Strategies for teaching White students about racism during a study abroad course

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It is challenging to teach about racism well. One of the reasons for this difficulty is that the topic of racism is sometimes met with resistance from students. Therefore, it is important for psychology instructors to continue to identify and practice effective ways to teach about racism. I contend that the study abroad experience is a valuable opportunity for this type of teaching. Drawing from my experience as a Korean American educator teaching Cross-Cultural Psychology to American students studying abroad in South Korea, I provide some concrete examples of pedagogical tools and approaches that I have found helpful in deepening White students' understanding of racism. My hope is that instructors who lead study abroad programs will be inspired to try some of these ideas and also implement new ones that will help White students to understand racism.

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RACISM IS MORE than what one person does or says to another. An accurate conceptualisation of racism includes the understanding that it consists of systemic advantages afforded to a particular racial group (e.g. Tatum, 2017). Therefore, in systems (e.g. United Kingdom – UK – and the United States of America – USA) where White people are in the majority, these individuals disproportionately benefit from structural racism. A closely related idea is the notion of White privilege (McIntosh, 2003), or the argument that White individuals inpredominant White societies, such as the UK and USA, enjoy access to social, economic, and other resources that non-White people might not have access to at the same level. Taken together, these conceptualisations lead to the following claims: (a) racism can be understood as those in power (White people) profiting or benefiting at the expense of other ethnic and racial groups, and (b) there is something different – indeed, privileged – about the experience of being White.

In my experience of teaching these concepts to psychology undergraduate students, I have found that both topics trigger wide-ranging reactions from students, especially from White students. One fairly common response is for them to counter with stories of being slighted or mistreated by others due to their White identity as evidence that racism 'goes both ways.' Or they might point out discrimination that an individual from a racial minority group might direct toward another individual from a different racial minority group (e.g. anti-Black sentiments held by an Asian American). Similarly, White students might respond by claiming that, in the current USA climate, being White is not seen by some as a privilege; consistent with this notion, a recent survey found that White individuals were least likely to agree that being White provided some advantages in the USA (Pew Research Center, 2019). These responses serve as counterproductive responses that hinder learning about privilege, White identity, and structural racism. The responses are also consistent with DiAngelo's White Fragility framework, which asserts that White individuals often experience 'a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves' (DiAngelo, 2011, p.57). Given how challenging these discussions about racism and White privilege can be in the classroom, psychology instructors could benefit from practical teaching

suggestions for delivering these materials to White students. The current paper describes such an effort in the context of a South Korea study abroad programme for students enrolled in an American university.

Every other year, I lead a small group of undergraduate students (mostly psychology majors) on a one-month study abroad experience in South Korea. They are enrolled in a private liberal arts institution located in the Pacific Northwest region of the USA. The racial composition of the study abroad students tends to mirror those on the USA campus, where there is an even balance between White students and students from other ethnicities and races. The South Korea study abroad programme consists of learning both inside and outside of the classroom. I teach them a compulsory course entitled *Cross-Cultural Psychology*, which I also regularly teach on campus in the USA, in addition to the daily two hours of traditional class time with me in South Korea, students participate in activities and weekend excursions designed to deepen their understanding of psychological constructs (see Kim, 2021, for some examples of activities and excursions). To date, I have led two study abroad trips to South Korea, with another one scheduled for autumn of 2022.

A few caveats are important to mention at this point. One, the reflections presented here focus on the South Korean context. However, I believe that the considerations can be generalised to other study abroad locations, especially settings where White students might be in the minority. I would argue that the paradox of being in the minority yet still potentially enjoying White privileges can be a learning opportunity during a study abroad experience. Two, the present study focuses on teaching strategies during study abroad designed for White students, but obviously the study abroad program itself is for all students, irrespective of ethnicity/race, thus all students have the potential to deepen their understanding of racism. Three, the class size for a study abroad program tends to be smaller. My study abroad typically includes 10 students, whereas my USA classroom has around 35 students. Therefore, the smaller group makes for an ideal discussion experience for students, especially in light of the empirical evidence that smaller the classroom, the optimal the learning might be (Cuseo, 2007). Four, I find that the study abroad experience tends to create a more relational learning community, in which follow-up conversations might be more likely to occur outside of the physical classroom, such as a coffee shop, on a bus/train to an excursion, or even on the walk to the classroom. I contend that these follow-up conversations are especially effective when White students process their emotional reactions to learning about racism.

Here are some concrete teaching suggestions that I have found effective to incorporate during this study abroad programme.

1. *Enable White students to process racial discrimination experiences in South Korea.*

As visible foreigners in South Korea, White students are likely to experience being treated differently (e.g. being discriminated against) by local South Koreans. Having students name and describe these experiences, and their feelings associated with them, can be a powerful learning experience. There are many ways that the processing of personal experiences of discrimination can be influential, but in my experience of teaching, at least two specifics come to mind. First, the White students might reflect upon the frequency of the racial experiences in South Korea, compared to how often they experienced such things at home in the USA. Often, students observe how acutely aware they are of their foreign status in South Korea, and how interactions with local South Koreans remind them of this status. As an instructor, it is during these moments of acute realisation that I encourage the students to think about how they can empathise with the experiences of people of colour in the USA to some degree, in terms of the frequency of having to think about

their identity and being reminded by others about their identity. This type of reflection is especially important, given the finding that White individuals were least likely to report that their family talked about potential difficulties that might arise as a result of being White (Pew Research Center, 2019). Because of this lack of regular engagement in the topic of White identity, being intentional during the study abroad in thinking about their White identity might be a challenging but educational experience.

