

Uniquely Me

Category: Being in the Minority

written by Olapeju Simoyan | May 30, 2021

"She plays with you when you've got no one to play with." Those words were used to describe a young girl in a Sunday school class many years ago.

The adult equivalent of "not having anyone to play with" might be the experience of being in the minority.

Being a black female physician in the US, I am no stranger to this. It seems like I have been "in the minority" for the majority of my life. Those who don't know me may be surprised to hear that I experienced "minority status" even while growing up in Nigeria. Not only was I a year younger than my classmates, I was also one of the few Nigerians in a boarding school where the majority of students were white North Americans. Later, I was the "American" in a predominantly Nigerian school. Decades later, as a "second career medical student," I was on the other end of the age spectrum.

The only female in a group visiting a traditional ruler in Northern Nigeria during a year of national service, I wondered why I wasn't offered a handshake along with my male colleagues, only to realize later that it was for religious reasons.

This perpetual "minority status" appears to have been conferred on me at birth. Being born in the US but not acquiring automatic citizenship because I was born into a diplomatic family meant that I did not automatically have the rights and benefits that would otherwise have been a birthright, even if I had been born to undocumented immigrants. Having to spend years in the process of obtaining US citizenship despite my US birth certainly put me in a special class of minorities!

These experiences made me into the unique person that I am today, able to relate to people from diverse backgrounds. In graduate school, I was described as being different from other international students, apparently because I seemed comfortable with everyone, regardless of where they were from. Perhaps I didn't really think of myself as an "international student."

That girl described in the Sunday School class above was me, and the ability to connect with people from different backgrounds has only been strengthened over the years. While our specific experiences may differ, the sense of vulnerability and need for connection are shared by everyone. I am better able to connect with patients, colleagues and learners because I am uniquely me.

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