

Experiences and inclusivity of Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) students during undergraduate Geography fieldtrips

By Eugene Tom (University of Northampton)

Abstract

This small research project explored the experiences of Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) students during undergraduate Geography fieldtrips. Online interviews were conducted with eight students based at two UK universities. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes. The data suggest that key issues that can affect the GEM student experience are religious considerations, group work and the student voice.

1. Introduction

Fieldwork is an integral part of Geography. It is recognised in the QAA Subject Benchmark (2022) and in the requirements for accreditation by the professional body (RGS-IBG, n.d.). Fieldwork has pedagogical and social benefits (Marvell and Sim, 2018). It provides a 'real-world' experience for students to develop and extend their geographical knowledge, as well as enabling them to apply the knowledge from the classroom in the field (Geographical Association, n.d.). However, recent research has exposed counter-narratives to this, in terms of inclusivity and accessibility for participants. Such counter-narratives have been noted in relation to 'protected characteristics' such as race (Hughes, 2016; 2022), disability (Tucker and Horton, 2019), and sexuality (Sou, 2021).

This project explored Geography fieldwork experiences of Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) students at universities in the UK. The aims were to investigate the experiences of GEM students during day and residential field trips and identify actions that universities could take to make fieldtrips more inclusive. The term Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) is a collective term that refers to people who are "Black, Asian, Brown, dual heritage, indigenous, or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities' but globally represent approximately 80% of the world's population" (Campbell-Stephens, 2020, p.2). There is an 'attainment gap' at UK universities: GEM

students are less likely to achieve 'good degrees' than their White counterparts (Weightman, 2023). This gap is observable within and beyond Geography fieldwork too, with visibility, cultural and socioeconomic barriers prohibiting Black communities from engaging with nature and outdoor spaces (Foster, 2021). Promoting diversity and inclusion in education plays a vital role in achieving various Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4 'Quality Education' (United Nations, 2023).

There is little research on the experiences of GEM students in fieldwork (Hughes, 2016; 2022). Henderson (2009) noted that in a study she conducted, participants and colleagues presumed she would be White and that being a GEM researcher was considered an anomaly. Townsend-Bell (2009) argues that fieldwork experiences are very much dependent on the researcher's identity. When it comes to planning fieldwork, for those from GEM backgrounds preparation does not stop at making sure they have the correct transport, materials and contacts - GEM people have to consider how to maintain integrity while taking safety into consideration too (Townsend-Bell, 2009).

2. Methods

In this small-scale pilot study, semi-structured online interviews were carried out with eight Geography undergraduate students who identified as being part of the GEM. Whilst this online method enabled the researcher to access participants in locations across the UK and during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, it was more challenging to build a rapport (Seitz, 2016). The sample included students who identified as Black Caribbean, Black African, South Asian, East Asian and mixed heritage (Table 1). Similar numbers of men and women participated. The sample included people from different religious backgrounds and some who did not follow a religion. The small sample size means that the data are not representative of all GEM experiences. Participants were recruited through an advert posted on social media platforms including LinkedIn and Instagram. The participants had studied at two English universities. Whilst this limited the types and locations of fieldwork participants reflected on, it was interesting to note varied experiences on similar trips. Some had studied during the pandemic and only experienced day trips; others had completed their degree shortly before the pandemic and so reflected on residential fieldwork too. The interviews were recorded so that there would be more rigour to the analysis. This is because the recordings are transcribed and allow the researcher to capture finer details and increase data quality (Rutakumwa *et al.*, 2020). Thematic analysis was used to draw out recurring themes and patterns (Cope, 2016). The project received ethical approval from the researcher's university.

	Ethnic Background	Religious Background	Gender
1	Asian - Afghanistan	Not Religious	Man
2	Asian - Chinese	Not Religious	Woman
3	Asian - Pakistani	Muslim	Woman
4	Black Caribbean	Christian	Man
5	Asian - Pakistani	Muslim	Man
6	Black Caribbean	Christian	Woman
7	White and Black African	Not Religious	Woman
8	Black African	Christian	Woman

Table 1: Summary of interviewee characteristics

3. Findings

Three key themes were identified: religious considerations; group work and student voice. Given the small size of the sample, evidence is presented here to illustrate the diversity of experiences, rather than to provide firm conclusions.

