

Understanding Racism PART TWO: Going Deeper

*The majority of this material is extracted from an article by Sukrithi Wahi in the **Harper's Bazaar** series "How to talk about race." <https://www.harpersbazaar.com.au/culture/how-talk-about-race-20371> (5 June 2020) Changes have been made to adapt to the context. Additional contributors are credited.*

"To help you navigate and better understand some of the common terms that come up in conversations about race, [Harper's Bazaar] have pulled together a list of words (with their histories and examples) that will help us all become better allies in the wider discussion, because language is one of the most powerful tools we have."

Some of the more challenging phrases are explained briefly below. There are recommendations to follow up with articles which are also in the Voices Folder.

White Privilege

White privilege describes the inherent advantages white people possess as the result of a society built on racial inequality and injustice. It doesn't mean that all white people have 'easy' lives, it means the colour of their skin isn't one of the things making their lives harder.

"I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books. But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Some everyday examples of white privilege include:

- Being widely represented in all facets of society, from media to workplaces.
- Being able to find 'skin' coloured items from band aids to lingerie easily.
- It being acceptable to not work hard to correctly pronounce the names of people from other cultures (while they typically end up having to anglicise their names, so they can 'assimilate').
- Never having to, as an individual, be the spokesperson for or represent all white people in any given situation.

*Refer to “Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”
by Peggy McIntosh in the Voices Folder for more examples.*

White Fragility

White fragility (from the 2018 book "*White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*," by University of Washington Professor Robin DiAngelo, Ph.D) is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

“While it is normal to feel upset when confronted with uncomfortable truths and perspectives, white fragility supports racism because it shifts the power dynamic in an insidious way,” says Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of African and African American Studies at Duke University. All of a sudden, the conversation becomes less about what the person of colour experienced, but the white person's reaction, and, in so doing, is an attempt to undercut the validity of the person of colour's experience.

We might find it difficult to believe that we possess biased attitudes and engage in behaviours that are discriminatory. If white people can let go of the need to defend, and focus less on feeling guilty, denying or justifying their actions, then they can strive to understand the hurt. It is helpful to focus on the **IMPACT** of our actions rather than on the **INTENT**.

Microaggressions

(Additional material from WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY TEACHING ROUNDTABLE by Lorna Hernandez Jarvis, Associate Vice President For Diversity, Equity And Inclusion.)

The word 'microaggressions' was coined by a black Harvard professor and psychiatrist, Dr Chester Pierce in 1970 after he studied the ongoing presence of stigmatising representations of black people on TV. He defined it as: "subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put-downs' of black people." They may indirectly, unintentionally or subtly inflict discrimination on members of any marginalised group.

The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the agent, and sometimes the target. We explain microaggressions away with seemingly nonbiased and valid reasons.

For the target there is always the nagging question of whether it really happened. Was it intentional or not? How should they respond? To answer these questions targets rely on **experiential** reality that is contextual (difficult to "prove", resulting in anger for having to bear the burden of proof. For the agent this was a single and minor event. An agent would not see the pattern of bias and defend the situation based on the argument, "I'm not racist."

Some examples of microaggressions as statements:

- "I don't see colour." (Denying the reality and lived-experience of a person of colour).
- "Your name is so hard to pronounce." (Reminding them that they are 'other' and your culture is the dominant culture).
- "All lives matter." (Often used as a response to Black Lives Matter, 'all lives matter' is highly problematic as it derails the conversation and doesn't acknowledge the racially specific injustices occurring towards black people).

Target individuals who respond to microaggressions are likely to:

- Be accused of being oversensitive or paranoid.
- Be told that their emotional outbursts confirm stereotypes about underrepresented identities.
- Give credence to the belief that they are hostile, angry, impulsive, and prone to violence.

***Refer to PDFs "Microaggression" and
"I Didn't Mean It Like That" in the Voices Folder.***

Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation is a form of individual racism that happens when, typically a more dominant people or society, inappropriately adopts elements of a culture that is not their own. Examples of this include people who are white wearing traditional black hairstyles, when in reality, black people are discriminated against for doing the same thing.

Another example: In 2017, Victoria's Secret sent models down the runway wearing headdresses resembling those belonging to different Native American tribes, where they hold significant cultural meaning. Similarly, wearing bindis to a music festival (which holds various meanings for Hindu women) for 'fun' is also a form of cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is not to be confused with 'cultural exchange', when a member of the other culture has invited the dominant culture to partake in their customs (i.e. wearing a traditional Indian outfit to an Indian friend's wedding).

Ally

An ally is someone who is not a member of a marginalised group, but seeks to help end the oppression and injustice towards those in a marginalised group.

Some examples of being a good ally include:

- Self-educating to understand racial inequality so that you help dismantle it (as opposed to expecting a person of colour in your life to provide all the answers to your questions).
- Actually listening when a person of colour calls you out on something that may be incorrect, as opposed to getting defensive.
- Using your privilege to speak out if someone uses racially inappropriate language (particularly if there are no people of colour around).
- Going beyond partaking in social media clicktivism by donating your time, money and/or voice even after the 'hype' has died down.

Performative Allyship

If you're only doing the first part e.g., posting a black square on Instagram (as much the intention may have been good), that's an example of performative allyship. It is the practice of using words, posts and gestures that do more to promote an individual's own virtuous moral compass, than actually contributing to the cause they purport to support. It's also often referred to as 'virtue signalling'. In its most dangerous form, performative allyship can also obstruct the good work being done by actual activists, either by derailing and centering themselves in the conversation.

See more about "Allies" in the Voices Folder.