



Was that a compliment or an insult?

Many of us have friends of different races. When we do not tune in to their feelings, we might say or do things that are hurtful to them without intending to. CHEW WEI SHAN finds out more through her chat with Amira and Nabil.

“You’re pretty cool for an Indian girl, Amira!”
 “Wow, you’re smart for a Malay guy, Nabil!”

Amira and Nabil pondered what their friends said. Were these really compliments?

Amira: Hui En was one of my best friends in primary school. One day, she said to me, “You’re pretty cool for an Indian girl, Amira!”

I forced myself to say thank you. But, her

words stung. I didn’t understand why at that time. I mean, it was sweet that she thought I was cool, right? But, Hui En had added “for an Indian girl” — what was that supposed to mean?

I thought about it. If I were “cool for an Indian girl” ... it means that, in her mind, most Indians are uncool. It made me think, gosh, if a nice girl like Hui En can think this way, what about the other kids? I became self-conscious in school, wondering how other people viewed us, Indians.

Shan: When you explain like that, these may be meant as compliments but are really insults, aren't they?

Nabil: Oh, yes. Growing up, I received "compliments" like that from people who were surprised that I did well in my studies. I would always hear things like: "Wow, you're smart for a Malay!" "Good job! You're the Malay hero in our school!"

Why was I a "Malay hero", I wanted to ask. When my Chinese friends did well, they were not called "Chinese heroes". They're just called "good students".

Even though they were trying to praise me, I could never feel good about it. It just showed that they did not expect me to have good grades in the first place, just because of my race.

Shan: That's sad.

Nabil: It troubled me as a kid. I tried very hard to stay positive. But, it hurt... through primary school, secondary school, even university. Also, sometimes, people say, "Don't worry, I don't think of you as a Malay. I think of you as a Chinese!"

Amira: Yes, I get that too! Someone once told me they don't think of me as Indian, but "Chindian" (half Chinese, half Indian). They meant it as a compliment. So, being half Chinese is better? I am 100% Indian. What's wrong with that? I am proud to be Indian!

Nabil: Yeah. When people say such things, it's wrong on many levels. But, worst of all, they're implying that one race is better than another. This makes it racist, even if they were trying somehow to make me feel good.

Shan: I get your point. You're supposed to feel good about being yourself, not about being seen as something you're not.

Nabil: Of course, some of these same people do often look beyond my skin colour and see my personality — and that means a lot to me. I'm no longer "that Malay guy". I am just "a guy". That's all I want, to just be "a guy"! "The guy who likes hip-hop", or "the guy who loves kimchi"! (*Laughs.*)

Amira: Yeah, that's nice! I also have wonderful friends who appreciate me for who I am. That is really important to me.

WHAT IS EVERYDAY RACISM?

Racism means to treat some people worse than others, just because they are of a different race or skin colour, come from a different place, or have a different culture. Everyday racism is a form of racism where people say or do hurtful things without intending to be unkind. Everyday racism is also called "casual racism", although there is nothing casual about it for the person at the receiving end.

Hello! My name is Wei Shan, but you can call me Shan. I am a Chinese Singaporean. As someone who has never experienced casual racism, I wanted to understand how those who had experienced it felt. So, I decided to listen to people who have experienced everyday racism. Based on what they shared with me, I wrote up these conversations for you to read. I also changed their names to protect their privacy.

Helping everyone belong

We can learn a lot from Amira and Nabil's experiences.

Even if we think we are praising someone, we might be expressing unfair **stereotypes** about them. When that happens, we need to ask ourselves:

- Why did I say that?
- How did it make them feel?
- Does it show that some of my beliefs are unfair?
- How can I correct my way of thinking?

What if, like Amira and Nabil, you are the one receiving well-meaning comments that are actually put-downs?

You could try to explain how the words are insulting to you. Since the person meant to be nice to you, use kind words to explain how it is not a compliment. That way, he or she is more likely to listen carefully and hear what you say. It may help to practice with a good friend until you feel more confident.

As I belong to the majority race here, when others look at me, they don't see my "Chineseness" first. They just see me as a person. I know this is an advantage that I enjoy. Unfortunately, not everybody gets to feel that way. Yet, Singapore is their home as much as it is mine. Let's do what we can to help everybody feel they belong.



VOCAB BUILDER

stereotypes (say "ste-reo-taips"; noun) = fixed ideas about what some people are like, especially if the idea is untrue.

This series is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Singapore. You can find more articles about casual racism at <http://more.whatsup.sg>.