individual's original goals in life;</li> <li>4. What it means to have family in the US;</li> </ol>

Finally, I conducted a comparison of cases and groups in MAXDA to give me a summary of the quotes from all transcripts that were related to each of the codes noted in

Table 4. For example, for the first research question, I activated all the transcripts and the relevant codes for that question in order to come up with a summary of all the coded segments from each transcript that were related to those codes. I reviewed the coded segments and quotes for each of the family units and created vignettes from their narrated experiences. In line with my research questions, the life course theory, and hermeneutic phenomenology, my goal in creating these vignettes was to present a clear picture of ways in which participants gain an understanding of US immigration policies and how that understanding influences the life course of individuals and families. These analyses and my process of reflexivity throughout the research process resulted in four main themes (*Sense-making process for visa status; How the understanding of visa statuses changes goal/purposes; Disparities between imagined lives and lived realities; The importance of living together as a family*) which reflect my understanding of the narrated experiences of the international students and their families who participated in this study. These themes will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections.

### **The Choice to Use Vignettes and Themes in a Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study**

Van Manen (2017) notes that rather than being perceived as the main outcomes of a phenomenological study, themes should be perceived as tools to explore the meaning of human experiences. As such, to humanize my participants and move beyond a simple presentation of themes that illustrate similarities and/or differences in the experiences of my participants, I chose to first present the experiences of my participants in the form of vignettes that capture the nature and essence of their experiences. These vignettes also reflect the nature of the interactions I had with my participants during the various interviews. Through these interactions and the iterative process of data analysis which

involved constant reflection on the data and the research process, I found four themes that reflect my understanding of the stories participants shared with me, and these themes are shared in the section after the vignettes.

Specifically, to address my first research question “*What do international students and their families know about immigration policies related to their status in the US?*” the findings from this study show that participants’ obtain the information about their visa status from various sources, but an understanding of their visa status comes from their lived experience/ having to live within the opportunities and constraints of the policies related to their visa statuses. The second research question which is broken down into two parts “*How does the understanding of these policies influence the choices and decisions that international students and their families make as individuals and as a family unit?*” and “*In what way does their immigration status influence family roles, relationships, and processes?*” The findings show that the core factor that influences participants’ choices as individuals and as a family is the desire to stay together, and that desire facilitates their willingness to migrate and remain in the US regardless of the constraints and hardships that they may experience.

## Chapter Four: Findings

Given the lack of research about the experiences of international students who migrate with their families, and the experiences of dependents of international students, my aim was to fill a gap in our knowledge about this group of immigrants by presenting the stories of my participants in order to expand our understanding of their experiences and begin to build theory about ways to support this group. In the following sections, I present vignettes and themes that are the results of my process of data analysis. First, I present vignettes of each family unit. In each of these vignettes, I provide details about the background of the individuals (e.g., the timing of their transition, their prior experiences in the US, etc.) and highlight their knowledge of their visa status and the sources of their knowledge about their different statuses, the process of understanding the information from these various sources, and the ways in which this understanding influences their choices and their life courses as individuals and as a family. I also provide descriptions of the ways in which the principles of the life course theory are manifested in their lived experiences. After the vignettes, I will also present the four main themes that emerged as part of my data analysis.

### Vignettes

#### **Agyeman Family**

The Agyemans are from Ghana and have been in the US for about five years as a married couple. They each migrated as individuals. The principles of *timing*, *time and place*, *human agency*, and *linked lives* stood out in their narrated experiences as their ability to make choices for themselves as individuals and as a family intersected with/was

filtered through their understanding of the opportunities and constraints of the F-1 visa status.

Simon Agyeman is a 34-year-old man with prior experience living in the US as a visitor/tourist with the B1/B2 visa and as an exchange student on the J-1 visa. His partner, Dorothy Agyeman, is 32 years-old with no prior experience in the US. They are both pursuing PhDs in STEM fields and are currently on F-1 visas. After exploring opportunities for higher education in other countries, they both chose to pursue their graduate studies in the US for a number of reasons, including the availability of funding opportunities. Simon has been in the US for 7 years and Dorothy has been here for 5 years. They were in a committed relationship back home and got married in the US. Their 7-month-old daughter was born in the US.

Their understanding of US immigration policies included knowledge about the restrictions and advantages of the policies. Based on his experience with other non-immigrant US visas, Simon rates the F-1 visa higher than the others. He notes that the F-1 visa status:

*“...means that you are purposely coming for school. And that is the main thing, you cannot do anything outside of school. Your work hours are restricted. And I think that is because they want you to focus on your education. There's...you don't get a lot of a lot of experience when it even comes to working. You can get...it during the summer, you can get some internships to do, but during the school year during the semester period, it's all education. Focus on your school...But on the other side, I think this is for me personally, I think this visa is rated above for me, I rate it above other visas because it puts you in a situation where you can further your education*

*and become a better person with time. And that is the good thing. I always say I would prefer to come to the United States with an f1 visa than with a green card.”*

The couple’s knowledge of their visa status comes from various sources including their own research on what it means to have the F-1 visa status, information from their university’s international center, and the experiences of others. However, regardless of these sources, their understanding of their visa status comes from living within the contexts where this policy is enacted. According to Dorothy:

*“Well, I learnt about it by being here...So, even though it was...I think when they issue the I-20 or the admission it will state that the number... [of hours that you have to work] Yes. I didn't see it as a problem, like, because we know that sometimes people work here. But when I got here, I realized that it was something that they were very keen [on] and they have to regulate it.”*

Although they have access to the information the F-1 visa status, their understanding of the information comes from their own lived experiences/ living through the opportunities and constraints of this visa type.

As noted in the different time frames for being in the US above, Simon migrated before Dorothy. Dorothy’s current program of study was not her preferred first choice. However, in light of the F-1 visa, to maintain her ability to work and contribute to the family’s resources and ensure that the family could be together, she selected a program of study that would provide her with an assistantship and allow her to be in the same school as Simon. She notes that it is important to have the family together because:

*“... it's better off, like knowing that we have them close by, we can interact, we can reach out. You feel that you have the love of the family. I know some people,*



*distance helps, but I feel when you have them close by it's better off than being apart.”*

The decisions they make as a family are often influenced by their understandings of their visa status. In expressing how they are able to navigate their different roles and responsibilities, Simon noted that *“I think the central part is consciously prioritizing family life, because everything else falls in place after that.”*

The principle of *timing*, especially biographical (e.g., age of an individual and previous life experience) and institutional ( e.g., age-related norms in the society) time, were evident in the experience of the Agyeman family because they migrated as individuals who were in a committed relationship but not yet married. This allowed them to obtain individual F-1 visas and that way they could both obtain on-campus employment. The principle of *time and place* were also present in Simon’s prior experience with living in the US under other visa types. His decision to migrate to the US as an international student was facilitated by his prior experiences living in the US, and for Dorothy, her decision to migrate to the US was facilitated by the fact that Simon had migrated to the US, and they wanted to be together. These individual decisions to migrate also illustrate the principle of *human agency* in their ability to actively influence their own life courses by making choices and taking actions to facilitate/validate those choices. The principle of *linked lives* is manifested in the choice that Dorothy made to pursue a program that was not her first choice in order to be together with Simon, the individual with whom she was in a committed relationship in Ghana and whom she subsequently married.

