



# Ouch! What a thoughtless question

Most of the time, it is good to ask questions. We ask questions because we are curious. We ask questions when we want to learn. But, sometimes, people ask questions in ways that hurt others. CHEW WEI SHAN tells us more.

When we ask questions, we must make sure we are asking for the right reason — to educate ourselves. We should be respectful, and genuinely ready to learn something new. This is not always the case. Today, Xiao Xin and Rozaini share examples of insensitive questions that hurt.

**Shan:** Have you ever been asked questions about your culture, religion, or traditions

that made you feel hurt?

**Xiao Xin:** I moved to Singapore from China just two years ago, when I was in Secondary 2. One question I get asked a lot is: “Why do your people eat their own pets?” There are so many things wrong with that one question. Firstly, when you say “my people”, what do you mean? The 1.4 billion people who live in China? Do you think we are all the same?

**Xiao Xin (cont'd):** Yes, dog and cat meat are part of some Chinese cuisines, but not mine. My hometown, Shenzhen, has actually banned the eating of dog and cat meat. Although I don't understand it or agree with it, I recognise that eating dog and cat meat is part of the unique culture in some parts of China.

It is also not fair to say these people in China are "eating their own pets". Dogs and cats are not kept as pets in those regions. They are reared or hunted just like the chicken, beef, or pork that we are more used to eating.

**Shan:** Gosh, it really is wrong on so many levels! This could be an example of a loaded question.

**Xiao Xin:** What do you mean by a "loaded question"?

**Shan:** When a question is loaded, it means that hidden inside the question, there is a belief that may or may not be true.

For example, if a teacher asks you "Why did you cheat in the test?", he is assuming that you cheated in the test. This makes it a loaded question. It shows that he already believes you cheated. In reality, this may not be true and you may feel that you were not given the chance to defend yourself.

**Xiao Xin:** Right! So, in my case, the question "Why do your people eat their own pets?" wrongly assumes that: (a) the whole of China can be called "my people", (b) all Chinese people eat dog and cat meat, and (c) the meat comes from people's pets.

**Shan:** Exactly!

**Rozaini:** Mm-hmm. In my own experience growing up, people around me would often question my religion and its rules.

"You can't eat pork, but can you smell it? The molecules enter your nostrils!" "Why must we always find halal places to eat just because of you?"

I wish people would see that all belief systems are complex and evolving. One religious community's traditions may not always seem logical to outsiders.

Go ahead and ask questions but there is a fine line between curiosity and disrespect. Sometimes, people are sincerely curious about my religious traditions. Some friends have asked me what exactly makes some meat halal and others not, and I gladly explained. At other times, I can tell when people are just trying to **provoke** or ridicule my beliefs.

### 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.

The author did not know what it was like to experience racism. So, she decided to learn more about it by interviewing immigrants and ethnic minorities. She wrote this series of articles to share their stories with you. The people's names have been changed to protect their privacy.

# Keeping an open mind

Asking questions is inherently a good thing. We should never be afraid to ask questions, because if we never ask, we'll never learn!

But, we should only ask questions because we are truly curious. Sometimes, we may be curious about other cultures, but are not sure how to ask. Remember to always ask with respect and an intention to learn and understand.

After hearing Xiao Xin and Rozaini's stories, I find myself trying to recall all the times I asked questions about someone else's culture. Was I ever rude or **judgemental**? Was I ever trying to be a smart aleck?

Rozaini's reflections about belief systems also left me with big questions for myself. How did I form my own beliefs about people who are different from me? What makes me, uniquely me? Our own opinions and habits are shaped by the people and things around us.

Everybody grows up with unique experiences. Our families may come from different backgrounds. The kinds of festivals we celebrate



may be different. Our social media feeds may be filled with very different kinds of ideas. The books and movies we consume may be different. All of these things play a part in how each individual develops a sense of self and a set of values as human beings.

So, when we ask questions about behaviours

and traditions that are less familiar to us, we need to keep an open mind. We need to remind ourselves, "Not everybody is like me. Everyone has a right to be themselves." And, from that standpoint, we are more likely to be genuinely respectful when we ask questions.

## VOCAB BUILDER

**provoke** (say "pro-voek"; verb) = to purposely make someone angry.

**judgemental** (say "jaj-men-tel"; adjective) = too quick to criticise.

**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>.**