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Racism and it's adverse effect on international students

When students are part of the majority people group in their home countries, and even more particularly if the country is relatively homogeneous, race may not have been an important marker of identity or have factored into their identities at all. Only when they come to the U.S. does race become salient. Students may suddenly become “black” or “Asian” or “Middle Eastern” or “Latino”^[2] in an American context when previously they never saw themselves as such before.

Black international students, such as those from Africa or the Caribbean, can sometimes initially be confused for black Americans.^[3] The fact that race is based mostly on physical appearance can cause greater confusion. One student in Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, and Peralta's study of race among black and Latino international students^[4] looks visibly Asian (and is of Asian heritage). However, she grew up in Latin America and identifies as a Latin American, but she notes that Americans label her instantly as Asian.

For many international students of color, suddenly becoming a minority within the racialized environment of the U.S. is often a lot to process. They experience “discomfort” from many different sources.^[5] The privileged position that many international students occupied in their home country may make them extra sensitive to their new minority status and the discrimination they experience in the U.S.^[6]

Bardhan & Zhang,^[7] in conducting 22 interviews with students from the Global South^[8] at a midwestern university, found that race is often not a facet of identity for many international students of color when they enter the U.S. and that race is sometimes seen as a “Western phenomenon.”^[9] In particular, “the experience of racialization seems most intense for participants from sub-Saharan African or mainly black countries who struggle with ‘becoming’ black in the United States,” they note.^[10]

In their qualitative study of race at various U.S. universities (conducted from 2004 to 2009), Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, and Peralta^[11] found that the majority of the mostly African and Caribbean students they interviewed said

they didn't really understand race when they first arrived in the U.S. It had little meaning to them. One Senegalese student explained it this way:

Oh, it's just funny when people speak of race. I don't know how you guys felt, but when I first came here I knew nothing about race. I knew how to spell racism but that's as far—I didn't even know what it really meant. I never looked it up in the dictionary.^[12]

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