## **Bukari Family**

The Bukari family is also from Ghana. They have lived together in the US for about three years. Similar to the Agyeman family, the principles of *timing, time and place, human agency, and linked lives* also stood out in the experiences of the Bukari family as their abilities to make choices for themselves (e.g., career and academic choices) and for their family (e.g., allocation of resources) was impacted by their understanding of the opportunities and constraints of the F-1/F-2 visa status.

John Bukari is 39 years-old and has been an international student with an F-1 visa status for the past six years. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Education after completing a master's degree in the US. Grace Bukari is 32 years-old and has been on the F-2 visa for three years. They have two sons, a six-year-old who was born in Ghana and a two-year-old born in the US. John and Grace are both Ghanaians and have not had prior experiences living in the US.

Similar to the Agyeman family, John's decision to pursue his PhD in the US was based on various factors, including sources of funding. He also describes his understanding of the F-1 visa status and notes the challenges:

*“Yeah, what you can do is just study. That's...that's the purpose of the visa. You can't do any other thing. You talk with friends, you move with friends, but you can't work, you can't travel any how you want. Because before you travel, you have to make sure you have documents from department, from the international office, and that your visas are all good and all that...But it's more like a challenge, you must go through everyday thinking about you being in some status, different from others.”*

From John's perspective, the F-1 visa status is complex and influences his choices and activities. He also notes that he did not fully understand or think about his visa status while he was completing his master's degree in the US as his family was still back in Ghana. *"Maybe after, after my understanding [from taking] some courses in a Ph. D. program, I can talk more about being an international student, because I didn't really see this during my master's program..."*. His current understanding of his status comes from having his family join him in the US and having to live under the opportunities and constraints of their current visa statuses, especially during his PhD program.

Back home in Ghana, Grace completed a bachelor's degree and was a qualified/certified high school teacher. Due to her F-2 visa status, she is currently not allowed to work in the US. Her knowledge of the F-2 visa comes from the information described to her by John and also from doing her own research on the internet, but her understanding of her status comes from her own lived experiences. She explains her visa status as:

*"I don't know what to say but I think it's not easy, because of the nature of the F2 visa...not working. It limits you. You are not permitted to do so many things. So it's kind of not impressive like that, so... because you have come, and then you are not permitted to work to support the family. It's not...I don't think it's a good idea. And it's really hurting [our family] sometimes."*

In an effort to improve upon her educational background and gain more experience in the US, Grace is currently taking some college courses at an institution of higher education in their community. Although she is allowed to take classes, she can

only do so on a part time basis. She explains how her visa status influences this aspect of her life:

*“...the visa allows you to take some number of courses, but you are limited, you can't take up to a certain number of courses. So, for instance, you can take [some course] but it's kind of part time. So, you take at least one or two courses instead of three or four, as the normal people do.”*

Grace's education, although currently on a part-time basis, puts a strain on the resources of the family. Due to the limitations on her ability to work in the US due to the F-2 visa status, John's stipend is their only source of income. Although Grace is willing to work to support the family and alleviate some of the financial strain for the family, she is currently unable to do so.

Regarding the ways in which their understanding of their visa statuses influences their life course as individuals and as a family, John notes that:

*“For now, every decision has to do with school, school, and school. Nothing more than that. You can't really think...you can't make any decision outside of academia...So they are just things you have to consider...you have to be firm about. You have to negotiate with your wife, with your children. And all this is just because you don't really have much flexibility about what to do. And in terms of that flexibility, you're comparing yourself to having the F-1 and not having it.”*

Regardless of their visa statuses and the influence it has on their lived experiences and life course both as individuals and as a family, the couple notes that is important for the family to be together such that their children can grow up with both parents. Grace highlighted this point in the interview. She said, *“It [being together] is important because*

*the children we're bringing up, at least will know [both parents] ...like, the kind of training, both of you will give to the child, will be different from one parent, just bringing up the child.”*

The principle of timing was manifested in the experiences of the Bukari family due to the time at which John migrated to the US. He migrated when his first son was eight months old and left behind his wife who was a fairly new mother to care for their son. Biographical time and institutional time are manifested here as the age of his son and his wife (27 at the time) and her previous experiences with raising their son with extended family in Ghana with John in the US influenced their experience as a family. Additionally, historical time (e.g., changes throughout the history of an institution or a society) was also evident in this case given the collectivist nature of the Ghanaian culture in which Grace and her son remained. Grace's abilities to care for her son while waiting to either join John in the US or have John return to them were influenced by the nature of the culture in which they found themselves. The contrast between the collectivist Ghanaian culture and the individualist US culture also manifests the principles of *time and place* (i.e., the role of context) on the lived experiences of the Bukari family. For Grace, moving to the US culture where she is now the primary caregiver for her children has been quite a change for her in comparison to her experiences back home where she had social support from her extended family. Additionally, migrating away from her extended family members who served as a major source of social support for her has resulted in Grace becoming more independent in her role as the primary caregiver for her children. Macro-level factors such as the restrictions from the F-2 visa influence Grace's choices to work or further her education. This ties in with the principle of *human agency*

because the choices that Grace makes as an individual (e.g., decision to pursue non-degree eligible studies) are based on her understanding of her visa status, which relates to the principle of *time and place*. The principles of *human agency* and *linked lives* are also illustrated in the experiences of the Bukari family because, ultimately, Grace's decision to migrate and their individual abilities to pursue specific career choices (e.g., Grace's decision leave her job back home, John's pursuit of a PhD) stems from their desire to be together as a family.

### **Nellawati Family**

The Nellawati family is from Indonesia. They have been living together in the US for about a year. The principles of *timing*, *time and place*, *human agency*, and *linked lives* are also evident in the narrated lived experiences of the Nellawati family. As a family unit living in the US, their J-1/J-2 visa status allows to them to have an additional source of income for their family, and also influences their individual and familial goals (e.g., career and academic choices).

Netra Nellawati is 30 years-old and has been in an international student in the US for about a year and a half. She is currently on the J-1 visa. Her partner, Aditya Nellawati, is 34 years-old and had been in the US for almost a year. He has a master's in business administration (MBA) and previously worked as an embassy official for his home country abroad. They are both from Indonesia and both of their children (a six-year-old and a nine year-old) were born in their home country. As individuals and as a family, they have not had prior experience with living in the US, but they have had a prior experience as an international student family in Europe.

For the Nellawati family, one main reason for choosing to migrate was the availability of funding for Netra to pursue her studies and the opportunity for Aditya to work in the US. Their understanding of their visa status came from conducting research about the J-type visas which were assigned to them based on the student exchange program that Netra is engaged in. Netra shares her understanding of the J-1 visa as she notes the advantages of having this visa type: “...*that's good for my husband because he can work with J-2 visa.*” Aditya also notes the main advantage of the J-2 visa as “*it means... you can work*”. The only restriction noted by the couple was the limit on external funding, as Netra mentions that “*I cannot get funding from the [US] federal government, like aid. Yeah, I cannot get it. Even though I am eligible because you know, the money, the stipend is not too much, but they said that I'm not eligible.*” Regardless of this limitation, the couple express satisfaction with the J-1 visa because it allows Aditya to support his wife as she completes her education.

