

Doing Public Sociology: Student perspectives of international placements

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The term 'global engagement' has entered the lexicon of corporatised Higher Education. Ironically Britain, once a favoured destination for international students, is now handicapped in the fierce universal competition to attract them owing to disastrous changes to the visa regulations, thuggishly policed by UK Border Control. Yet if international students no longer enter the UK in droves, home students are keen to hear about international opportunities open to them, now a major selling point at university open days.

Professional degrees focus on the marketable edge gained through international mobility. Yet what of sociology students, who are normally younger in age, and whose future careers are widely diverse? How do they apply their discipline knowledge to international learning opportunities?

Here nine Bournemouth University undergraduate sociology students reflect on the international placements they undertook in January 2016 in welfare settings in Penang, Malaysia under the auspices of our partner, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Placed in selected NGOs working at the 'coalface' of need, the agencies gave aptitude-testing demands of the students to rapidly adjust and cope with very different work expectations in an unfamiliar socio-cultural context, as described below.

The Peace Learning Centre (PLC) is an independent school exclusively for Rohingya refugee children seeking asylum in Malaysia from religious persecution in Myanmar. The PLC was established in 2013 by a local academic with the aim of providing a basic education for these children as a key component to their social integration in the host culture. This is essential, for the Rohingya refugees are no more recognised as citizens in Malaysia than they are in Myanmar where they have long been stripped of their citizen rights. Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries, have not signed up to The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and are therefore not obligated to provide refugees with education or medical assistance.

In our group we taught rudimentary lessons to children ranging from 3-15 years old. We were allocated our roles by simply being shown to a classroom and expected to teach with virtually no preparation. This was challenging, requiring us to use our initiative and highlighting the scarcity of staff and resources at the school. We developed educational games as well as hand-drawn flash cards, for crayons and paper were all we had to work with. The language barrier was an added problem, as many children could not even speak local Bahasa Malaysia, let alone English.

Using ethnographic participatory critical observation techniques we noticed how fighting and aggression among the children was commonplace. It was to be expected that they had

probably adopted some anti-social behaviours due to some of the horrors witnessed. As a response to this we found the teachers used corporal punishment as the most effective disciplinary tactic. To our shock, on the first day the children brought us a whip to use on them! Gradual enculturation and reflection helped us to realise that we had to culturally isolate our First World conditioning to adapt to the new environment. Regardless of this we found our own imaginative, non-violent disciplinary methods.

Further observations showed these altercations were often triggered when a child took something from a peer. We interpreted this in the context of the appalling privations in Myanmar; so everything they owned was deeply precious to them, even if it was only a pencil sharpener.

The most important issue we learned was the lack of international awareness of the Rohingya refugee crisis. Many children had travelled up to a fortnight by boat into Malaysia, risking their lives. Even then the struggle was not over, because these vulnerable people were then labelled as stigmatized 'stateless entities' by the Malaysian Government. The Rohingya crisis continues but the sparse media coverage has led to little global awareness. On placement we confronted these social injustices and realised how in the West, we, the public, uncritically consume the Eurocentric news filtered down.

House of Hope (HoH) aids local under-privileged families living in the Rifle Range neighbourhood. It is run entirely by volunteers who provide daily meals for the children, second-hand clothing, education, temporary financial relief and medical assistance. Many of the families worked with presented characteristics Lewis (1996) described as featuring a 'culture of poverty': lack of income/resources and organisation, helplessness, dependence; where childhood is not protected or cherished, marriages are unstable and where these features tend to be passed down generations becoming a vicious cycle. The HoH aims to respond to this 'culture' by breaking the cycle through supporting children's education and providing a sense of affection, so children can strive for a better life. This is where our group played an important role working in the kindergarten and tuition classes, run every day by a retired 75-year-old Christian volunteer.

Although there are disagreements about whether Malaysia is a welfare state, it does provide rudimentary welfare support. The State government offers welfare assistance to 115,000 senior citizens, disabled people and single mothers, but nevertheless this is not enough to relieve hard-core poverty. The Poverty Line Income (PLI) in Malaysia is contested, standing at RM6 person daily (compared to an average monthly household income of RM2,500). Consequently efforts are made to demonstrate to the Government that it is extremely difficult to survive on these levels of financial aid.

