



LINDA YEW

Racial jokes: “But they’re cool with it!”

Sometimes, we may hear “playful” racial jokes being shared among friends, and nobody appears to be offended. CHEW WEI SHAN wonders about what kids really feel when they are teased like that.

Jessa and Aadi were always the butt of racial jokes, growing up. Many times, they found themselves playing along, even if it pained them. Today, they share their feelings and experiences with me.

Shan: I have seen kids being teased about their looks, their accents or something else about them that makes them different from the other kids. The person who cracks the joke may mean no harm, and may say that it is only affectionate teasing. I wonder whether those being teased are truly cool with it. Or, are they **masking** their feelings just to fit in? What are your experiences of jokes like that?

Aadi: You must have heard this one before. The kids in my class used to turn off the lights and joke, “Eh! Where’s Aadi?”

The joke was that my skin was so dark, they couldn’t see me without the lights on. I used to laugh along so they wouldn’t think I was too sensitive. But, it actually made me feel like I was some kind of freak.

Shan: Oh, dear. You’re right, sadly... I have heard that joke many times.

Aadi: It seems to happen to almost every darker-skinned person I know. Whenever we had overnight school camps, everyone would joke, “If you see a toothy smile floating in the darkness, don’t panic. It’s just Aadi.”

The author of this series is a Chinese Singaporean who admits she does not know what it is like to be treated differently. So, she listened hard to people who had experienced everyday racism. Based on their stories, she wrote up these articles for you to read. The people’s names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Aadi (cont'd): I knew that I would be made fun of even more if I protested. I just wanted to be chill, I guess. I wanted people to like me. So, I not only embraced the joke, I started making the same jokes, too — about myself, or aimed at my other dark-skinned friends! Looking back, I am not proud of doing that.

Jessa: You were just trying to fit in. I totally get it!

Aadi: Maybe, but I hurt other kids in the process. Somehow, I had trained myself to ignore the discomfort and just live with it. Over time, it just got worse.

I was a football player, and I had very good footwork — I could gracefully steal the ball from my opponents. My teammates called me the “dark shadow”. “Careful, later the dark shadow swoop in and steal your ball,” they would say.

I told myself it was fine — the whole “shadow” thing must be their way of saying that I have good football skills. But soon, the jokes evolved to a nastier level.

“Careful, the sun is setting. Later the dark shadow steal your money.” “Careful. Later the dark shadow steal your girlfriend in the night.”

I realised it was about my dark skin all along. I chuckled politely at first, but it started to bother me more and more. One day, I gently protested, “Oi. I’m not some kind of criminal, lah!”

Casually and still laughing, my friends teased, “Why should we believe you? There’s a reason they say DTI.”

Shan: What does DTI stand for?

Aadi: I had heard many people say “DTI” before, but I had no idea what it meant. I always assumed it was some kind of inside joke. “What is DTI?” I finally asked.

“How can you not know? It stands for ‘Don’t Trust Indians’.”

I was shocked. In the years to come — through secondary school, poly, even university — I would continue to hear “DTI” everywhere I went. Sometimes, even Indians used it jokingly on themselves. “It’s just a joke, what!” they would say if I showed any discomfort.

Don’t people say “racist jokes are funny because they are true”? It makes me worry. Do people really believe that Indians can’t be trusted? Am I supposed to laugh it off? I don’t know.

Jessa: Of course, you shouldn’t just **laugh it off!** Joke or not, it still spreads harmful ways of thinking. (*Sighs*) My schoolmates used to make mean jokes, too.

My mum is Filipino, and my dad is Eurasian. Because of Dad, my skin is quite fair compared to Mum’s. When Mummy first picked me up from school, my friends immediately said, “Hey Jessa! Your maid is here!” Even after they learnt that she was my mother, they continued to joke that she was my helper.

Some classmates even put on a Filipino accent and imitated her, saying things a domestic helper might say: “Jessa, please to hurry up, later Ma’am and Sir not happy.”

Shan: How did you feel when they imitated your mother?

Jessa: I laughed along, at first. Only when I was much older did I understand how harmful these jokes were. On hindsight, I am ashamed I didn’t defend my mum. I wish I had said, “What is so funny about looking and sounding Filipino? My mother is proud to be Filipino, and so am I.”

But somehow, I felt so helpless. I couldn’t bring myself to tell my friends how I really felt. I was afraid that they would think I was overly sensitive. I didn’t want to lose my friends.

Jessa (cont'd): Sure, some Filipino women are helpers — they too deserve our respect! Making jokes based on stereotypes or looking down on people spreads ugly attitudes about them.

Aadi: It's hard to admit you are hurt. I think admitting it is scary because you feel less safe. But you know, I eventually came clean with my friends about their racial jokes.

Jessa: Really? That is brave of you, Aadi. How did you do it?

Aadi: We had been schoolmates for 10 years before I finally decided to be honest with them. I told them how racial jokes have been making me feel all these years.

I was so afraid to lose their affection. But, they actually listened. Then, they apologised! They said they realised that they were blinded by their advantage, as childish boys. They even promised to change for the better, and continue to educate themselves. That is when I knew I had true friends, and I have never been happier.

VOCAB BUILDER

masking (say "mas-king"; verb) = hiding something.

laugh it off (say "laf it off"; phrasal verb) = to make yourself laugh about something unpleasant to make it seem less serious.

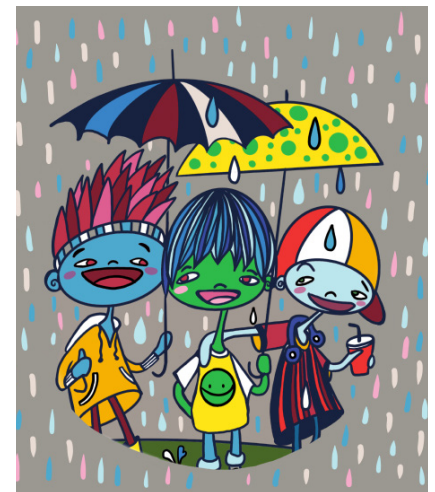
Stamp out jokes that hurt

Many ethnic minorities have endured painful racial jokes all their lives. Aadi was very brave to speak about the issue with his friends. However, it was not his responsibility alone to teach his friends to stop being racist. Racial teasing robs the victims of their dignity. When a robber steals money from someone, it is not the victim's job to catch the robber. In the same way, it is not fair to expect the victims of mean jokes to educate those hurting them.

It is everyone's job as human beings to be kind, and to treat others with respect. Just as Aadi's friends did, when we make mistakes and hurt others, we should admit we are wrong and commit to change.

We must all learn how to identify jokes that hurt and exclude others, even if they seem "all in good fun". As long as a joke singles out and puts down someone, alarm bells should ring in our heads. When that happens, we can speak up for

our peers. We can step forward and call out harmful attitudes when we see them. Only then do we have a chance at stamping out casual racism.



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.

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>.