As part of the Fulbright program, Netra was expected to stay in the US alone for a semester before her family could join her. As such, Aditya and the children had to join her later in the US. In addition to the availability of funding, for this couple, having the family together was an important part of the decision to migrate, even if that meant they had to be apart for a brief period. Netra describes the importance of family and how that intersects with their decision/desire to migrate by saying:

*“So actually, I love being a mother...I love studying but for me being a mother is my priority and being on wife as well. So [being] a student is just like my job, you know?... In the first place, me and family always want[ed] to live abroad. We want to travel around the world together. So, the first thing that came to our mind*

*as a family, I just, study again. So I applied for a scholarship. And we were planning to move here before I got the scholarship as well.”*

Familial support is important to the success of international students. For Aditya, his goal is to support his partner as he says: *“My dream is to support her first because she got a better opportunity, so I support her. Maybe after her finishes her study, maybe she will also support me.”* As described by Netra, her husband’s ability to work in the US due to the J-2 visa status and his willingness to support the family during this time is important. She says:

*“It’s meant a lot...Like I said before, student is a job for me now, you know, it’s not my life. So, for me being here, it’s more than being together as a family, you know, growing old as a family being a better person as a family... And my husband as well. He[’s] really like supporting us a lot with job. He’s not someone who [is] picky. He will just pick the job that give him the highest salary...yeah, he [isn’t] picky. That’s good.”*

Even though Aditya has an MBA degree from his home country, he notes that he is unable to use his degree because it is not accepted in the US and as such, he has had to shift his career choices to be able to support the family. Aditya has had to switch careers from being an official in an Indonesian embassy to being a school bus driver in the US.

The Nellawati’s experiences also manifest the four principles of the life course theory. In regard to *timing and time and place*, their experiences as an international student family in Europe vary from their experiences as an international student family in the US. For example, their children were much younger when they migrated to the US. Also, US migration policy differs from migration policy in other countries. As such, their



lived experiences as individuals and as a family are influenced by the different life stage and the contextual factors that stem from their geographical location (i.e., the US) and the policies that govern the US. Additionally, as noted by Aditya, some of the barriers that they face (e.g., language barriers due to variations in word choice) stem from the differences between their home country and the US. For example, Aditya notes that he learned British English, and as such some of the challenges he faces in communicating with others comes from difficulty in assimilating his language to fit the US culture. Aditya's shift in career choice to accommodate the new US system in which his MBA degree is not recognized in order to remain close to and financially support his family illustrates the principles of *human agency* and *linked lives*. His decision and choice to work within the constraints is largely because of supporting his wife's studies and providing additional income for the family.

### **Rathnayaka Family**

The Rathnayaka family is from Sri Lanka and has lived as a family in the US for about two years. Kiyoma and Prasanna are both 36 years-old and are currently completing PhDs in science fields. They have a four-month-old daughter who was born in the US. The principles of *timing*, *time and place*, *human agency*, and *linked lives* are also evident in their narrated experiences. Their decisions about their academic choices and future plans (e.g., whether to stay in the US or return to their home country) are influenced by their understanding of their different visa statuses.

Kiyoma Rathnayaka completed an MPhil degree in Sri Lanka and worked as a university professor prior to migrating to the US. Prasanna Rathnayaka completed an MBA and MPhil degree in Sri Lanka and also worked as a university registrar prior to

migrating to the US. They both do not have prior experience with living in the US, but Prasanna has visited three other countries for various conferences and professional purposes. Kiyoma has an F-1 visa and Prasanna is on a DV-1 visa. Kiyoma applied for (DV-1) diversity visas (green cards) for both of them in 2018, but only Prasanna's application was accepted, hence his DV-1 status. Subsequently, Kiyoma applied to schools in the US and obtained the F-1 visa after gaining acceptance to her academic institution.

Kiyoma and Prasanna note the internet and the experiences of friends as the main sources of obtaining information about what it means to hold these different visas. They also understand what it means to hold these different visas. Kiyoma describes her visa in this way: “*F-1 visa? It's a student visa. So, we can...if we have assistance, we have to work 20 hours per week.*” Prasanna also describes the DV-1 visa saying: “*Actually, diversity visa means...it [is] consider[ed] as...permanent residence here, that's a simple answer for diversity visa... I don't have limitation for working...But I don't have much time to work outside while doing TA and graduate studies so I'm not thinking about working.*”

Although they both understand what it means to hold these different visa types, it is Prasanna's visa status that mostly influences the decisions that they make about their future. Kiyoma describes this when she says: “*Actually, we are not still decided. If [Prasanna] decides to stay here, because his visa status... is also different from mine, I will come back...*”

Both Kiyoma and Prasanna are in the US while on study leaves from their jobs in their home country. As such, as part of their agreement with their employment agencies, they

would have to return home to work for a number of years or pay back the money that was used to support their absences during their study leaves. This condition also plays a role in their decisions about their future (e.g., where to stay, careers, etc.)

Keeping their family together is important to them both. Kiyoma notes that she chose to come to the US to further her education because it has always been her dream to do so. For Prasanna, even though he wanted to study in other countries, the decision to move to the US came mostly from his desire to be together with his family. Due to COVID restrictions and other job obligations, Prasanna was not able to move to the US with Kiyoma in 2019 but he was able to join her later in 2021. Regarding the decision to migrate with family, they both note that their current programs of study were not their initially preferred programs. However, they were willing to continue in these programs as it allowed them to remain together as a family in the US. Also, in regard to their future decision as to where to stay in light of Prasanna's visa status and the conditions of their study leaves from their home country, Kiyoma notes that the most important factor in that final decision is that "we can stay together as a family."

The principle of *timing* is manifested in the experience of the Rathnayaka family especially through the birth of their daughter. Regarding institutional time, Prasanna narrates how they waited to have a child due to the period of separation when he was unable to migrate with Kiyoma. Kiyoma also talks about how her experience as a first-time mother is different because her daughter was born at a time when she was away from her extended family in Sri Lanka. She notes that previous experience with her own relationship with her mother back home helped her to navigate this new experience. This emphasis on previous experience illustrates biographical time. The principle of *time and*

*place* is also manifested in Rathnayaka family's experience in their role as first time parents. For example, their view of what it means to raise a child is influenced by a combination of their cultural values and the resources (e.g., social support, finances, etc.) available to them in the US. The principles of *human agency* and *linked lives* are manifested in the couple's discussion about their choices (e.g., their program of study and location of study) and future plans as a family (e.g., whether to stay in the US). They will make these decisions after considering what they believe to be the best option that allows them to stay together as a family.

### **Tsehay Family**

The Tsehay family is made up of four individuals: Menelik, his partner Negassi, and their two daughters (six years-old and two years-old). Menelik and Negassi are both 35 years-old and are from Ethiopia, where their children were born. For the Tsehay family, the principles of *timing*, *time and place*, *human agency*, and *linked lives* were most prominent, especially in their initial decision to migrate to the US. They chose to come to the US so the family could be together, regardless of the restrictions from their visa statuses. They view this as a temporary status even though it influences their current and future decisions as individuals and as a family.

