

Race, Ethnicity, Power, and Privilege Abroad: Racialized Tensions Rise Among a Group of Students Abroad in Chile

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

Mission State University (MSU) is a large public university system with over a dozen campuses. MSU prides itself on the diversity of its students, with many of its campuses designated as Hispanic-Serving Institutions. However, on their education abroad programs, many diverse racial and ethnic student populations are underrepresented while white students are overrepresented. About 70% of MSU education abroad program participants are white while the rest are students of color.

The MSU system serves as a provider organization for students from throughout its campuses to study abroad together. There is a cohort of students on a semester-long program in Santiago, Chile that includes a language intensive pre-semester portion of the program in which this case takes place. The students are instructed by a local Chilean professor and all course work is in Spanish, though this professor is lenient and lets them speak in English as needed to express themselves.

This cohort is made up of 30 students, about 10 who are people of color while the other 20 are white. Eight students of color are Latino/a/e students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, with a range of brown and beige skin tones. The other two students of color are East Asian with light-skinned complexions.

Case

On the first day of instruction, Nicole and Sonia, who had decided to study abroad together, walk into their class a few minutes before it begins. Nicole is a heritage seeking student who is in Chile for the first time looking to reconnect with her roots. Sonia is of Mexican descent. When they arrive, they find a group of students sitting around Sharon and Katie, two white students, who are excitedly sharing about their recent hiking trip in southern Chile.

Nicole and Sonia notice Yahaira, who is of Afro-Dominican descent, and Stephen, a gay man who is of Chinese descent, chatting among themselves. Nicole and Sonia slide into their seats among them. Sonia turns to Yahaira and says to her, "*Parece que nos siguieron hasta el fin del mundo*. There's no escaping." This translates to, "Looks like they've followed us even to the end of the world", in reference to the white students, insinuating that there's no getting away from them. Yahaira simply looks down and doesn't say anything in response. Stephen responds by saying, "Yes girl, they're everywhere". The professor walks in and calls everyone to attention.

This language-intensive course is based around language, culture, and history. However, the coursework prompts conversations around power and privilege. Some of the white students in the cohort, especially Shannon and Katie, have made comments that were offensive. In return, the students of color, particularly Nicole and Sonia, made comments about the white students. Neither of these groups of students seem to recognize the impact of their words on one another.

During the first week, Shannon shares that her Mexican nanny taught her Spanish while growing up, which is why she's able to speak it so well. Sonia and Nicole share eye rolls with one another. In the second week, Katie mentions that she hates being discriminated against as an American when overcharged while buying local artisanal goods. Sonia tells her that she should pay the prices that locals are asking for since she holds the power and privilege of having U.S. currency. Yahaira counters Sonia and tells her she agrees with Katie - that she also hates being ripped off by locals. This conversation sparks a heated debate among the rest of the class.

On the third week of the language-intensive course, one other white student, Emma, shares that she is having a hard time navigating her white privilege knowing that she is of German descent. She discloses that she's aware of the stigma surrounding German descendants in Chile due to their association with Nazis who fled to South America after World War II. After class, Stephen begins to joke that some of the white students in their cohort, including Emma, are Nazis.

Day by day, the discussions get more and more intense. On the fifth and final week of the language-intensive course, when discussing the end of the Chilean dictatorship, Nicole, the student of Chilean descent, has an emotional outburst. She blames the United States for catering to the greed of its people, white people, as the ongoing reason for issues in Chile.

Shannon, who happens to be sitting a couple of rows behind Nicole, jumps up in her seat in an aggressive manner. She shares that she is tired of having everything blamed on white people when none of these issues have anything to do with them. She shares that a lot of white students in the group are from different backgrounds themselves - German, Jewish, Irish, Italian, French, Norwegian. She states that some of them

don't even know their cultural background and that it's unfair to blame them when they weren't even alive when many of these historical events took place. Nicole tells Shannon that none of that matters since she still holds white privilege that runs rampant around the world. Shannon tells Nicole that she needs to stop victimizing herself. That's when Nicole approaches Shannon to tell her off face to face. The two students begin a yelling match in each other's face while the professor shouts at them to sit down with no success.

Sonia stands next to Nicole, attempting to pull her away from Shannon. Katie and Yahaira try to pull Shannon away as well. Shannon flails her arms and accidentally hits Yahaira in the face with her elbow, causing her nose to bleed. Nicole yells at Shannon, telling her, "Look what you did!". Shannon pushes Nicole away and Nicole responds by pushing Shannon back so hard that she falls to the floor. Sonia pulls Nicole away while she continues shouting at Shannon. Shannon begins to cry while Katie attempts to consult her. Stephen attends to Yahaira while the professor calls the onsite study abroad coordinator for assistance.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What pre-departure measures could have been taken to prepare students for cultural competency and behavioral expectations while on this program?
- What could have been done onsite to encourage community-building and belonging among this cohort of students?
- What kind of support could these students receive as they navigate topics such as race, ethnicity, power, and privilege while on program?
- How can international educators tackle topics of race, ethnicity, power, and privilege in a way that validates students' experiences while also challenging them to question how they engage with one another on these topics?
- How could relationships within this cohort be rebuilt after an altercation as intense as this?
- What would the appropriate consequences or next steps for the students involved in this situation look like?