

Black Students in China Identity, Environment and Institutions in the Individual's Perception of Racial Encounters

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Abstract

In recent years, American study abroad and scholarship programs have profoundly targeted the Black demographic, a group largely underrepresented amongst the study abroad community. Researchers have contributed a wealth of understanding about the personal and professional benefits of study abroad, and how to make these benefits more accessible to Black students. However, a general lack of understanding of the perceptions of racial encounters amongst the Black study abroad population, and the specific variables that shape these perceptions, pose a problem both for administrators and recruitment efforts for study abroad. This study, focused on Black American students who have studied in China, identifies three lenses, identity, institution, and environment, that allow us to better describe the student's process of interpreting racial encounters while abroad. Results found that of these three factors, identity and environment were equally significant to the student's understanding of racial encounters in China, while institution held little to no significance. Students' lack of confidence in and connection to their study abroad institutions cause them to place larger weight on their identity and the study abroad environment, while the institution remains a passive entity. This information raises a host of questions about the role of the study abroad institution in the minority student's unique experiences abroad, and to what extent they can adapt to better serve an increasingly diverse study abroad population. Further research is suggested to measure the effectiveness of study abroad programs in creating an optimal environment for diverse cohorts of students.

Keywords: study abroad, race, racial discrimination, racial perception, Black American students, China, identity, institution

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Introduction: The Realities of Study Abroad

Study abroad is becoming an increasingly vital topic in higher education. In exploring the tangible benefits of studying abroad, conversations concerning making these benefits accessible to underrepresented groups have also emerged in recent decades. Research in both the international relations and education communities has begun to challenge traditional sentiments and “universal agreements that study abroad experiences are valuable and enriching” (Hembroff and Rusz, 1993, p. 1). Two current goals among study abroad researchers are 1) to understand the nature of benefits produced in the home and host country during the study abroad experience, and 2) to measure, discuss, and improve the participation of minorities (Penn and Tanner, 2009).

This study refers to the term study abroad using the same definition as the term “International Educational Exchange,” defined by the Forum on Education Abroad:

The migration of students (secondary, undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate) and scholars between educational institutions in different countries. A narrower usage of the term “exchange” refers to reciprocal agreements that allow students, faculty, or staff to spend a specified period of time at institutional partners of their home institutions. (McCauslin, 2015)

This definition incorporates any study abroad program which takes a student out of the context of their home institution and places them in an institution away from their home country, with the purpose of introducing them to the culture and customs of the country in which they are studying. In this study, I explore particular study abroad programs individually and their specific functions in students’ learning experiences. These functions differ based on each institution’s pedagogical approach, which I discuss in the following section.

The Constructivist Framework and International Education

International education, like any form of education, necessitates a conversation about goals for, and approaches to, learning. A unique element of study abroad is that it incorporates the process of encountering and interpreting different perspectives than one’s own into the learning experience (McLaughlin, 2006). This serves to bridge a noticeable gap between traditional education practices and pedagogies that prioritize cognitive development and critical thinking (Duffy and Jonassen, 1992). Constructivism is a particularly useful social science theory that can explain the cognitive growth students experience during study abroad, for reasons I explore in this section.

In scholarly discussion of international relations, rationalism and interpretivism are two social science paradigms that have traditionally occupied opposite poles. Rationalism, which encompasses theories such as realism, neorealism, liberalism, and neoliberalism, is mostly “empowered by positivist and exclusively materialist philosophies of science” (Adler, 1997, p. 321). In particular, realists and neorealists take a methodical approach to international relations, and suppose that states’ actions are predictable, rational, and reliant on external forces (Adler, 1997). These “external forces” are critical to an understanding of realism and neorealism. According to these ideologies, pressures such as the pursuit of power, security, and access to

natural resources drive states to behave in a manner that supports their best interests (Adler, 1997). Conversely, interpretivist frameworks, including postmodernists, poststructuralists and the many branches of critical theory, contest the nature of these external forces and challenge the objectivity of their effects on states' behavior (Adler, 1997). These frameworks give credence to the many differing realities that individuals experience, which have a tangible effect on the motivations of individuals, and by extension the motivations of states (Adler, 1997).