Menelik Tsehay has an F-1 visa and is currently completing a PhD in a social science field. He has had prior experience living in the US under the J-1 student exchange program and he has been an international student in at least 3 other countries. His partner, Negassi has an F-2 visa. Although she has not had prior experience living in the US or other countries, she has two bachelor's degrees from Ethiopian universities and was

working with underprivileged families and children in her home country. Due to the F-2 visa, she is currently not working in the US.

Menelik's prior experience with the J-1 visa caused him to conduct a lot of research about the F-1 and J-1 visa types. His research included searches on the internet as well as conversations with friends about their own experiences with the different visa types. After all his research, Menelik describes his decision to pursue a program to obtain F-1 visa instead of the J-1 visa:

*“I think the disadvantage with the F -1 is the spouse not working. And me as well, like, [I'm] really limited to the 20 hours employment. That an unfair policy out there... So I mean, the opportunity is after graduation, I would say like the we have two options, right? As far as I know, J-1 and F-1. So for the J-1, your spouse can work, but you will be required to go home. So...I just decided okay, F-1 sucks when you are staying as a student, not good for you, for your family, etc. But I didn't want to stop...take the risk of having to return home and all that bureaucracy after I finish.”*

Menelik emphasizes here that his decision to stick with the F-1 visa and its constraints is temporary because when he graduates, he and his family would have more options rather than being compelled to return home immediately with the J-1 visa.

Negassi notes Menelik as her main source of information about the F-2 visa, and her understanding of the F-2 visa was based on Menelik's explanations of the conditions related to the F-2 visa as well as her own lived experience in the US.

Regardless of the restrictions on her ability to work, Negassi notes that being with family was the most important factor in her decision to migrate: *“And I really love my*

*job, the surrounding I work with [but] family is the basic thing, so I decided to come here and support him. And mainly our children ... have to ... they have to know their father, so he has to spend some time with them.*” There were several factors that influenced the family’s decision to migrate to the US, including the quality of Menelik’s academic program and his prior experiences in other countries. However, across three interviews with this family, regardless of their visa statuses, familial support and being together was the most important factor that influenced their choices. Menelik notes that having his family here has also increased his productivity and efficiency with his academic work as he is eager to spend more time with his family.

The principle of *timing* is manifested in the Tsehay family through the couple’s concern for their children’s upbringing. In line with biographical time, both Menelik and Negassi note that their experience in the US would have been different if their children were older because the children would have a firmer grasp of their Ethiopian culture and heritage before being immersed in the US culture. Negassi and their two children migrated to the US during the Covid-19 pandemic. The principle of *time and place* is manifested in Menelik’s narration of his family’s initial experience in the US. Menelik notes that because there were several stay-at-home orders in place at that time, his family was not able to explore their new environment upon arrival. This influenced their perspective of life in the US making the first couple of weeks difficult. The principles of *human agency* and *linked lives* are also manifested in the sacrifices that the couple make for each other and for their family. For example, although Negassi loved her job back home, she chose to leave and come to the US where she is unable to work due to her visa

status. She notes that the most important factor for her was the desire to have the family live together.

### **Wu Family**

Xia and Jinhai are both 30 years old. They both came to the US as individuals in 2014 to complete master's degrees and are currently completing PhDs in Education and Technology fields. They met during their first year in the US and were in a committed relationship until their recent marriage. They both have F-1 visas and have not had prior experience living in the US. The four principles of life course theory that guided this study (i.e., *timing, time and place, and human agency, and linked lives*) were evident in the story of the Wu family. Their current visa status influences their decisions about career choice, future employment opportunities, and decisions about where to stay as a family.

Xia Wu decided to migrate to the US because pursuing a higher degree had been a constant goal she had while growing up and she perceived the US to have quality higher education opportunities. Jinhai chose the US because of the quality of the academic programs in his field. Using various sources, mainly internet searches and communications with international student advisors and other international student colleagues, Xia and Jinhai obtained information about their F-1 visa statuses. Jinhai explained his understanding of this visa status as:

*“I think first I have to be a full-time student. I cannot work outside of the university. In my university, I can only work no more than 20 hours per week. Yes. And also means that if I want to apply for some internship, like summer*

*internships, not all of the companies will accept international students as their interns. So, a lot of limitations basically.”*

Similarly, Xia also described her understanding of the F-1 status and noted the limitations of her status. She expressed the same work concerns as Jinhai.

*“I’m here for study purposes and I cannot work outside the limits [of the university]. So that means like 20 hours per week, and I cannot work outside the university. So that means I cannot apply to whatever job I want, and everything is constrained within the university. And also like to I need to worry about my visa after I graduate, because when with F-1...when I graduate what am I going to do? So, like, I think most of the decisions are based on ‘I have to keep an active visa status.”*

For this couple, a lot of decisions about their future plans are influenced by their understanding of their current visa status. Regarding the ways in which their visa statuses influence their future decisions, Xia shares:

*“For me, I think at least I always mentioned or discuss with him [Jinhai] about that [visa status] ...because I only have one year OPT after F-1 student visa ends. Then I might have a possibility of losing [my] job. That means I will not earn anything, and just stay at home. So, I did mention this to him and we kind of discussed that, and how that will influence our family. We decided together that if I lost..., if I cannot work, then I will be on a dependent visa and based on our discussion, I think he's quite accept[ing] of that possibility... So, if I will be [on] a dependent visa then he will be the only one to at least to secure a job or earnings...”*



Xia's conversation with Jinhai illustrates some of the ways in which her visa status influences her own experience as an individual and also their lives as family. A change from an F-1 status to a dependent visa (F-2) will lead to a decrease in their financial resources as a family and potentially put a strain on Jinhai as the sole provider for the family. Xia also mentions some other ways which their visa statuses influences their decisions as a family:

*I think we have also discussed whether or not we want to stay in this country. Because even though he has three year OPT after his F-1, there is still a possibility that he may not get an H1-B visa. Then we have discussed whether or not we really want to move back to China... [That means] our home will be based on where he works so we also have discussed that because we both want to find a place that we both want to stay. So that he does not apply all across the country and accept an offer in a place that I don't like, since we're already a family."*

Their current visa statuses and the uncertainties of acquiring a more flexible visa (e.g., the H1-B visa) also produces some uncertainties in regard to decisions on where to establish their home as a family. The interactions between Xia and Jinhai also demonstrate how international students and their families must navigate visa constraints and negotiate their choices when thinking about how their visa status might affect their families' lived experiences.

Like Simon and Dorothy in the Agyeman family, the principle of *timing* is evident in the experiences of Xia and Jinhai. Historical time is manifested in their experience as they migrated as individual students, and this allowed them to each obtain F-1 visas which allow them to have on-campus employment. Regarding biographical and

institutional time, the Wu's also both migrated after their undergraduate education, so they had limited experience with living on their own. After obtaining their master's degrees in the same institution Xia and Jinhai both decided to pursue doctorate degrees to maintain their F-1 visa statuses and their abilities to engage in paid employment. This illustrates the principle of *time and place* as the policies related to international student migration influenced this decision. *Human agency* and *linked lives* are also manifested in the Wu family's narrated experience. Although they are newly-weds, the decisions that the couple makes about their future together and as individuals (e.g., employment, possible change of visa status for Xia, where to stay as a family) is also based on their understanding of their visa statuses and their desire to stay together as a family.