Second, despite the racism that White students may experience in South Korea, they should be encouraged to reflect on the type of racism they experience and how this may compare to the racism experienced by other racial minority groups and its impact on wellbeing. White students on this study abroad programme often report uncomfortable experiences such as being exoticised (e.g. for lighter skin) or others staring at them. At the same time, my students are struck by how racial experiences reported by White students can reflect qualitatively different themes compared to students of color; for example, the blatant admiration of White physical features is a stark contrast compared to being subjected to a sense of inferiority for students of colour. The experiences of my students of colour in South Korea tend to mirror the common types of racism reported in the USA, such as being stereotyped as dangerous and less intelligent (Sue et al., 2007). For study abroad students where White people are in the minority (e.g. South Korea), this affords the opportunity to experience and process the paradox of being White and having a minority status.

2. *Learn about the experiences of racial and ethnic minority individuals living in South Korea.*

Historically, South Korea has been a racially and ethnically homogenous society. Although the country is still quite homogenous today, the multiracial, multiethnic, and international population has increased significantly in the recent years (see Kalia, 2007). This population trend has been accompanied by highly publicised incidents of overt racism and discrimination perpetuated by South Koreans against foreigners and multiracial/multiethnic individuals. Therefore, the study abroad programme provides an opportunity to learn about the racialised experiences of racial and ethnic minority individuals in South Korea. There are many teaching tools to use for students to learn about the experiences of marginalised individuals, but I find people's stories to be especially powerful learning and teaching tools. As an example, I show students a social media project called the *Halfie Project*, which unpacks the experiences of multiracial and multiethnic individuals living in South Korea. This project utilises social media, YouTube videos, podcasts, and many other creative tools to capture the lived experiences of racial and ethnic minority individuals in South Korea. The founder of this project is a guest speaker to my study abroad students to introduce this project, and it has been an amazing learning experience for students. Specifically, for White students, it is an opportunity to observe the parallel between the majority-minority dynamic in South Korea and also the majority-minority dynamic in the USA.

3. *Observe beauty standards reflected in media and skincare products.*

When one travels in many places in Asia, they are likely to observe a troubling trend in which the media (e.g. advertising) blatantly promotes a beauty standard that equates white features with attractiveness. A significant amount of time is spent by the study abroad students being out in public; these moments provide an opportunity to observe the nearly ubiquitous White beauty standard, such as in advertising on public transportation. Similarly, makeup shops are very common in South Korea, and to walk into one of these and notice the blatant promotion of whiter skin as a beauty standard is a powerful experience for American students.

Furthermore, Korean pop (K-pop) blatantly promotes a Westernised beauty

standard, perhaps best illustrated through the widely accepted plastic surgeries of K-pop stars. Given that American university students are likely familiar with K-pop, which has risen to prominence as a popular music genre thanks in large part to world famous bands such as BTS and Blackpink, I find the integration of K-pop into this conversation about Western beauty standards to be effective. For students to be able to process the internalised beauty standard that idolises Western features can be a good gateway topic to in-depth discussions of other ways that White supremacy might manifest in South Korea.

4. *Leverage the study abroad classroom for processing of powerful films on race.*

One activity in this study abroad course is to watch and process the documentary *The Color of Fear*. The film is an intense conversation about race/ethnicity, racism, and White privilege that nine men of diverse racial backgrounds engage in. Although this film is made from a USA perspective, watching and discussing this film during a study abroad course seems even more significant in terms of student learning than watching it at home would be.

The nature of *The Color of Fear* touches on powerful topics such as White supremacy and structural racism, and it is not uncommon for the White students to have especially strong emotions (e.g. guilt) following the documentary. Sometimes, although well-intended, this might lead to White students dominating the classroom space to process their thoughts and emotions that feels genuine to them but at the same time, takes away the space for the non-White students to participate in the conversation. This is also an important learning point for these students, and one which I bring up as a discussion area. The nature of a study abroad program also means that there are other opportunities outside of the classroom for White students to discuss these issues (e.g. a train ride). This type of effort to be intentional about who takes up classroom space is consistent with the call for decentering of White students' voices when teaching about racism (Smalling, 2020).

Conclusion

Study abroad provides an opportunity for instructors to experiment with different types of pedagogical tools, including activities to teach about the complexity of racism. The study abroad programme can be especially impactful for White students who might not have previously internalised issues of racism. I hope that educators who lead study abroad programs around the world can continue to generate innovative ideas for teaching students about racism and related constructs.

Author note

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul Youngbin Kim, Department of Psychology, Seattle Pacific University, 3307 Third Avenue West, Suite 107, Seattle, WA 98119-1922. Email: paulkim@spu.edu

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