Constructivism is a paradigm of international relations that assumes that “the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world” (Adler, 1997, p. 322). The constructivist can answer the question of the existence of external forces in the international realm; these forces do indeed exist as a result of collective understandings between groups of individuals, which become solidified and reinforced over time (Adler, 1997). However, the constructivist places emphasis on the argument that these forces are simply ideas to which individuals attach significance, and these ideas can vary according to an individual's social context, values, beliefs, norms, and so on (Adler, 1997).

Another important contribution that constructivism has provided to our collective understanding of international relations is the idea that not only do individuals' interpretations of external forces vary, but that these interpretations can potentially change over time (Adler, 1997). While constructivism acknowledges the idea that individuals can be influenced by external forces, the paradigm also assumes that individuals are capable of changing the amount of significance they attach to these ideas, in essence reconstructing their understanding of the world (Adler, 1997). As such, individuals can mutually influence and change these external forces themselves (Adler, 1997). Linking ideas of socio-cognitive development with empirical social science theory, constructivism interprets the rigid elements of rationalist theories as more fluid (Adler, 1997).

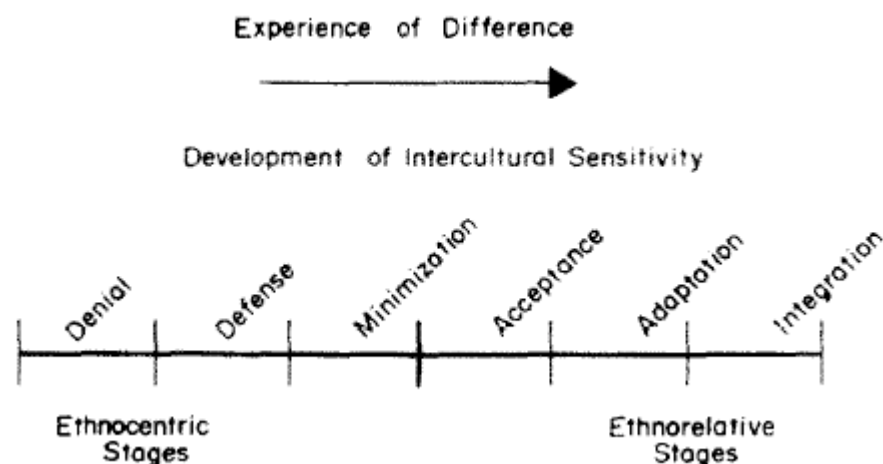


Figure 1- “Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity.” (Bennett, 1986)

One can make a strong connection between the topic of cognitive development in constructivist theory and in study abroad literature. Milton J. Bennett, a scholar on intercultural communication and sociology at the Intercultural Development Research Institute, is responsible for creating the

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). It provides a language and framework for understanding how individuals undergo the process of acculturation (Bennett, 1986). The DMIS and many subsequent studies hypothesize that, through the appropriate amount of time and exposure to different cultures, an individual can create, restructure, or completely destroy the schema that organize our understanding of the world (Bennett, 1986). This statement reflects the language of constructivist theory, and demonstrates the constructivist notion that schema can in fact be changed over time. The DMIS attempts to clearly delineate the particular stages of an individual's cognitive adaptation to unfamiliar concepts, which may support the constructivist argument by providing specific, identifiable phases in the restructuring process of one's understanding of the world.

Another element that constructivism and study abroad share is the often optimistic, progressive interpretation of an individual's cognitive transformations. Both concepts suggest that the interaction of conflicting norms can be a positive, even synergistic experience. Fosnot and Perry (1996) describe constructivism as a "psychological theory of learning." In their article, they compare constructivism to a wide variety of theories such as behaviorism and maturationism, which contribute to an overall understanding of the process of learning (Fosnot and Perry, 1996). To them, the cognitive restructuring that occurs in constructivist theory resembles the basic course of human evolution, and the ability for humans to adapt to constantly changing interpretations of the world is, in and of itself, development (Fosnot and Perry, 1996). One can see a similar sentiment from the DMIS, which incorporates "Adaptation" as one of its more advanced stages of acculturation, and organizes the process of acculturation along a spectrum defined as "Development of Intercultural Sensitivity" (Bennett, 1986).

