



SpartansAbroad

Identity and Cultural Awareness



Learning Goals & Outcomes

This module is designed to help you:

- ❑ Reflect on your social identities and consider the way culture plays a role in your self-expression.
- ❑ Develop an awareness of complex social issues and consider how this may affect your ability to navigate a new cultural environment.
- ❑ Learn ways to support your peers when discussing identity and/or addressing conflict.



Knowing Your Social Identities & Culture

Education Abroad will provide a unique opportunity to step outside of the cultural environment you're familiar with and into a cultural environment you're unfamiliar with. While you should research your destination before leaving, your knowledge will still be incomplete when you arrive. Be prepared to experience some culture shock.

You may or may not be aware that you express your social identities differently depending on the environment you are in (e.g. where you are, who you are with, why you are there). You might do this for several reasons including personal safety and experience, current and past world events, and more. Gaining a greater understanding of yourself and your own culture may help you be more successful while studying abroad.

It is natural to want to focus on your host culture and learn as much as you can about the language(s), traditions, and values of those around you. Those you meet abroad may express similar curiosity about your cultural background, which is why we encourage self-reflection prior to your departure.

Self-Reflection Exercise

Take five minutes to reflect on your social identities. What are the characteristics, qualities, values and experiences that make-up who you are *and* what you want people to know about you?

When thinking about your social identities, you might consider your cultural background, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability status, religious or spiritual beliefs, level of education, profession, family/marital status, etc.

If you are struggling to get started, you may find the “Discovering Your Cultural Diversity” activity handout helpful.



Now that you have reflected on your social identities consider the way *culture* may change and shape your self-perception and expression. The various roles we play in everyday life have an impact on our identities; in some situations, we may feel more/less comfortable being who we are.

Studying abroad will challenge and disorient you at times. Tell someone if you feel uncomfortable, harassed, or unsafe. Additional information and resources will be available in this module if you have identity-specific needs and concerns you would like to explore before your departure.

