



One human race, many peoples

CHEW WEI SHAN reflects on her learning journey about everyday racism. Join her as she commits to making our island a better home for all.

Growing up, I did not know that people from minority races face subtle forms of racism like casual racism. As I grew older, I realised that life was not that simple. I became aware of the different challenges and frustrations that other people face just because of the colour of their skin. We can all do more to treat one another with respect.

Racial discrimination can be found everywhere in the world. In some countries, a person of Chinese race like me is in the minority

and must endure insults and unfair treatment. Living in Singapore, I do not face that. Is this because everything is fine here? Or because I am in the majority? To find out, I interviewed **ethnic minorities**, including new immigrants, about their experiences. Based on what they shared with me about everyday racism, I wrote up their stories in the form of eight conversations for you to read. I did not use the interviewees' real names to ensure their privacy.

You can find the whole series at

<https://more.whatsapp.com>. I hope that, like me, you too will benefit from reading these stories.

Reason for sharing

For many of the minorities I interviewed, casual racism is part of life. They frequently feel hurt by rude jokes, put-downs, and inconsiderate questions. Some of them said that they had to defend or explain their own culture constantly. I felt sad that they had to experience all this here, in their own home country. I have been friends with some of them for a long time. But, I did not know about this side of their lives until I asked them.

They share their stories with you so honestly because they hope you will learn from them. They understand that acts of casual racism are not always meant to hurt. And, if more people became aware of how harmful these can be, the next generation of Singaporeans would be able to grow up in a more loving and inclusive country which they call home.

My interviewees made it clear that not all minorities share the same struggles. Some, of course, do not face any difficulties at all. But, I believe that one person discriminated against is already one too many.

Too easy not to know

I think about Dewi's son in kindergarten, and how many minorities in Singapore are made to feel like outsiders from a young age. I think about Aadi and Jessa, who were often the brunt of racial jokes.

I think about Reyansh and Iman, who grew too shy to introduce themselves because people found their names hard to pronounce. I think about all the people who hesitate to speak because their accents may be made fun of. I think about Nivya and Phyu, who always had to prove to others that they too were locals.

Such discrimination may have easily been

happening around me back when I was a kid. I did not see it because I was not the one being picked on. It is not like when a big bully punches a child and makes him cry. We call it "casual" or "everyday" racism because it slips into normal conversations. If you are not the target, you may not even notice it. But, for the victim, it can feel worse than a punch to the stomach.

Questions for you and me

The stories I heard make me reflect on my own behaviour. I ask myself whether I have ever been casually racist. Perhaps you can join me in asking yourself these questions, too.

Do you jokingly single out some of your friends for the way they speak, the food they eat, or their cultural or religious practices? Do you just forget to invite them to hangouts, or never pick them to play on your team?

Let's strive to create a society where all of us truly befriend, love, and look out for one another regardless of race. In this world, we will all be there for one another in times of need, and defend one another against harmful stereotypes.

Discrimination hurts people

Casual racism and subtle discrimination can inhibit and hurt persons of minority races.

Here in Singapore, I have never felt mocked or left out because of my race, accent, or name. Nobody has ever questioned whether I am truly local, or made me feel like I don't belong. I cruised through my years growing up without these difficulties. This allowed me to grow a certain level of self-confidence.

If I had grown up facing a pattern of racial comments and bullying, I would have been much more afraid to open up to others. I might have been scared of being judged or being seen as different. Now, I see that some of my minority friends who faced everyday racism had to work harder to build their confidence and sense of belonging.



Learning to listen more

This series on casual racism is a collection of many voices. And yet, there are so many more stories out there that are waiting to be told.

I am still learning every day. I hope you are too. What is important is that we remain willing to learn, open to changing our attitudes, and able to admit when we are wrong.

This is why, sometimes we need to speak less and listen more — not just to others' complaints or angry reactions, but also to the feelings they try to cover up. Almost everyone I interviewed hid their hurt at the time, and only opened up later. Some even laughed along when they were teased because they did not want to make a fuss.

In these stories, the adults I spoke with often said that they did not know how to respond when they were hurt or put down by friends during childhood. You may be in that situation now.

One of the hardest parts of knowing what to say is that the other person did not intend to be unkind. In which case, you must figure out how to explain to that person about everyday racism.

I hope this series gives you enough stories that you can use to help them understand why all of us must be more careful with our words. Learning the perspectives of someone

who is different from us can be hard, but it is always a good thing. It can teach us a lot about ourselves and our friends, and how to be fair and caring towards all human beings.

We all have dreams, and we all have insecurities. We all want to be liked and respected. We all have people whom we love. We all have stories to tell and songs to sing. Are we all that different from one another? I don't think so.

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.

VOCAB BUILDER

ethnic minorities (say "eth-nik mai-no-ri-tees"; noun) = groups of people living in a country or area where most people are from a different race.

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>.