This optimistic sentiment also lies at the core of study abroad, and brings clarity to why it may be an attractive investment for both home and host country. Study abroad, using education as a conduit, can introduce students to the experience of acculturation in a manner that non-immersive cultural study cannot. It also tests the assumptions of constructivism by bringing students into an environment that causes them to drastically reassess their internal understanding of the world. Of course, these benefits are disproportionate to people of different races, genders, religions, sexualities, etc. The uneven terrain of study abroad is becoming an increasingly salient topic, one that is central to this study. In this study, I apply constructivist theory to explain the racial normative conflicts that occur in the study abroad context.

Main Topic

Racial minorities in the US experience tangible differences when compared to their White counterparts not only in their educational experiences at higher institutions at home (Hurtado, 1992; Cabrera et al., 1999; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007), but they also have a radically different experience than their White counterparts while studying abroad (Talbert & Stewart, 1999; Evans, 2009; Brux & Fry, 2010). Though many believe that diversity would undeniably improve study abroad institutions by introducing more perspectives, therefore increasing the potential for intercultural understanding, I argue that the belief that diversity leads to linear growth is a dangerous one. Racial norms, defined in this study as "understandings of the stratification of race," differ from person to person and from culture to culture. The interaction of these racial norms in study abroad have not been adequately discussed in literature, and I intend

to highlight the nuances and difficulties that arise in study abroad institutions when conflicts of racial norms are introduced.

The central question of this study is as follows: how do Black students perceive racial encounters while studying abroad in China? In this study, I define racial encounter as “any situation which directly causes one to become aware of one’s race, and its relationship to other individuals or one’s surroundings.” Racial encounters have particular importance in the study abroad experience. As mentioned earlier, study abroad literature and constructivist theory alike often depict the interaction of norms and restructuring of cognitive schema as positive. One can see the nuances that complicate this viewpoint when one considers the interplay of racial norms. In the context of this study, I utilize racial encounters as identifiable instances in which racial norms present themselves in the student’s consciousness. This study seeks to critically evaluate the so-called benefits of diversity in study abroad by exploring the reality of the interaction of racial norms, and how race exposes the disparities and inequalities of international education.

I examine racial encounters using a model I have created called “The Three Levels of Normative Analysis.” The three levels are identity, institution, and environment. Each level has a specific definition for the purposes of this study. Identity refers to “anything that defines one’s individuality, e.g. your race, sexuality, gender, personality, etc..” It represents the different interpretations of racial norms amongst different individuals. Institution means “the study abroad program itself, its administrators/staff, housing arrangements and any accommodations provided by the program.” It incorporates the reach of the study abroad program within a foreign country, and the racial norms it establishes within this reach. The institution level in particular must meet a specific set of criteria in this study: each study abroad program must have a relationship to a US-based university or organization, a focus on academic and linguistic goals, and a housing arrangement provided directly via the program’s resources. Finally, environment means “one’s study abroad location”— in the context of this study, it refers to China at large and the racial norms it encompasses. The environment is the larger cultural background that the study abroad student experiences, which takes on particular importance when its racial norms and those of the study abroad student are incongruent.

This model is loosely based on the concept of the three “images of analysis,” introduced by Kenneth Waltz in his 1959 novel, *Man, the State, and War* (Waltz, 1959). The first image of analysis can be described as either individuals or human nature; this lens focuses on the elements of human beings that may or may not make war an inevitability (Waltz, 1959). The second image of analysis is the state, which refers to governing bodies that dictate the legislative and societal boundaries upon which groups of people agree (Waltz, 1959). The third image is the international system, or the unordered interaction of all of the states in their individual pursuits for power, resources, and security (Waltz, 1959).