### **Themes**

In this section, I discuss four main themes that emerged as part of my analysis of the data from each family and demonstrate how each of these themes address my overarching research question: *How might the understanding of immigration policies shape the lived experiences of international students with families?* Specifically, the themes that were evident from participants' shared experiences were:

1. Sense-making process for visa status
2. How the understanding of visa statuses changes goal/purposes
3. Disparities between imagined lives and lived realities
4. The importance of living together as a family

In describing and discussing each of these themes, I will be interpreting the ways in which participants made sense of their visa statuses and the effects of that sense-making on their lived experience as illustrated in the vignettes above. I will also address the ways

in which these themes contribute to our knowledge about the lived experiences of international students and their families.

### **Sense-making Process for Visa Status**

There are various sources from which international students and their families obtain information about US immigration policies specifically related to their visa statuses. These include university and government websites, Google searches, Youtube videos, and the shared experiences of other international students. In some instances, students conduct their own research about the different types of international student visas and the opportunities and constraints for each of them before they decide to migrate.

Regardless of the availability of various information sources, the findings from this study show that a clear understanding of these policies comes from personal experience. That is, most international students and their dependents are only able to fully understand the implications of US immigration policy by living through the affordances and restrictions of these policies. This is best represented in the narrated experiences of Dorothy Agyeman, who notes that although she had read about these policies and heard about them from Simon, her partner who migrated before her, she only realized the effects of the policies after she arrived in the US to begin her studies. Similarly, Grace Bukari and Negassi Tsehay also echo Dorothy's experience because, although their partners had explained to them the restrictions of the F-2 visa, the impact of leaving their jobs in their home countries and their inability to work in the US was only tangible to them after they arrived in the US. For students who have not had prior experience in the US or in other countries as international students, knowledge may come from various

sources (e.g., Department of Homeland Security, n.d., Non-Immigrant Classes of Admission), but the sense-making process comes from their day-to-day activities and choices as individuals and as a family living in the US.

Additionally, some international students make sense of their visa status through their prior experiences. This is especially true for individuals who may have had prior experiences with living in the US or in other countries as international students. For example, due to his previous experience in other countries and knowledge of the restrictions of the J-1 visa, e.g., the two-year home country physical presence requirement (UC Berkeley International Office, 2022), when deciding to further his studies and have his family join him in the US, Menelik Tsehay perceived the F-1 visa as a better option for his family. He described this as an option of “temporary suffering” that would provide better future opportunities. Similarly, Simon Agyeman, who had also had prior experience with the J-1 visa and the B-1/B-2 visitor’s visa in the US also described the F-1 visa as very restrictive yet temporary and rated it as better than the other visa types because of the opportunity to further his education and move up the socioeconomic ladder. Netra and Aditya Nellawati had also had prior experience living as an international student family in a different country. As such, although they note that the J-1/J-2 visa was assigned to them based on the Fulbright program, their understanding of their visa status was filtered through their knowledge of what it means to live in a different country. Prior experience with immigration policy better prepares the international student and their family for what their experience might look like and facilitates the sense-making process.

### **How the Understanding of Visa Statuses Changes Goal/Purposes**

Previous research details the several reasons for which international students migrate, with one main reason being the desire to seek better opportunities for themselves and for their children (Abuosi & Abor, 2015). This was evident in the findings from this study as most of the participants migrated to seek better opportunities. For example, Simon Agyeman and Netra Nellawati noted the availability of funding opportunities to further their education as one of the main reasons for migrating to the US. Additionally, Aditya Nellawati also noted that his decision to migrate was to support his partner, who had obtained a good opportunity in the US. His desire to maintain family ties (i.e., linked lives) has also influenced the shift in his ability to engage in a career of his choice as he had to decide to pick a career that was less prestigious than his former employment in order to support his family. Even though international students are well-informed about their visa status and subsequently come to understand their status through personal lived experience, the decision to remain in the US is fueled by a desire to obtain and pursue better academic, employment, and life opportunities for themselves and for their families.

The understanding of their visa statuses coupled with the desire for better opportunities also poses some challenges for international students and their families as they are faced with difficult decisions or choices regarding their future. This is illustrated through the narrated experiences of Kiyoma and Prasanna Rathnayaka who both chose to pursue academic careers in fields of study that were not their preferred choices. Netra Nellawati also noted that her current field of study and university were not her preferred choice. However, because of the availability of funding in that department in her current university and the opportunity for her partner Aditya to obtain a J-2 visa that allowed him

to work in the US, she opted to pursue that career. Similarly, to maintain her visa status and continued ability to have paid on-campus employment, and to be able to stay together as a family, Dorothy Agyeman also chose to pursue an academic career in a field and a university that was not her initial choice. Xia and Jinhai Wu also echoed these difficult decisions as they shared their discussions about the future careers and the limitations in their choices and location of future career opportunities due to their current visa statuses.

In addition to decisions about career choices, the findings from this study also showed that the understanding of the affordances of constraints of individual visa types also influences family process, roles, and decision-making (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Further, for families with young children, migration and the understanding of their individual visa statuses influences their childbearing and childrearing decisions. This was particularly evident in the experiences of Grace Bukari and Negassi Tsehay, who are both F-2 visa holders. Due to restrictions on their abilities to work, both women found themselves transitioning from being career women to becoming full-time stay-at-home mothers who are the primary caregivers for their children. This transition has affected the availability of financial resources for each of these families as their partners John Bukari and Menelik Tsehay have become the sole financial providers for the families.

For the Rathnayaka and Agyeman family, the delivery of their daughters and the limited amount of time provided by their visa statuses meant that they were unable to take time off after having their children. Instead, they shifted their family roles such that they schedule their classes and research work to be able to share the care-giving responsibilities. John Bukari also illustrates the changing family processes as he describes the ways in which the limited amount of time he has to complete his education in order to

maintain his visa status influences the amount of time he is able to spend with his children. Likewise, Menelik and Negassi Tsehay also describe some of the limitations that their visa status places on their childrearing. For example, due to restrictions of Negassi's ability to work in the US, Menelik is now the sole provider for the family. As such, they do not have additional financial resources to spend on extra-curricular activities for their daughters and they have had to make choices about which programs they can engage in. An understanding of one's visa status impacts human agency and linked lives through family ties also influence the family process, roles, and relationships (Elder et al., 2003; Wingens, 2011).

### **Disparities Between Imagined Life and Lived Experiences**

The findings of this study also indicate that, in some cases, there are disparities between imagined life as an international student with families and actual realities. Social support matters for the psychological well-being of international students, even when family members are not present in the US (Harvey et al., 2009; Yeh & Inose, 2003), and prior research shows that better sociocultural adjustment of international students also facilitates their academic adjustment (Aldawsari et al., 2018; Chai et al., 2020). For some international students, their initial perceptions of the presence of their families is that they will have additional support and company in the US. Although the presence of family provides comfort and warmth for some students, for others, due to the constraints of the F-2 dependent visa, the arrival of their family members in the US presents additional financial burdens. This was evident in the Tsehay and the Bukari families where the students became the sole financial providers for their families after migration.