The question of entitlement to aid also raises issues of 'race'/ethnicity and political preferences, as ethnic-based privilege is constitutionally enshrined. Accordingly sometimes well-off families may be given help over poor families because of ethnic factors. Consequently, philanthropy and the charitable work provided by organisations, like the HoH, play an important role in poverty relief. Political policies and ethnic

diversity shape Malaysian approaches to charity, where the Chinese communities may focus on providing for ancestors and funding educational facilities; whereas Malays practice the Islamic giving of *zakat* and *sadaqah*, channelled to the Muslim homeless, the poor and the construction of mosques.

Arguably, patterns in charity highlight tense ethnic relations because diverse communities may focus on helping their own. However, through our work we found that the HoH promotes social solidarity and social cohesion across the community regardless of ethnicity or religion. This not only improves material conditions but also revives social capital in the area by encouraging community interaction in the centre, creating trusting reciprocal relationships across ethnic groups via donations and the volunteering of time and skills. We realised how important community initiatives are in addressing socioeconomic hardships and creating social cohesion; together with what we in turn have to offer our own communities, especially at a time when over 13 million people in the UK are reported to live in absolute poverty (Belfield et al. 2015).

AIDS Action and Research Group (AARG) AARG is based at USM. It's central purpose is to prevent the spread of AIDS/HIV by providing support to those most at risk of contraction, as well those afflicted by the disease. AARG's work is interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional, comprising of researchers and specialists in health, sociology, social work, as well as the outreach team who possess local knowledge and build community relationships.

The relationship between AARG and the community proved essential for locating drug users, for obstacles were created due to the conflicting interests of Malaysia's police force. The police take a punitive role where AARG adopt a restorative one. This is manifested in the dichotomy of the ways an intravenous drug user (IDU) can be treated: either as a criminal or a client in need of support, depending upon who has made contact first. We learned that the police approach fundamentally fails to address the problem of addiction because punishment often leads to drug usage becoming increasingly subversive and harder to tackle in a meaningful way. Accordingly the outreach workers articulated their impression that the police and NGOs were working in opposition to one another, despite them ultimately having the same goal.

Most of our working days were spent travelling with the team to local or remote communities to make contact with IDUs. This approach presented a stark contrast to the largely bureaucratically encumbered, impersonal methods used in the UK. We were moved by the tenacity and perseverance displayed daily by the outreach team. Creating a network of trust across various communities allowed clients talk about their addictions, enabling the team to offer advice and pathways out of drug use.

The majority of clients we met were male, who account for the majority of infections in Malaysia through unclean needle usage. Heroin is the most widely used and easily available drug, with an estimated 170,000 intravenous users in Malaysia. We witnessed how easy heroin was to obtain: it took one client merely 5 minutes following a brief phone call. He then showed us a small straw filled with a yellow-brown powder and

explained that it would last him for about three smoking sessions. He confessed that he would normally smoke three straws of heroin per day, with each straw costing the equivalent of £1.50.

We spoke to one drug user who had been addicted to opiates for 45 years. He described his need for heroin as akin to that for food and water. As the outreach workers facilitate each user to make their own decisions about accepting treatment, they were still in the process of supporting him to sign up to methadone maintenance treatment.

Infections through sexual activity among women are on the increase and to combat this AARG distribute free condoms to sex workers, another high-risk group. They were thankful for help but unwilling to talk to us students, being strangers. We found this an uncomfortable experience, as we were aware that these women were earning very little money and probably had no other options.

Assimilating another culture has considerably broadened our perceptions of human diversity. This placement was an enlightening experience for we witnessed first-hand how an NGO is contributing to the reduction in the spread of HIV/AIDS in a country struggling to manage the crisis, particularly among injecting drug users. The hands-on contact we made with so many different individuals has given us valuable insights into applied sociology with marginalised people and, hopefully, clues to work with future research participants.

References

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