While Waltz uses these images to speculate on the causes of war, this study’s focus on the individual, institution, and environment seeks to determine which of these elements are the most prominent in the student’s understanding of their study abroad experience. The definition of these three levels parallel Waltz’ three images. The individual, like the first image, accounts for the variability in each person and their specific ways of understanding and interpreting the world. Both the institution and the second image refer to deliberately constructed establishments, the

agendas of which are often, but not always, determined by the best interest of its constituents. Finally, the third image is similar to the environment level as it reflects the larger context under which the second and first images function, and the unpredictable nature of this context. In the following section, I will discuss each of these levels of norms in depth, and how students relate to them during their time abroad. In order to do so thoroughly, I have chosen to analyze a case study for a specific group of study abroad students: Black/African-American students studying in China.

Conclusion

The Three Levels of Normative Analysis used in this study, identity, institution, and environment, provide a clearer picture for how Black students in study abroad interpret racial encounters. From the data, identity and environment are often associated with racial encounters, while institution is rarely associated with them at all. The racial encounters themselves widely vary, but there are evident trends in how students interpret the different encounters similarly. In this section, I will discuss each of the Levels in depth, consider their implications, and make specific policy suggestions for institutions, which will result in more positive and productive study abroad experiences for Black students.

The process of collecting information in this study took the form of structured interviews and online surveys. The total number of interviews and surveys administered was 16, and the total number of racial encounters was 66. The questionnaire portion of the interview or survey asks students to recount 6-10 racial encounters, rating them overall on a 0-100 scale (0 being extremely negative, and 100 being extremely positive). Then, the student is asked to consider how much they associate each of the Three Levels of Normative Analysis with each experience, and rate the association on a 0-100 scale (0 being no association, 100 being a great deal of association). After collecting this information, I clean the raw data using Excel, and import the cleaned data to Stata. Then, turning questionnaire information into numerical or categorical data, I perform a series of analyses such as correlations, regressions, and plot graphs with lines of best fit.

Identity

Many of the racial encounters provided were strongly associated with the identity level. Out of the 66 encounters, 58 of them were rated 50 and higher for its association with identity, and 22 of the encounters were given a rating of 100. In 41 of the 66 racial encounters, identity had the largest relative rating of all three levels. Given that the mean rating for identity for all 66 encounters was 76.7, one can assume that identity played a large role in how Black students interpreted their racial encounters in China.

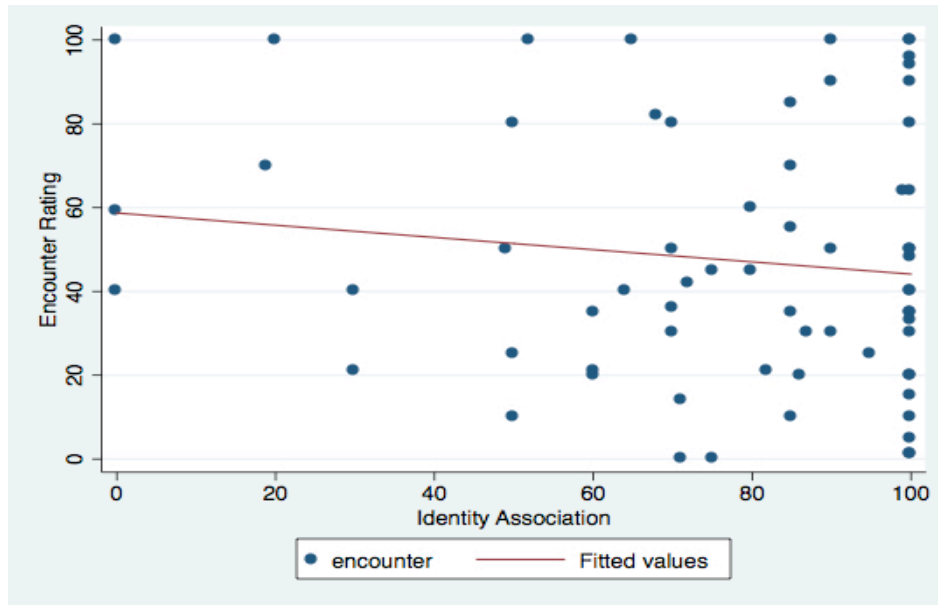


Figure 2- A scatterplot of encounters; x axis= identity association, y axis= positive/negative rating.