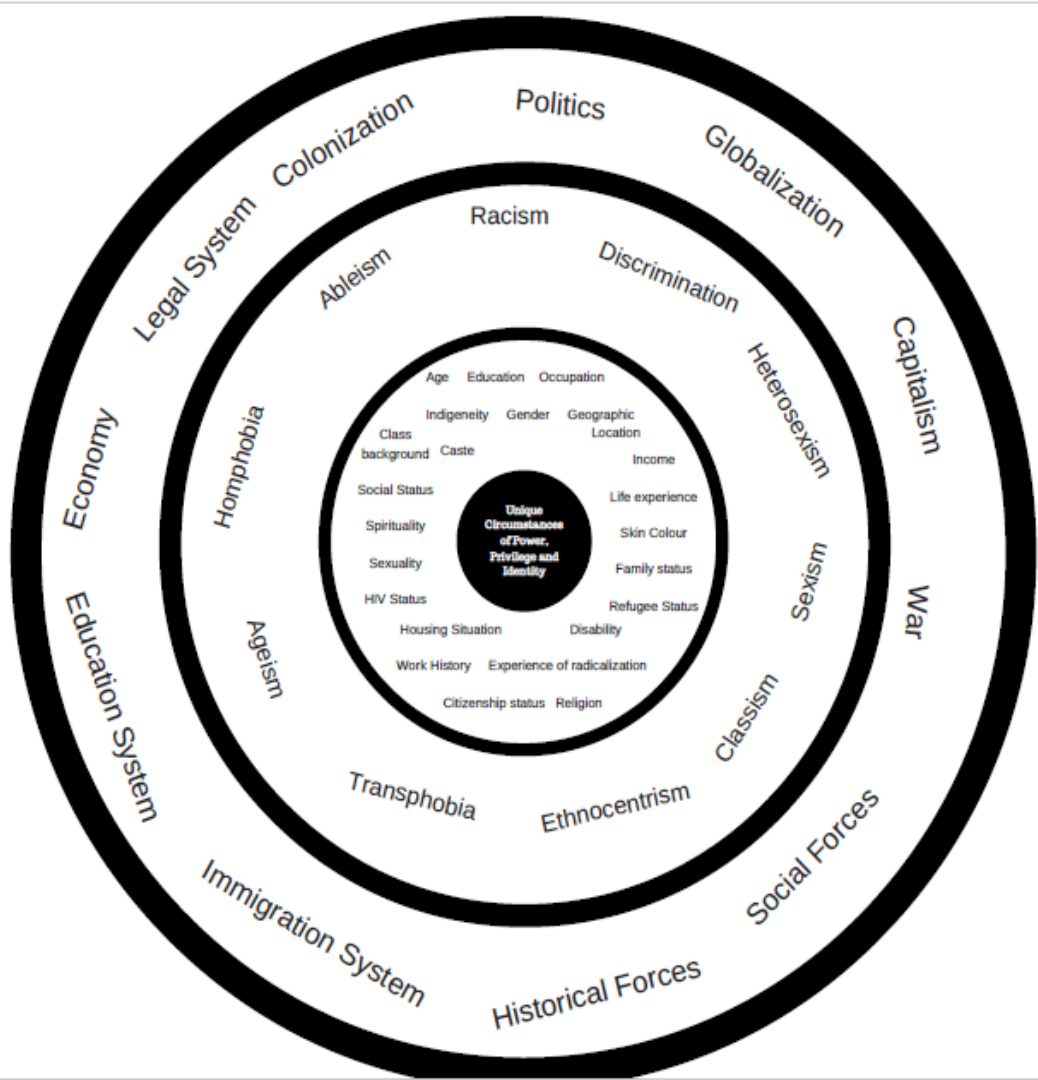
Intersectionality



Intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989) refers to the overlapping nature of our social identities and larger systems of discrimination and oppression (historical and present). Intersectionality is important because it helps us understand diversity and create inclusive environments. While abroad, you will participate in diverse environments that may or may not feel inclusive to you because of your own social identities and the larger cultural climate in your host country.

Whether Intersectionality is brand new to you or you are more familiar with the concept, having a general awareness will help you gain a greater understanding of yourself and it will help you mindfully engage with your peers and people you may meet while studying abroad. Our social identities overlap with systems of power, oppression, and discrimination in the US and they will abroad as well.

It will take time to recognize the similarities and differences among your home and host cultures. Recognize that your social identities may or may not hold power and privilege in new locations and systems.



Understanding Intersectionality

The innermost circle represents the unique circumstances (e.g. our family and opportunities) that shape our power and privilege.

The second circle represents aspects of our social identities, visible and invisible, like the ones we explored earlier in this module (for example: disability status).

The third circle represents types of discrimination that impact identity (for example: ableism).

The fourth circle represents larger forces and structures that reinforce our power and oppression.

Intersectionality helps us recognize diversity among individuals. While getting to know new people abroad, keep an open mind and be aware of your assumptions and potential biases. Challenge yourself to recognize when you have created a **single story** about another person, place, or culture.

Be prepared for those you meet to make assumptions about you, too. Successful cross-cultural interactions can be challenging at times but are also incredibly rewarding. Everyone is learning, growing, and often struggling during their time in a new cultural environment.

*As we work to create and participate in diverse environments, we need to understand how **our own and others' identities** and related social locations affect our lives and our interactions with each other.*

Diane J. Goodman



Implicit vs. Explicit Bias

Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (Kirwan Institute). Implicit bias can impact your decisions, perceptions, and behaviors; and may not align with your values.

Explicit bias refers to the attitudes and beliefs we have about a person or group on a conscious level. Much of the time, these biases and their expression arise as the direct result of a perceived threat (Perception Institute).

Explicit bias can also be understood as a stereotype, wherein you consciously believe a generalization about a group or culture.

Microaggressions

One of the most common outcomes of implicit bias are microaggressions, which are statements, actions, or incidents of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group.

Regardless of intent, microaggressions are harmful and have a major impact on individuals and groups alike. Thinking about the ways you may demonstrate bias before studying abroad will help you navigate new social environments.



The Danger of a Single Story

“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, TEDGlobal 2009



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk reminds us of how often stereotypes are used to “make sense” of the world. Everyone is guilty of stereotyping but few understand why they do it or the impact it can have.

Was there a time when someone assigned a single story to you? Was there a time when you assigned a single story to someone? How did you/they respond?

Stereotypes are usually communicated through microaggressions and indicate bias. Bias reinforces systems of power and oppression that we can simultaneously benefit from and be harmed by.

Supporting Your Peers

Programs where students get along and support each other are usually the most successful. You can play a positive role in that support system.

One of the most important things you can do to support a friend is listen to them if they tell you about an experience. Rather than rushing to compare and converse, focus on letting them talk without interruption. This is known as Active Listening.

If you think someone needs help, ask them if that is the case. Step in if it is appropriate and safe to do so.

Tell your program director or someone at your host institution if you have concerns about anyone's safety.



Supporting Your Peers

Possible Strategies to Intervene in a Situation:

Create a distraction

Interrupt the situation if you can.

Ask directly

Ask your peer if they want help.

Refer to an authority

Encourage your peer to tell your program director about what happened.

Enlist others

Make an effort to include your peer in group activities.

(Source: [RAINN](#))

How to Listen Actively:

Action	Example
Pay attention	Get in the frame of mind to pay attention to what they are saying rather than mentally preparing to respond.
Show you are listening	Put your phone away, make eye contact
Provide feedback without interruption	Nod your head, ask questions
Defer judgment	Don't compare your experience or rush to problem-solve. That can feel like you are judging their feelings and actions even if that isn't your intention
Respond appropriately	"Wow, it sounds like that was tough for you."

Conclusion

Identity and culture are complex and interconnected; this is not an exhaustive resource, but rather, a place to begin. Connect with your Program Director, EA, and peers if you would like to discuss these topics more. Understand that you will find both similarities and differences between your own identities and culture to those of your peers abroad and in the community. Recognize when you are making assumptions and challenge yourself to keep an open mind so you can learn and develop lifelong friendships. We hope this resource is something you keep in mind when navigating conversations and situations that may feel foreign to you.

