

CONSIDERING PERSONAL IDENTITIES

when preparing for and participating in community immersion programs



When traveling within a new culture, our own identities can influence the experiences we have when interacting with local communities and individuals.

By considering these identities and learning how they might be perceived abroad, we can be prepared for how we are received and treated as well as how we might need to consider our own behavior and attitudes in the local environment.

While no two experiences are the same, and culture is always evolving, an examination of common experiences in the location can be easily conducted through the eyes of both a local and visiting outsiders.

By sharing what we know about these aspects of identity with all study-abroad participants, we can normalize the conversation, and make all participants more sensitive to these.

By developing living documents, we can update materials with future experiences, and enable participants to share their insights.

Gender

South Africa: Zulu culture is patriarchal and you may observe men being served meals before women or being offered the best seats. As a male visitor you may find your opinion is sometimes sought over your female colleagues, so maintain an awareness to be sure you enable everyone an equal voice.

Race and ethnicity

Tanzania: The term “mzungu” is used interchangeably for “white person” and “outsider”, so travelers of all races can expect to be addressed in this way.

Peru: All Asians are labeled as Chinese (Chino) regardless of their geographic origins, despite the majority of Peruvian-Asians actually being of Japanese descent.

Sexual identity and gender relations

Thailand: Transgender identities are openly accepted in many Thai communities. A “third gender” is commonly recognized in society and Buddhism does not regard homosexuality as a sin, but there is still much discrimination in the law with same sex marriages and the ability to change birth genders on Thai ID is still illegal.

Body shape and physical features

Latin America: Commenting on people’s physical features is not considered rude, and it is often a sign of endearment to use these as nicknames, such as “gordita” (fatty) or “flacka” (skinny).

Social-economic status

Peru: As the ability to travel is identified as a sign of wealth, locals may express surprise when you use local amenities like public buses, and have been known to extend invitations to become a godparent to their children, with the expectation of financial support.

Hierarchy structures

Vietnam: Within some communities our status as “Westerners” can result in assumptions of better education and authority. It is important to recognize when this is occurring and avoid reinforcing this position of superiority, while graciously accepting the ‘compliment’ and allowing the local person to save face.

Religion

Ecuador: 89% of the population is of Christian denomination, and while other religions (especially those of visitors) are respected, there is little accommodation for other faiths. This makes it difficult to find places of worship and Kosher or Halal foods, and can result in interest, discussion and misunderstandings about those practicing other religions.

How does focusing on these identities aid community engagement?

- ✓ Set expectations - remove the element of surprise
- ✓ Mentally prepare for difficult encounters
- ✓ Knowledge to adapt aspects you can control (dress, behaviors, etc) to minimize conflict
- ✓ Discuss potential situations in advance to develop coping strategies and responses
- ✓ De-personalize “insensitive” comments and actions
- ✓ Use learnings to train local staff in awareness of issues
- ✓ Enable organizations to identify and connect students with identity communities
- ✓ Use the information to educate and prepare host families for potential sensitivities