The scatter plot in Fig. 7 measures each encounter's identity rating in the x axis, and the encounter's positive/negative rating in the y axis. The higher the encounter's identity rating, the further along the x axis it is located; similarly, the more positive the encounter, the higher on the y axis it is plotted. By running a correlation between the two variables however, I discovered that there was in fact a weak, but negative relationship between the two variables ($r = -0.13$). A regression analysis between these two variables showed a similar coefficient of -0.15 , but with a p-value of 0.3. From both these analyses we can see that there might be a slight relationship between how much students associate an encounter with identity and how negatively they perceive the encounter, but the statistical evidence for this claim is not strong.

Deconstructing Identity Abroad

It is necessary to analyze, as the study abroad institution, how identity will be dealt with in the study abroad context. In China, it may initially seem as if foregoing one's individuality may be the best way to ease into an immersive experience. In many ways, this approach is not necessarily wrong. It assumes that the ultimate objective of the student's experience is to achieve a level of acculturation, and to step outside of oneself and one's understanding of the world out of respect for and better understanding of a foreign culture. In these examples, however, we can see that not only can shedding one's identity be impossible for some students, but it can also stifle the opportunity for realistic and meaningful exchange.

Of course, different students will have different relationships to their own identities, and students interpret their individuality in their home country differently than they might in an abroad context. It is largely up to the student to determine how much they are willing to engage with the construction and deconstruction of their own identity while abroad, and in their home country as well. Study abroad is an opportunity for students to learn more about themselves in an environment that challenges their essential understanding of who they are. In the case of this

study, the students' Blackness, their personalities, habits, levels of comfort and discomfort, and even their sexuality were in a constant state of formation. In this sense, one half of answering the question of "how important is identity in study abroad" comes from the student themselves. However, another half of this legwork comes from the study abroad institution.

The power of the institution is illuminated by Harper (2009) in the following quotation, and echoed by Sweeney (2014):

...Questions concerning effort must be shifted from the individual student to her or his institution. Effective educators avoid asking, what's wrong with these students, why aren't they getting engaged? Instead, they aggressively explore the institution's shortcomings and ponder how faculty members and administrators could alter their practices to distribute the benefits of engagement more equitably. Accepting institutional responsibility for minority student engagement and success is the first step to race-conscious educational practice. (p. 41)

As was evident in the racial encounters where students took the opportunity to teach Chinese people about their Blackness and what it meant to them, intercultural exchange is most beneficial when both parties are engaging and sharing bits of their identity. It is the task of the study abroad institution to provide both opportunities to do so, and an encouraging environment to frame these exchanges in positive ways.

Environment

Environment is a level that is, similarly to identity, commonly associated with racial encounters. Of the 66 racial encounters provided, 57 of them were given an environment rating of above 50, 13 were given a rating of 100, and only two were given a rating of 0. Clearly, environment is likely to factor into a student's perception of a racial encounter, and it also may dictate how a student chooses to interpret that racial encounter.