Further, regarding these disparities, international students are aware of the opportunities and constraints of their visa statuses, and they obtain this information from various sources (e.g., the internet, university and government websites, the experiences of others). However, their lived experiences facilitate the process of making sense of what it means to be categorized under a specific visa type. This is evident through the narrated experiences of Dorothy in the Agyeman family as she explains that her understanding of the importance/implementation of immigration policy related to the F-1 visa only came through her own experience of living through these policy allowances and constraints. Similarly, for the Wu family, their imagined perceptions of life in the US did not include a consideration or an understanding of the effects of the immigration policies that were linked to their visa statuses, especially as individuals. As a married couple, they are now exploring the different options for their future and are able to understand the different ways in which their visa statuses influence their lived realities as a family. The imagined life that is created by the knowledge of existing immigration policy becomes a façade when the international students and their families make sense of their visa status.

These findings indicate a disparity between immigration policy creation, policy enactment and policy implications for the stakeholders as the intended meaning of the opportunities and constraints of the different visa types are essentially only meaningful through lived experience. Policies are created and implemented through a dynamic process of interactions between various stakeholders, historic, and sociopolitical contexts (Ball, 1993; Diem et al. 2014). However, the effects of policy can only be understood by learning from the lived experiences of the stakeholders who are impacted by these policies.



### **The Importance of Living Together as a Family**

In each of these interviews, participants described the importance of living together as a family as one of the main factors that influenced their decision to migrate. For example, during the individual interview with Grace Bukari she noted that, regardless of the knowledge that moving to the US would mean that she would no longer be able to work, she chose to move because she believed that it was necessary for children to be raised by both parents. Similarly, Negassi Tsehay also chose to abandon her career and move to the US so that her children could also benefit from growing up in a two-parent family. Grace and Negassi chose to let go of their careers to ensure that their families could live together and that their children could enjoy continued interactions with their fathers.

These stories of choosing family togetherness over individual preferences were also evident in the experiences of the other participants. For example, Netra Nellawati chose a program of study that was not her first choice because it provided an opportunity for her family to join her in the US. Dorothy Agyeman also chose a program of study and a university that was not her first choice because it was an opportunity for her to be able to live together with Simon. This same story was shared by Prasanna, who also chose a program that was not his preferred choice. In each of these cases, the participants compromised on their individual preferences to keep their family together. The need to stay together as a family also fuels the desire of international students and their families to do well in their new and environment and validates and encourages some of the sacrifices (e.g., loss or change of career) that their family members who migrate with them have to make to maintain the family unit.

The findings of this study support previous studies about the various reasons why people to choose to migrate. In addition to migrating to build social, cultural, and economic capital (Abuosi & Abuor, 2015; Efonayi & Piguët, 2014) and to pursue opportunities in higher education (Kritz, 2015), the participants in this study chose to migrate to keep their families together. These findings expand our knowledge of the various reasons for which international students migrate and provides additional details about the reasons why a specific and rarely studied population of immigrants (i.e., the relatives of international students) may also choose to migrate.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

International students and their families make valuable contributions to the US economy (IIE, 2019). However, most of the existing literature about international students had focused on the experiences of the students themselves without considering the experiences of the family members who are living in the US with the international student. The findings of this study emphasize the need to continuously explore the lived experiences of international students with families because of the intersections between individual and familial well-being. International students and their families live within the opportunities and constraints of US immigration policies which often affect their well-being. As such, the goal of this phenomenological study was to explore the ways in which international students and their families make sense of their visa statuses and the effects of that understanding on their subsequent choices and life course outcomes (Van Manen, 2017b). The findings of this study also humanize the students and their family members by illustrating the complexities of their roles, responsibilities, and identities as parents, spouses, breadwinners, caregivers, and students.

Based on the four principles of the life course theory used in this study and the hermeneutic phenomenological design that framed this study, the findings provide evidence of the ways in which an individual's ability to make choices and the effects of those choices is always influenced by their sociohistorical and political contexts and their understanding of these contexts. Specifically, as narrated through their lived experiences, there is an intersection between the timing of participants' stay in the US (e.g., when they arrived/how long they have been here) and the time and place (i.e., the US at his point in time). Additionally, the intersection between the principles of human agency and linked

lives is also evidenced here through participants' narrations of the ways in which making career and educational choices is influenced by their visa status and their desire to be together as a family. Previous studies have focused on the experiences of international students as individuals (e.g., Abuosi & Abor, 2015; De Araujo, 2011), without necessarily focusing on the experiences of the family members who often migrate with the students (Department of Homeland Security, 2021). Because family is a major source of social support for international students (Yeh & Inose, 2013; Harvey et al., 2017), it was important to explore the experiences of the individual family members and the family unit as well. Through the lived experiences of participants, this study also provides more evidence for the importance of family as an important aspect of social support for international students, especially regarding sociocultural adjustment (De Araujo, 2011).

This study also expands on previous research (e.g., Wingens et al. 2011) in which the life course theory has been used to explore the effects of macro-level factors (e.g., policies) on micro-level (e.g., individual and family) outcomes. The decisions and choices that international students and their families make regarding their situation as an immigrant family stems from their understanding of US immigration policies and illustrate the four principles of the life course theory that guide this study. The life course of the student and the individual family members are influenced by the *timing* of the transition (e.g., considering the ages of the individuals and the stage in life), the *time and place* (i.e., the sociohistorical and political context of the US), *human agency* (i.e., the ability to make individual choices) and *linked lives* (i.e., the union/relation to other family members and the need to consider that union in making decisions).

## **Implications**

Social constructivists suggest that the individual's life course is not an isolated concept as it exists, is realized, and understood in relation to others with whom the individual has interactions in each context (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The findings from this study suggest that there are several macro-level (e.g., national) and micro-level (e.g., universities and academic departments) that can be made to facilitate the academic, social, and psychological well-being of international students and their families. In the following sections, I provide some implications of for policy, practice, theory, and research.

### ***Implications for Policy***

One main issue discussed in the findings was the limitations on employment for international students and their dependents (e.g., the number of working hours, on-campus location restrictions). Especially for international students with family, this restriction limits their abilities to obtain access to financial resources to efficiently care for their families. This finding highlights the importance of understanding the intersections between policy and lived experience. Specifically, based on the narrated experiences of the participants in this study, policy makers should consider reviewing the restrictions that the F-1 and F-2 visa types place on the individuals' ability to work and the types of activities in which they can engage. This is important for the well-being of international students and their families because, for example, allowing F-1 visa holders to work outside of campus, especially during the summer when they can work for more than 20 hours as per their visa status, would provide more opportunities for them to obtain financial resources to support their families. Allowing F-2 visa holders to engage

in some type of paid employment would reduce the financial burdens on international students with families.

