Where are you ***actually*** from?

**Microaggressions; how to check your biases and address those of others**

by Maya, Year 7, June 2020

Obvious discrimination and racism are quite easy to recognise; a nasty comment or ‘joke’ or physical assault. Whilst much of this type of discrimination has reduced, it still unfortunately exists. However, a more common yet subtle form continues to impact members of marginalized groups. Victims can receive subtle questions, comments or actions about their heritage, gender, age or sexual orientation, which imply bias, judgement or dislike. The offenders are often unaware of the offense in their comments or actions. These are called microaggressions.

One of the problems with microaggressions is that they are very subtle and therefore hard to spot. Comments such as asking, ‘what **are** you?’ to a mixed-race person, saying ‘you are so beautiful, for a transgender girl’ or staring at someone because of the colour of their skin are all examples of microaggressions.

Micro aggressions are the outward expressions of our inner biases whether they be conscious or unconscious so the first thing we can do to prevent them, is to check our own. Do you find yourself holding particular views and thoughts about particular groups of people? How do you deal with these? Do you challenge yourself or find evidence to back up your views? e.g. “All black girls are loud and in a clique. That’s true because Esther and her friends are loud and never include me in their conversations”. If you allow thoughts like this to become your beliefs, they become part of you bias and you are more likely to judge and view all black girls through this lens. This is just one example but illustrates the point; we must check our own beliefs and views as well as challenging others.

Microaggressions happen on a daily basis for some people and unfortunately you cannot prevent them from happening to you as you can’t control other people or their actions. But you can decide to challenge them. To help decide how to respond to the comment, ask yourself some questions about the situation.

* Do I think I will be safe after responding to the comment/question or action?
* How well do I know this person?
* If I respond, will it affect my relationship with the offender? Does this matter to me?
* If I don’t respond does it suggest that I agree with the statement?

If, by the end of answering the questions you feel you have to respond to the statement, think carefully about how you phrase your response. You want the offender to listen to what you’re trying to say rather than focus on the shame or hurt they may feel about being challenged. While your response will vary by situation, context, and relationship, it is helpful to remember these three tactics.

* Ask for more clarification: “Could you say more about what you mean by that?” or “How have you come to think that?”
* Separate intent from impact: “I know you didn’t realize this, but when you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behaviour), it was hurtful or offensive because\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Instead you could\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (different language or behaviour.)”
* Share your own process: “I noticed that you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (comment/behaviour). I used to do/say that too, but then I learned\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

The principle underlying these statements is to help the offender understand that they are not under attack for their comment. We need to be mindful that if we want people to hear what we’re saying and potentially change their views, we have to think about the way in which we relay our message. As soon as they are in defensive mode; the receiver will be unable to hear the message you are giving them, and your efforts will be futile.