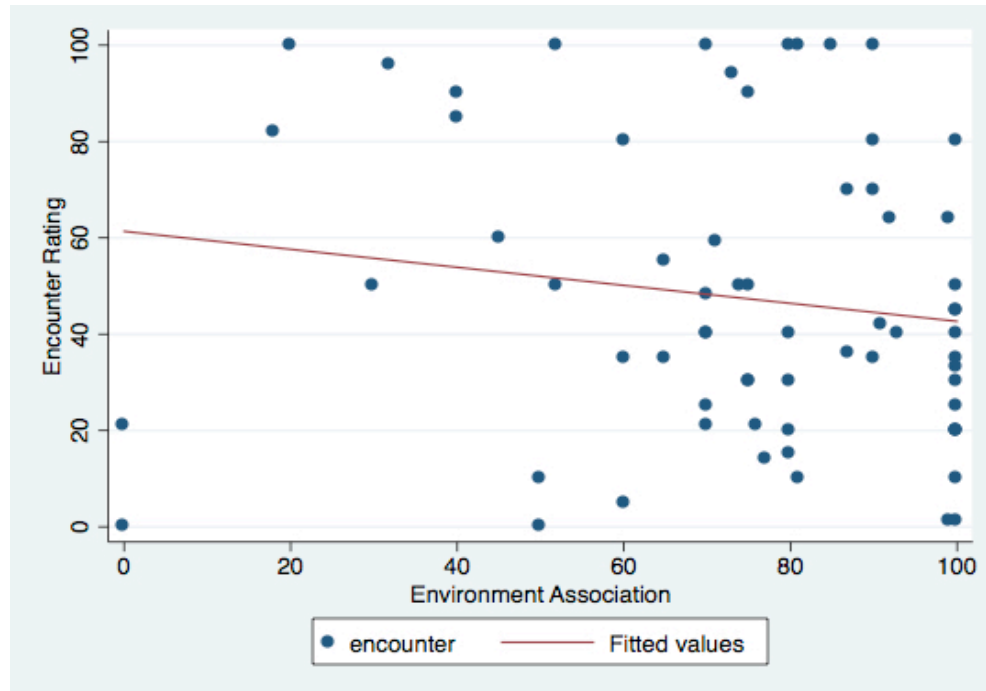


Figure 3- A scatterplot of encounters; x axis= environment association, y axis= positive/negative rating.

Most of the encounters on this graph aggregate closer to 100 on the x axis, and the relationship between the two variables seem to be a slightly negative trend. A correlation analysis produces a coefficient of -0.15, and a regression analysis gives a similar coefficient of -0.18; however the P value is not statistically significant (0.22). One could argue that the more an encounter is associated with environment, the more negatively the student perceives that event, but there is not much statistical evidence to support this claim.

Contexts and Conflicts

While it may seem obvious why the environment of China has a huge impact on perceptions of racial encounters, it should not take the place of deliberate and thoughtful understanding of racial relations within the country. The fact that China has had limited contact with the West throughout its history does not fully and completely explain why a certain racial encounter might've happened. Encounters vary based on generation, city, educational and socioeconomic level, and other factors of the opposite party in a racial encounter. Simply attributing an experience to being in China precludes the student from understanding the depth of the encounter, and doing so runs the risk of creating rigid schema for the entirety of Chinese society.

In order to prevent this from happening, institutions should again take a more active role in students' experiences and their understanding of the environment. In the case of taking pictures, institutions could make students aware of why Chinese locals may want a picture, why they may ask in certain cases and not ask in others, and what having a picture of a Black person may mean to them. In another example, when Black students were asked if (or told that) they were from Africa, it is not sufficient to leave this encounter uninterpreted by the institution. The institution could discuss China's history with Africa, the existence of African students in China (even

before formal US-China education exchanges), their treatment, the construction of African expatriate districts in cities such as Guangzhou, and so on. This way, students may make more sense of the encounters, and attribute them to more nuanced historical narratives within China.

Institution

Students did not often associate racial encounters with their study abroad institution. Of the 66 racial encounters provided, 30 of them were given an institution rating of 0, and only 19 of them were given a rating above 50. Nine of these 19 encounters were positive, and 10 were negative. The fact that institution had a noticeably low average rating of 26.7, and that the 75th percentile of institution ratings was only a rating of 50, one can see a clear absence of the institution in students' perception of racial encounters.

