

Dateline Spain: Racism abroad

Written by Abeni Hill, Insight Intern
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As a writer and journalist, I am not one to voice my opinion and personal beliefs, aloud or in writing. I am very grateful that Insight News has given me a chance to share my experiences abroad. Although I have had many great experiences here in Spain, I cannot deny that racism is everywhere.

My major is Communication and Journalism and I am required to take an Intercultural Communication class. A couple of weeks back, my professor for that class was talking about stereotypes and began talking about stereotypes and jokes containing prejudicial undertones. She even gave some examples. She talked about Jews, Gypsies, Arabs, other Spaniards, and ultimately Africans and African-Americans. This made the class as a whole feel uncomfortable. After her lecture, she asked us are there any jokes in America about certain groups of people.

Now at this point I thinking in my head, If someone knows a joke they are not going to admit it. After class, two students (one Caucasian and one African-American) approached the teacher after class and said that the United States doesn't have prejudice jokes.

The week after that my professor started to talk about globalization and began with colonization and colonialism. It was a powerpoint presentation. As she is talking I notice a picture that she put on the colonialism slide that I thought wasn't a very accurate depiction of colonialism.

When I think of colonization I think of chain gangs and slave ships. However, my professor chose a caricature-like cartoon of very dark Africans (they were basically in "black face") carrying a stereotypical European explorer in a throne.

The first thing that went through my mind at that point was that this picture isn't very accurate because that is not the way Colonialism even happened. Secondly, why use a cartoon when there are so many pictures available with real people in them? That was strike one.

The next day, I approached the other African-American student, Kami, in my class and talked to her about it. She told me that she felt uncomfortable in the class as well. She told me that she would email the teacher and say she wanted to talk to her. I said that I would email the professor also, but Kami said she didn't want the teacher to feel like she was being attacked.

Fast forward to next Monday after class, Kami talked to our professor. Kami came up to me after her discussion with our professor and said it had been difficult because of the language barrier (we are required to speak in Spanish during class and to the professors). She also said the professor didn't understand what she was trying to tell her. Kami said she automatically went to the "cliche response", which was that she loved black people; things such as "I think black skin is really pretty", "I had a black boyfriend", and that she experienced a lot of racism when she was with said boyfriend.

That was strike two.

After Kami told me this I said, "Wow, what are we going to do?" She said that there isn't really anything we can do now and that she was over it because she at least tried to talk with the teacher.

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On Wednesday during the class, our professor brought up the fact that she talked to Kami and brought up the powerpoint and started talking about how learning about stereotypes is important to intercultural communication. She basically reiterated the same lecture about stereotypes. This was strike three.

Not only did this professor call out Kami, but going back to the lesson and talking about how important it is to the subject and knowing how Kami felt about the topic. At that moment I said to myself I need to talk to this professor.

When I talked to the professor and expressed my feelings, she immediately began to apologize and say that by putting the photo on the powerpoint she was showing how negative it was. I told her that the photo hurts me as an African-American. She replied by saying that she needed the photo to demonstrate that colonialism is bad, but also that she would make it more clear to the class that the picture demonstrates something negative.

This experience taught me the importance of speaking my mind, especially when my feelings are involved. I also learned that solidarity is important when facing ignorance. I am glad that Kami and I worked together to make the classroom a safer place for us.