

No Ethnographers Needed: When Whiteness Affects Community-Based Research

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Tags

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Setting

The College of Kansas is a small, Christian college in Louistown, Kansas with about 2000 students, most of whom are White and of the Christian faith. At The College of Kansas, Dr. Heddy Jameson runs a summer study abroad program for three months in Laos, a small country in Southeast Asia. In this program, students studying anthropology at The College of Kansas can learn ethnographic research methods and conduct a small research project while also being immersed in a new culture and country. As part of the program, the students complete two courses—Ethnographic Research Methods and History and Culture of Laos. They also receive basic introductory Laotian language lessons with a native speaker for a few weeks at the start of the program. A Laotian buddy was also assigned to help them both with navigating the capital city, Vientiane, and conducting their small research projects in local villages.

Case

Morton is a White male-identifying American second-year student at The College of Kansas where he is studying for a bachelor's degree in Anthropology. Morton, having never been outside the United States, was excited to hear about Dr. Jameson's study abroad program from his academic advisor and a graduating senior who visited his advisor's Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course to talk about her experience studying abroad in Laos. The student who visited the class spoke positively about her experience, although she also mentioned that the transition from the United States to Laos was difficult in the beginning because of "culture

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shock” and some foodborne illness. She also mentioned that she met many local people who had not yet interacted with Americans before. Morton was especially excited to hear about her experience conducting research related to the Buddhist religion in Laos because he wanted to learn about how different the religion was in other countries from what he had grown up learning at home. He applied and was accepted with a scholarship to help him pay for his tuition, hotel stays, food, and airfare.

At the start of the program, Morton and his fellow students received a basic introduction to fieldwork and some readings on interviewing, observation, surveying people and writing good field notes. Although Morton and the other students learned basic Laotian in the short language lessons, it was not enough to conduct interviews. One week into the program, Morton met Pin, a Laotian male-identifying student who would help Morton with interviews in the local village that he was assigned to visit during his program.

For the first several weeks of fieldwork, Morton and Pin went to a local temple close to Morton’s assigned village where Morton learned about Buddhist religious practices in Laos and interviewed local clergy officials. Pin helped with translating during the interviews. Morton became fascinated with the monks at the temple, one of whom had spent a year abroad learning English. He also noticed that some people would stare at him silently but thought nothing of it. Morton slowly became acclimated to Laos and Laotian culture during these first few weeks of conducting research and wrote in his field journal that “sitting in the shade under a Banyan tree with fresh papaya during my lunch break, while watching locals in the rice fields, I could not imagine myself anywhere else in the world”. At that moment, Morton was sure that he wanted to study anthropology beyond his bachelor’s degree.

In the second and third month of the program, Morton and Pin were to go into the local village to interview villagers about their Buddhist practices. A few weeks into interviewing people in the village, Morton and Pin went to one home to interview a couple who were about 35 years old. The husband and wife were happy to be interviewed and told Pin they could talk for hours about their religious beliefs and practices. Morton found it interesting that they were not reluctant to talk with him as he had observed with other people earlier. They even set out fresh papaya and other fruits for Morton and Pin to eat and made fresh coffee and tea. About 30 minutes into conducting and recording the interview, a much older man of about 80 or 90 years old came over and sat down near Morton. He kept touching Morton’s left shoe while saying something that Pin said made no sense. Morton and Pin tried to ignore the old man while continuing to talk to the couple, who also ignored him. After about 5 minutes, the old man stood up and walked away slowly, his back hunched over. Morton and Pin continued talking to the couple, but suddenly, the old man came back to sit at Morton’s feet again, holding a kitchen knife. Morton was immediately frightened and turned to Pin and asked him, “Should we leave?” The husband got up and took the knife away from the older man and begged Morton and Pin to stay, but they were both scared and decided to leave. Morton told Pin that he felt “unwelcome” in the village and unsure why he was the target of this unusual situation.

Later, Morton and Pin reported the incident to Dr. Jameson who said that the old man was not dangerous. “He might have been afraid of you, Morton,” said Dr. Jameson. “Many of the older people here are afraid of White people because they think they are missionaries,” she said. Morton, now thinking more about the old man than himself, was left with disbelief that he had had this kind of impact on another person, and he wondered why the program did not prepare him for this aspect of his time in Laos. He also wondered if he could have done

anything differently so that the old man would not have been frightened by his presence in the village. He did not finish his small research project, but he managed to turn in a paper based on what he and Pin had done in the field.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What impacts might this fieldwork-based education abroad program have had on Morton's learning and development?
- What pre-departure and on-site measures could the study abroad program have taken to better prepare Morton and the other students studying and conducting research in Laos during their time abroad? What support should faculty and staff give to students like Morton who have never been abroad before, particularly with navigating unexpected situations?
- In what ways could colleges and universities make exchange programs beneficial to local communities? How could they prepare them for encounters with students studying abroad and doing research in their communities?
- How could this situation impact the relationship that The College of Kansas has with the Laotian community in which Morton did research? What responsibility does Morton's college have toward the Laotian community and its people?
- How could Dr. Jameson discuss Whiteness and the Christian religion with students on the program? How should she approach providing future students with information about community engagement in Laos?
- What responsibility does Dr. Jameson have for Morton's and Pin's physical and psychological safety in the program?