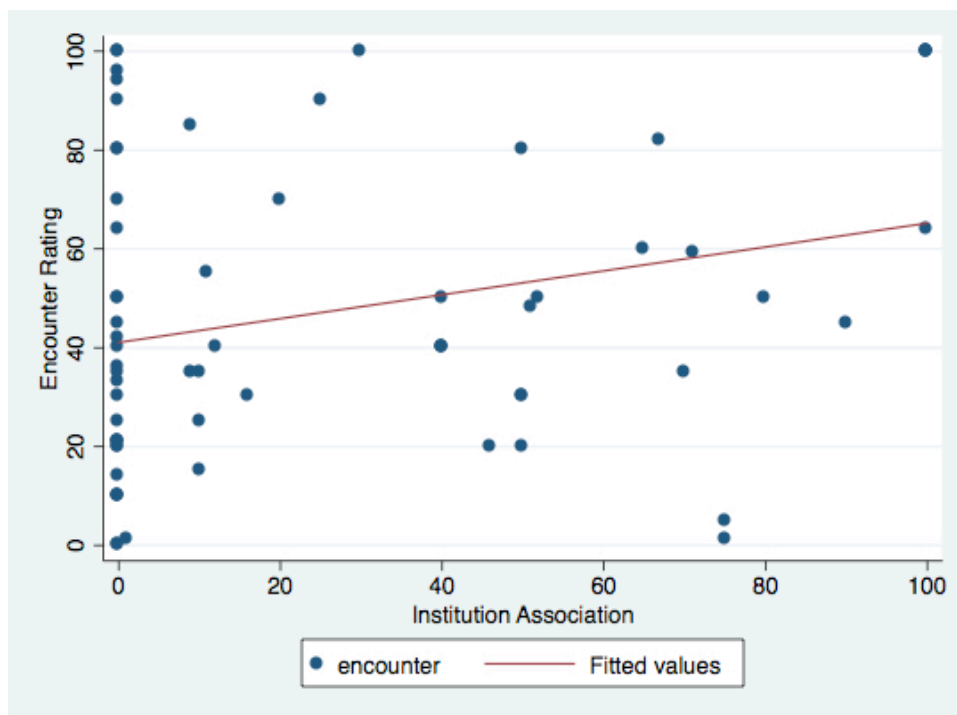


Figure 4- A scatterplot of encounters; x axis= institution association, y axis= positive/negative rating.

This plot shows an aggregation of racial encounters closer to 0 on the x axis. There is a positive correlation between the institution variable and the positive/negative rating ($r= 0.27$). A regression between these two variables produces a similar coefficient of 0.24, with a statistically significant p-value of 0.03. The line of best fit also reflects this positive trend between these two variables. These analyses suggest that the more the student associated encounters with their institution, the more positively students perceive the encounter. Considering the number of encounters given an institution rating of zero, however, this information does not necessarily point to a reliable trend.

Playing Its Hand

Study abroad institutions have a wide variety of tools at their disposal that can enrich the intercultural experience of both study abroad students and individuals in the study abroad environment. In the case of racial encounters, they can apply the same model they use to promote acculturation in order to facilitate the interaction of differing racial norms. Institutions have the choice of doing so more actively, through their curriculum and the activities they promote in exchange with Chinese natives, or more subtly through the values it promotes. For instance, if a student experiences a difficult negative racial encounter, the study abroad institution can make it known that it supports the student and is willing to hear them as with any other difficulty in adjusting.

Though it is significantly more difficult to extend this rhetoric to the surrounding environment, the study abroad institution can maintain, within the reaches of its power, a setting of intolerance for racial discrimination. In this way, the study abroad institution can facilitate or mitigate racial encounters for Black students, regardless of the source. The active engagement with and acknowledgement of racial norms would be ideal not only for the Black students participating in these study abroad programs, but for the institutions as well. Harper (2009) offers further insight on this symbiotic effect:

Critical race theorists posit that Whites who endeavor to improve the status and conditions of racial minorities rarely do so without first identifying the personal costs and gains associated with such efforts (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Thus, it is important to make clear how majority persons will benefit from their work with and on behalf of minorities. Not well documented in the higher education literature are the educational profits conferred to individual faculty and predominantly White institutions when racial minority students are engaged in an assortment of high-impact activities. (p. 44)

By facing topics of race head-on, study abroad institutions would ultimately benefit, as they would discover the needs and sentiments of the minority students they seek to serve. Doing so would uncover discussions and interactions that would encourage the constructive exchange of racial norms, which should be an imperative of study abroad programs that recognize the importance of cognitive growth and transformation.