The dependents of international students are often highly skilled workers with varying strengths that can contribute to the growth of the US economy. For F-2 holders, due to the restrictions placed on employment, they are unable to engage in any form of paid employment. As noted in the previous section, this restriction is harmful to the well-being of the family as it leads to limited financial resources. Given the current shortage of workers in the US (Leonhardt, 2021), I would argue that this immigration restriction creates a loss for the US economy as well as there are individuals who are willing yet not allowed to work in the US. In the case of J-2 visa holders, although they are allowed to work in the US, their degrees and/or other qualifications from their home countries are sometimes not recognized in the US. This limits their employment opportunities and is also a loss to the US economy as the skillsets of these individuals could be beneficial to the development of the country. The need to foster the well-being of students converges with the need to grow the US economy. The sociohistorical and political context within which Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 was created varies from the current US context with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy makers at the national level should consider reviewing these restrictions not only to facilitate the well-being of international students and their families but also to facilitate the growth of the economy.

In creating immigration policies, policy makers should consider gathering and using information about different aspects and contexts of the lived experiences of different types of immigrants (e.g., international students) to guide the policy making process. For example, even though F-1 visa holders can only work on their university

campuses, there are often limited opportunities available for students to work on campus during the summer. This means that several international students and their families sometimes end up accruing debts over the summer as they rely on credit cards to pay their bills. At the national level, policy makers should reconsider the restrictions on international student employment. Allowing international students to work for 40-hours during the summer while restricting their employment to on-campus jobs which are in limited supply does not provide the necessary financial resources to support themselves as individuals and also support their families. To address this issue, policy makers should consider revising immigration policy to allow international students to engage in paid, off-campus employment during the summer.

### ***Implications for Practice***

The findings from this study illustrate the ways in which immigration policies affect the lived experiences of international students and their families. The policies, opportunities, and practices at the universities which international students attend also affect their individual and familial well-being, and as such, it is important to review some of these policies and practices. In line with the discussion on employment from the previous paragraph, at the university level, academic departments should consider the ways in which summer employment is allocated. For example, department chairs should consider allocating summer employment on a needs basis and also ensure that there is a fairly equitable rotation of these opportunities so that international students may have access to these opportunities.

Although there are several sources provided for information about US immigration policies, in addition to the support from international centers on different US

campuses of higher education, the findings from this study suggest that provision of additional support services for incoming international students might be beneficial to aid their transition into their new lives, especially since a clear understanding of immigration policy comes through living under the opportunities and constraints of these policies. To facilitate the process of transition and the sense-making process, university leaders can go beyond the provision of information on their websites or through emails. For example, academic departments can provide personal mentorship opportunities for new international students. It would be helpful to pair students with other students with whom they have shared similarities (e.g., incoming students with families should be paired with more experienced students who also have families) so that they can have access to knowledge about the resources that are available to them both on campus and within the community. Given the bidirectional relation between academic and sociocultural adjustment as described by Menelik from the Tsehay family, by providing support for international students and their families in the sociocultural domain, university leaders would also be facilitating the academic success of international students.

As illustrated through the experiences of Negassi Tsehay and Grace Bukari in the findings, the F-2 dependents of international students sometimes find themselves being isolated during the process of transitioning to life in the US. This isolation comes from the separation from their sources of social support (e.g., work colleagues, extended family members, caregivers) back in their home countries. In addition to the support provided from international centers on various university campuses across the US, university leaders should also consider making accommodations for the family members of international students. For example, universities can consider offering slightly reduced



childcare services or free language classes for the dependents of students who indicate that they would be migrating with their dependents during the application process. Even if universities can only provide these services for a limited time (e.g., for the first year), it would be beneficial to facilitate the process of transitioning to the US culture as a family.

### ***Implications for Theory and Research***

The findings from this study illustrate an intersection between various aspects of the life course theory and the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. Specifically, through phenomenological interviews with participants, the findings from this study help us to further our understanding of how the sense-making process of the participants illustrates the ways in which an understanding of macro-contextual factors (i.e., immigration policy) influences their lived experiences. This highlights the importance of congruence between theory and research approaches. Additionally, although the use of both vignettes and themes in presenting the findings for this hermeneutic phenomenological study was not the traditional format for a phenomenological study, it was helpful in humanizing my participants and presenting a more wholistic view of their lived experiences as well as the interactions, reflections, and interpretations that went into this study to help address the research questions. In selecting theoretical frameworks, methods, and designs for conducting similar research about the lived experiences of others, researchers should explore the ways in which a particular theoretical framework might be appropriately paired with their methodology to ensure that the stories and voices of their participants are appropriately highlighted throughout the research process.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to learn about the lived experiences of international students with families by exploring their understanding of US immigration policies and the ways in which these policies shape their individual and family experiences. The study was guided by hermeneutic phenomenology and four principles of the life course theory. The findings show that there are various sources through which international students and their families gain access to information about their individual visa statuses. Regardless of these sources, the sense-making process about the different statuses comes from living through the opportunities and constraints of US immigration policies and there are real-world implications/consequences of the policies. The understanding of these policies influences the decisions of international students and their families and consequently influences the life course of individuals and families.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

There were some limitations to this study. First, even though I would have liked to interview at least one individual who represents each of the diverse make ups of international students with families, any attempt on my part to assume that I could identify all the different makeups was inappropriate and would be a way to negate the existence of other diverse international student family compositions. My goal in this study was not to generalize this information but rather to present the lived experiences of a portion of this diverse population. As such, there were several potential participants who may have been excluded from the study. Also, the use of the life course theory together with hermeneutic phenomenology in this study highlights the role and effects of contextual factors on individual and group experiences. Looking at the different types

and characteristics of international student families (e.g., families who migrate with their children, children born in the US who are then US citizens by birth, etc.), there may be an intersection between the diversity of immigration status in a particular family and the choices that the families may make concerning their future (e.g., whether to seek permanent residence in the US or return to their home countries). Future research can employ similar research methods to explore the experiences of some of the other diverse family types within this population.

Familial support and the need to be together were some of the main factors noted by each of the participants in this study, and prior research shows that social support is important for the well-being and successful adjustment of international students. Since family is one of the main sources of social support for international students (Aldawsari et al., 2018), future research can be conducted to explore and/or compare the adjustment of international students who migrate with their families in comparison to those who migrate alone.

Time was also a limitation for this study. Given the many roles and responsibilities of international students with families (e.g., care giving, studying, completing assistantships, etc.), and the fact that the data for this study was gathered during the semester when students are juggling several roles, there were some difficulties with scheduling interviews. I would suggest that subsequent studies can be conducted during the summer months where some international students are relieved of some of the responsibilities that come with academic work and on-campus employment.

Additionally, all the participants included in this study were in their 30's and a majority of those who had children within the early to middle childhood stages. This was

not an intentional criteria for selection of participants. The individuals who consented to participant were from young/growing families, and their experiences might differ from other families with older or adult children or families without children. Employing similar methods and perspectives, future research can be conducted to explore the experiences of international students and families who are in different stages of their individual and familial life course.

Finally, the sense-making process is subjective. As such, the way I made sense of US immigration policies may have differed from the way some of the participants made sense of them or the ways in which other individuals might make sense of these policies. Given the number of participants and the fact that I did not speak to any immigration policy experts (e.g., immigration lawyers and international center advisors) for this study, I cannot say that the interpretations encompass everyone else's views. Future research can incorporate the views of immigration policy experts to explore the differences between the legally intended purposes of US immigration policies and the sense-making process/understandings of international students and their families.