3.1. Religious Considerations

Religious considerations were mentioned by some participants, notably those who identified as Muslim. For these participants there were several things they had to take into consideration before going on a fieldtrip. The first consideration was diet. A halal diet is essential for practising Muslims and can be a key factor when deciding whether to participate in a fieldtrip. Two participants in this study stated that halal options can be hard to find in some fieldwork locations, especially in rural areas. As a result of this, they had to alter their preferences and involuntarily only eat vegetarian options. Both Muslim participants stated that they had to adjust their behaviour to ensure their dietary requirements were met, either taking food and snacks with them or eating food that they would normally avoid.

It is something I have to consider, I wouldn't say it necessarily puts me off, I just have to do extra preparation... thinking of places I can eat before, there is usually something to eat, but not always a whole meal" (Pakistani, Woman, Muslim).

"I may have 'cheated' [eaten non-halal food] a few times" (Pakistani, Man, Muslim).

This is not allowing people to be true to their identity the way that Townsend-Bell (2009) suggests.

Another aspect mentioned was clashes between fieldtrips and religious events or holidays. One participant (Pakistani, Man, Muslim) mentioned that he was discouraged by his family members from attending an international fieldtrip as it was during Ramadan. This factor had not been considered by the fieldtrip organisers during in the planning process. The participant felt that they had to weigh up the educational benefits of attending the trip against religious and cultural considerations. Situations like this can perhaps further increase the attainment gap that Weightman (2023) mentions, as students may not be getting the same opportunities.

3.2. Groupwork

Group work is an integral part of fieldwork and a key theme that was found in this research. Being in a group that works well can often make or break how enjoyable a fieldtrip is. One student said,

"I think your group is a big factor... you need a group that supports you and you feel comfortable with, which will give you confidence and you will feel safer"
(Chinese, Woman, not religious).

A recurring pattern from the participants was the importance of being able to choose who is in your group, and reiterating how important it is to have people in a group who are from a GEM background so that there are commonalities between students.

Being able to choose the people you are with is not only important in the field, but also in the accommodation if it is a residential fieldtrip. Who students shared a room with determined how enjoyable a trip was. For some, there are certain routines that need to be completed, whether that is hair and beauty related or religious, and when in a room with someone that is not from a GEM background, it can feel isolating and as though they are being judged. One participant (Black African, Woman, Christian) mentioned how on one of her fieldtrip experiences, she was put in a room with non-GEM people and felt uncomfortable explaining about wearing a wig. She said she would have felt more comfortable if she had the option to say she wanted to be with a specific person, preferably another Black woman, due to having more commonalities.

Another participant mentioned how there needs to be increased staff awareness of how GEM students experience situations differently from their White peers. Understanding the microaggressions and subliminal messages that strangers may say for example. This backs up Townsend-Bell's (2009) point on how, if you do not

possess these characteristics, then you often do not recognise the issues. Therefore educating both staff and peers would be beneficial (Hughes, 2022).

3.3. Student voice

The final theme was the opportunity for student input. Several participants mentioned how they felt that they should be able to have more input when it comes to the organising and planning of fieldtrips to make people feel comfortable. As one participant noted: *“When it is student-led, it brings that social inclusion aspect into it”* (Black Caribbean, Man, Christian). Areas where students could have an input in fieldtrip design could be: helping to decide the location of the trip; suggesting dates so that religious holidays could be avoided; the length of stay, and the accommodation and rooming options. One participant suggested there could be a forum-type meeting to plan the trip which would not only allow GEM students, but also their White peers, to contribute ideas:

“If students could have more of an input as to what the fieldtrips were about, or where we were going, and how long for, and the time of year” (White and Black African, Woman, Not Religious).

Morales *et al.* (2020) discusses creating a common goal of student-centred field experiences that resonates with the learning identities of participants. Allowing students to set expectations in advance can foster inclusion by acknowledging that field experiences are both an individual and collective learning experience. Educators, therefore, need to provide a space for this.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This small-scale study has provided some insights into issues that may impact upon GEM students’ fieldwork experiences, such as religious considerations, groupwork and the student voice. Fieldtrip organisers could consider the following to enhance inclusion of GEM students:

- Involving students in the planning of fieldtrips;
- Checking that there are no clashes between fieldtrips and religious events;
- Ensuring there are appropriate options in relation to accommodation, diet and time/space for prayer;
- Inviting GEM representatives from previous cohorts or religious/cultural university societies to speak to the staff and all students participating in the fieldtrip to enhance understanding of exclusion and microaggressions.

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