Proposed Solutions

To discuss solutions concerning study abroad institutions and their involvement in racial encounters, I refer to the “field course experiential learning model,” which has three steps: “1) pre-trip preparation, 2) trip experience, and 3) post-trip synthesis” (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 66). These three steps in the student’s study abroad experience “facilitates critical thinking and illustrates the scientific process—inquiry—in action” (McLaughlin 2006, p. 66). By establishing a pre-trip relationship with students that involves a discussion of race, monitoring the racial experiences and comfort or discomfort of students during their time abroad, and following up with students to play an active role in their effort to process the racial encounters they’ve experienced, study abroad institutions can provide genuine and lasting support to students for whom race is an inextricable factor of their participation in study abroad. The following

initiatives are targeted towards the study abroad institution, and they seek to initiate this consistent interaction between the institution and either the individual students or the larger context of the study abroad environment.

Determine racial/normative positioning.

Just as the study abroad institution should make an effort to increase participation rates among minority students, it should also make efforts to engage deliberately with its own racial and normative positioning. This should happen in the interim period between study abroad cohorts, in most cases in the summer between school years. This initiative should also precede the “pre-trip preparation” step of the field course experiential learning model, as the institution’s process of determining its positioning should occur independently of the institution’s interaction with individual students. This level of preemptive engagement with racial norms would demonstrate that the study abroad institution is competent in managing racial encounters when they might happen.

Set realistic advancement goals for students.

Practices such as “shedding one’s identity” and “becoming Chinese” is not a possibility for individuals whose identities are central to their study abroad experience. As such, study abroad institutions should abandon rubrics for individual growth and advancement that hold complete acculturation as an objective. Instead, institutions should adapt measures of cognitive advancement to each individual student. In similar ways, study abroad programs with participants from many different home institutions adapt to fit students’ disparate linguistic, academic, and social capabilities. Study abroad institutions should regard racial norms and the extent to which one can acculturate to them as a variable of the individual student. Ideally, institutions would only push students to acculturate to slightly past their levels of comfort, while not putting in jeopardy the significance they attach to their own identities.

Incorporate discussions of race.

Study abroad institutions suffer by ignoring or bypassing discussions of racial norms. As was evident in this study, racial norms differ not only between cultures, but also between individuals of the same culture. In the same way that the prevalence of racial discussions indicates the overall tolerance and heterogeneity of higher institutions of learning at home, study abroad institutions should also take advantage of opportunities to highlight the diversity within and outside of the institution itself. The normalization of these discussions will give validity to the experience of minority students, and engage majority students in necessary conversations as well.

Address the Identity-Environment exchange.

It should no longer be the case that cognitive development with the interaction of norms only happens to the student. In a majority of a student’s set of racial encounters abroad, the opposite party is a member of the society in which the student is studying abroad. Institutions should not shy away from these interactions simply because they are more difficult to monitor under the

auspices of the program. When students are left to interpret racial encounters without the involvement of the study abroad institution, not only is the burden of processing the event on the student alone, but their ability to process the event may itself be misguided. Institutions can play an active role in acknowledging and managing these exchanges of racial norms between the student and the surrounding community in three ways: 1) incorporating a discussions of the racial norms of the environment in the institution's curriculum, allowing students to better understand and process their interactions, 2) providing students with a comfortable setting in which they can discuss these racial encounters with administration or faculty, and 3) deliberately creating situations in which students are engaging with the surrounding community, including race in the process of cultural exchange. These three strategies will help to shift the onus of racial encounters off of the student and produce more meaningful exchanges, benefitting the environment and institution as well.

Facilitate further interactions.

Expanding on the third strategy listed in the previous paragraph, institutions benefit by creating intentional spaces for the exchange of norms. These spaces may manifest in the form of "cultural exchange organizations," or groups of students from both the study abroad institution and the surrounding community that discuss the differences and similarities between the two cultures. These organizations may arrange specific events such as food exchange parties, movie screenings, speech contests and roundtables, and other activities that promote direct ideological engagement between students of the home and host societies. In order to improve experiences for minority students, these interactions would hold racial norms as an essential element.

Provide post-trip support for students.

After students have completed their sojourn, the institution can continue to utilize interactions with students to continue to improve the program. By encouraging minority students to share their experiences, their disappointments and hopes for the institution regarding racial norms, institutions involve students in the continual improvement of the institution itself and its ability to manage racial encounters. Furthermore, the students' experiences will serve as trial-and-error to better inform the decisions of the institution in the future, and cohorts that follow.

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