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## Appendix A

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: US Immigration Policies: The Lived Experiences of International Students with Families

Principal Investigator/Researcher: Vida Nana Ama Bonney

IRB Reference Number: 2085682

You are being invited to take part in a research project. You must be 18 years of age or older. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop being in this study at any time.

The purpose of this research project is to find out the ways in which US immigration policy shapes the lived experiences of international students living with their families (in this case spouses and/or children) in the United States. You are being asked to participate in three interviews where you will be asked to respond to open-ended questions about your knowledge/understanding of immigration policies related to international students and share your experiences as an international student or as a family member living with an international student in the US. It is estimated that your participation in all the interviews will not last more than five hours. It is estimated that there will be up to a week's spacing between each interview. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Additionally, for the first interview which will be conducted via email, I will copy your responses upon receipt into a separate document and delete the email. Also, the information from the email will be de-identified by creating pseudonyms for participants. The information you provide throughout the interview series will be kept confidential and any identifying information will be removed. Pseudonyms will also be used to protect your identity in any discussion related to the findings of this study.

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information we learn from you during this study may help us to better understand the experiences of international students with families.

If you have questions about this study, you can contact the University of Missouri researcher at [va244@umsystem.edu](mailto:va244@umsystem.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or [muresearchirb@missouri.edu](mailto:muresearchirb@missouri.edu). The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email [muresearchrpa@missouri.edu](mailto:muresearchrpa@missouri.edu).

You can ask the researcher to provide you with a copy of this consent for your records, or you can save a copy of this consent if it has already been provided to you. I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions

#### **PROJECT: US Immigration Policies: The Lived Experiences of International Students with Families**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee (Pseudonym): \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Survey/Interview 1 (Questions sent via email to the international student only)**

#### **Questions for the International Student**

*The goal of this initial interview is to obtain some background information about you and your family. Please respond to the following questions and send me your responses via email.*

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from? Is your partner from the same country?
3. How long have you been in the US as an international student?
4. What is your program of study?
5. What is your source of funding for your program (e.g., research or teaching assistantship, Fulbright)?
6. What type of visa do you hold (F-1 or J-1)?
7. How many family members are here with you?
8. What are the ages of the family members who migrated with you? Specifically, how old were they at the time that you moved to the US?

**Interview 2 (Individual interviews conducted via Zoom for the student and also for the family member/dependent)**

**Questions for the International Student**

1. I know you mentioned X in the questions I sent via email. Tell me more about your family (e.g., ages, birthplace, language(s) spoken, etc.)
2. *Agency*
  - a. Tell me about your decision to pursue studies in the US. What pathway led you here? (Probe for decisions about the US as a destination for study, choice of the program of study, factors that were considered in making those decisions)
  - b. Tell me about your decision to move with your family. What was that process like? (Probe for contextual factors that may have led to that decision)
3. *Time and Place*
  - a. What does a normal day look like for you now? Describe to me what goes on in a typical day in your life.
  - b. How did you envision your life as an international student in the US?
  - c. Tell me about your experience with the process of transition from living in your home country to living in the US (Probe for ideas about the school and visa application process)
    - i. You noted in your background information that you have an (X) visa. What does it mean to hold that visa in the US?

- ii. How did you learn about this visa status? If possible, can you share with me some of the resources that have helped you to understand this visa status?

#### **4. *Timing***

- a. What was it like to move to the US with your family? (Probe to find out if they came together or the family members joined later. Consider how that might be different for other families)
- b. Have you had prior experiences with being in the US (e.g., as a visitor) prior to becoming an international student? Tell me about that experience.
- c. Have you had prior experience with living in any other countries apart from the US and your country of origin? Tell me about that experience.
- d. How has the timing of your transition to the US influenced your experience? (For example, do you think that your experience would be different if you had moved here earlier or later?)

#### **5. *Linked lives***

- a. To you, what does it mean to have your family in the US with you?
- b. How are you able to navigate family life while being an international student? (Consider the different aspects of your identity and the roles/responsibilities of those aspects as applicable to you - e.g., student, worker, spouse, parent, etc.)

### **Questions for the International Student's Family Member**

1. Tell me about yourself (e.g., age, birthplace, language(s) spoken, work/school, etc.)
2. *Agency*
  - a. Tell me about your decision to come to the US with your spouse. What pathway led you here? (Probe for decisions related to leaving the home country, social networks, and other opportunities there to move to the US, contextual factors)
3. *Time and Place*
  - a. Before moving to the US, what did a typical day look like for you?
  - b. How did you envision your life in the US?
  - c. What does a normal day look like for you now? Describe to me what goes on in a typical day in your life.
  - d. Tell me about your experience with the process of transition from living in your home country to living in the US.
    - i. Your spouse noted in the details about background information that he/she has an (X) visa. What type of visa do you have?
    - ii. What does it mean to hold that visa in the US?
    - iii. How did you learn about this visa status? If possible, can you share with me some of the resources that have helped you to understand this visa status?
4. *Timing*



- a. Have you had prior experience with living in any other countries apart from the US and your country of origin? Tell me about that experience.
- b. How has the timing of your transition to the US influenced your experience? (For example, do you think that your experience would be different if you had moved here earlier or later?)

## **5. Linked lives**

- a. To you, what does it mean to be the family member of an international student in the US?
- b. How are you able to navigate family life as the spouse of an international student? (Consider the different aspects of your identity and the roles/responsibilities of those aspects as applicable to you - e.g., spouse, parent, worker/non-worker, caregiver, etc.)

## **Interview 3 (Joint interview conducted via Zoom with both the student and their family member)**

### **1. Linked Lives**

- a. What does a typical weekend look like for your family?
- b. Tell me about your life as a family (e.g., how do you divide chores, what role do each of you play in finances, decision making, caregiving, etc. as applicable).
- c. In our previous interviews, I asked each of you to describe how you are able to navigate family life. Here's my understanding of what you told me.

- i. Would you say that is an accurate reflection of what you said? Is there anything you would like to add or clarify for me?

## **2. Comparison of context**

- a. Tell me about your life as a family in your home country
- b. Tell me about your life as a family living in the US
- c. How is your experience as a family in the Us different from your experiences as a family (if that was the case for you) back home?
- d. Do you know of any resources available on campus or in the community to support you and your family?
  - i. How have you individually or as a family utilized these resources?
  - ii. How did you learn about those resources? Can you share with me some of the sources that helped you find those resources?

## VITA

Vida Nana Ama Bonney was born in Tema Ghana. She arrived in the US in July 2014 to pursue a Master of Arts degree in Language Teaching (Spanish) at the University of Missouri. Although she started a PhD in the same academic unit in Spring 2017, she switched to pursue a PhD in Human Development and Family Studies in the Spring of 2018. Vida's experiences as an international student have shaped her perspective on the importance of context, as such, her research centers the role of contextual factors on individual and familial outcomes and well-being. Her research interests include the effects of cultural and contextual factors on development, parenting and adult-child relationships, child development in multicultural and/or multilingual families, dual language development, and the lived experiences of immigrant families.