

STUDYING ABROAD AS A WOMAN OF COLOR

If you're a student of color who is interested in going abroad, it can be both exciting and challenging. You learn to navigate a new environment with an entirely different history and because of that, an entirely different political climate. That results in different attitudes about issues of race and ethnicity. I identify as a second-generation Taiwanese American, and in the fall of 2015, I went abroad to the University of Sussex in Brighton, England. I am a Sociology minor, so of course I had a field day analyzing and exploring my own experience as a woman of color through the lens of race and ethnicity. It was especially interesting living in a new continent and country with a complicated history of colonialism, imperialism, and racism.

Experiencing Microaggressions

London and Brighton are considered relatively diverse and liberal areas with an increasing number of racial minorities coming to live there. During my time abroad I did not face any acts of overt discrimination and prejudice. However, I was not completely free of racial microaggressions.

Microaggressions, as defined by Juan Garibay in a booklet on "Diversity in the Classroom" for UCLA, are "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership."

Thankfully for me, I only remember experiencing one instance of microaggression. This was having a shopkeeper in London speak to me in Chinese unsolicited, reinforcing the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype of people of Asian descent.

A Unique Cultural Space

Another aspect of my experience that stands out to me was living in a flat where there were many Chinese international students. We all got along well the first few weeks, but my mediocre

Chinese language skills soon tired out. We eventually formed our own groups where the Chinese international students stuck with each other, and I stuck with my British and American friends. This led me to realize that I had a certain privilege because I spoke English and could communicate more easily with the British students.

Thus I “separated” myself from the Chinese international students, which led to an “us” vs. “them” mentality. As an Asian American woman, I believe that I already occupy a unique space in the United States, though I often feel I am still trying to figure out what that is. In England I occupied a different one. It was both fascinating and frustrating to navigate this new cultural and social space without feeling like I even had a good grasp on my place at home.

How is this Appropriate?

I am someone who is extremely interested in the intersections of race, politics, and law. When I was abroad, I learned that England has a very different history of immigration and racial integration and a very different attitude about communities of color. This was apparent to me when I was with the Christian Union at the local student bar and a group of students walked in wearing stereotypical Mexican costumes complete with sombreros, handlebar mustaches, maracas, and ponchos. Seeing that was extremely jarring, especially because I had been reading about the protests on campuses across the U.S. regarding institutional racism in higher education. It also hit close to home because I had recently read about an incident at the Claremont Colleges where a photo was shared of a group of students wearing the same kind of racially insensitive “Mexican” costumes.

I shared my concern about this with a British friend, and she said she did not realize this was offensive and that in England it is still socially acceptable to wear that kind of costume. The marginalizing effects of cultural appropriation were not as apparent to British students as to

American students. They were more concerned about the refugee crisis in Europe because that was a more pressing issue for them. While the British were generally aware about discrimination and were sensitive to issues about race, certain things that have become unacceptable in the States are still socially acceptable in the UK.

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A New Perspective on Identity

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Overall, while in England I often felt more aware of my identity as an American than as an Asian. What helped my transition into British university life was finding another Asian American friend from the same area in California. Spending time with her helped because she understood the sadness that was the constant cloud cover and the intense craving for boba milk tea. While it might not be possible for everyone to find a friend from the same area while you are abroad, I found that it was also helpful to stay connected with my family and community. Before you go, download and tell your family to download apps such as WhatsApp or Viber which let you make free phone calls and send messages using WiFi!

Studying abroad truly opened my eyes to the fluidity of identity, as my identity took on different meanings when I entered different spaces and interacted with other students from around the world. I learned that there is no one country with a perfect history of respecting the rights of communities of color and other marginalized identities. My time studying abroad as a woman of color helped open my eyes to new possibilities for creating a more inclusive and just society.