



Profile

Ama de-Graft Aikins: unravelling the complexities of chronic illness experiences in African communities



Ama de-Graft Aikins

For more on the **Chronicity and Care in African Contexts** project see <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/global-professorships-ama-de-graft-aikins/>

For more on the **RODAM** study see *PLoS One* 2019; **14**: e0214501

For the study of **hypertension care in Ghana** see *J Community Appl Soc Psychol* 2020; **1**–22

For more on the **Chronicity** project see *J Br Acad* 2020; **8**: 401–13

Chronic non-communicable diseases are more than just a collection of physical symptoms, but also intertwined strands of social, cultural, and economic problems whose interplay needs to be understood to address the burden of each disease. The burden of chronic diseases in Africa and in African communities elsewhere in the world is disproportionately high and even more complex, requiring a “whole-of-society” approach. This approach, together with understanding the social psychology of chronic illness in African communities, forms the basis of Professor Ama de-Graft Aikins’ latest project at University College London (London, UK) titled “Chronicity and Care in African Contexts”.

The project entails a social psychological study of the experience of chronic illnesses in London’s West African communities and involves a large amount of interaction with participants and their families, something that suits de-Graft Aikins. Born in London and raised in Accra, Ghana, she describes growing up as a quiet, studious, only child. During her pharmacology degree at the University of Manchester (Manchester, UK), she worked on research with human participants and realised, almost surprisingly for herself, that she enjoyed engaging with people rather than solitary benchwork. She was hooked on research from that point and switched career directions towards psychology.

Her subsequent Masters and PhD degrees in psychology ignited her interest in the experiences of psychiatric care from the perspective of the users themselves, particularly in different ethnic communities. Her interest in the user’s perspective led to her conceptual focus on how fluid and complex thoughts and feelings, in the context of life circumstances, can influence an individual’s understanding of chronic diseases—and shape health behaviours and actions. She commented “I began to understand the interconnectedness of complex physiological systems and complex structural systems.” As part of a large multi-institutional consortium, de-Graft Aikins worked with Professor Charles Agyemang at University of Amsterdam (Amsterdam, Netherlands) from 2012 to 2015 on the Research on Obesity and Diabetes among African Migrants (RODAM) project. The project aimed to examine why the prevalence of type 2 diabetes and obesity was so high in sub-Saharan African immigrants in Europe, and incorporated qualitative methods to examine lay perceptions of the conditions. The qualitative study, led by de-Graft Aikins, showed that, although there was general awareness in both immigrant and non-migrant populations about

preventing type 2 diabetes through healthy eating and reducing complications from diabetes through adherence to medication, knowledge was not comprehensive and biomedical ideas coexisted with cultural beliefs about supernatural causes of diabetes and faith-based treatments. Another study led by de-Graft Aikins was a social psychological study on hypertension care in Ga Mashie (Accra, Ghana). This study highlighted how chronic diseases can have added socioeconomic complexities in poor urban communities, especially in Africa where there is a high double burden of infectious and chronic diseases. These studies form the basis of her current project on chronic illness and systems of care in African communities on the continent and the diaspora.

de-Graft Aikins is a chilled and relaxed interviewee, even when speaking of facing the familiar twin struggles that many women of colour in academia face, of often being the only Black woman in a room with the accompanying feelings of isolation. She faced an even bigger challenge juggling academic work and parental care when she had to care for her father who had a succession of strokes over a long period. But perhaps this struggle increased her empathy and pushed her to understand the stress of caregiving at a deeper level; as she says, “perhaps part of the reason I’ve shifted, in my current project, to the social aspects of chronic illness and to systems of care is due to the experiences I have had as a caregiver.” She has subsequently increased her determination to focus on care on local and international projects. One of her main interests is reading, particularly essays and short stories, and she is inspired by brave and bold writers such as Toni Morrison, who urged Black women to speak up unapologetically from their centres. She loves being transported by art, music, particularly old school hip-hop, and dancing, and hearing about a monthly hip-hop club night on a rooftop in Brixton (London, UK) was met with enthusiasm. It is these diverse strands of personality that drive de-Graft Aikins’ ongoing and future projects. When she has completed her Chronicity project, she hopes to successfully disseminate insights to improve chronic care practices in African-British communities, and positively influence policies on health and social care in these communities. She also wants to write for lay readers, particularly anthologies of stories of chronic illness in the African context that are told in an engaging way, to hopefully change the way people view and respond to disease and long-term illnesses.

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