

## It was just a harmless joke, Right?

“You’re pretty... for an Asian.”

3 The ‘compliment’ above is a perfect example of what has become widely known as covert racism. Covert racism is a subtle, commonplace form of discrimination, such as being ridiculed, treated differently or ignored, and is particularly aimed at racial minority groups within a demographic. J, a student Chinese descent, experiences this subtle racism daily.

She says that the ‘compliment’ above is just one of many examples of inexplicit statements, gestures and attitudes, under which lie little threads in intolerance and racism, slithering their way through the mask of politeness like a snake. Explicit or inexplicit, are the feelings the words, insinuations and actions leave behind not the same? And can the perpetrators blame ignorance and unawareness? You would think that in a first world, democratically developed country like New Zealand, people would not have a racist bone in their bodies. But the vast diversity of \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ students is bring into light the possibility that maybe we do not realise that the bone actually is there, much like a mosquito bite you didn’t know you had until it begins to itch. 3

1 JF has called NZ home for more than 17 years, but for some reason, was caught in a rather explicit territorial dispute. “I remember when I was younger, about ten, walking along the road when a car of teenagers drove past shouting, ‘go back to your own f\*\*\*\*g country!’,” says the 17-year-old student. But despite the gruesome experience, J considers the subtle racism she experiences on a daily basis much worse. And the cases of covertly racist comment she falls victim to do not spill from strange mouths. The perpetrators are, in fact, her friends. “It has been decreasing lately... but I think that’s cause people know that I hate it, and that I’ll actually say something...”. J says that the racism mostly manifests itself as fatuous little jokes and comments, but, when she retaliates with, “what’s wrong with being Asian?” she is met with guiltily flustered looks. They realise what they said was racist but just don’t want to admit that it was.” It was just a harmless joke, right? 3

Not as innocent as it seems:

1 That is how a lot of people seem to justify these discriminative comments. When I asked two NZ Europeans students, AB and TB, if they thought covert racism existed at their school, their replies were similar: AB said no, “I don’t think any type of racism exists here at school. People make the occasional stereotypical joke about a person’s race, but they don’t mean anything by it.” TB supports this theory. “I wouldn’t consider racial jokes racist, because its always just harmless banter...”. But these “harmless” comments have made J notice that having a different ethnicity generally has negative connotations, and have cause her to disagree with AB and TB, especially as she listens to the remarks that are made in front of her about other ethnic groups around school. Stereotypes follow a person’s race like a predator stalking a prey, with “curry-muncher” and “dairy-owner” drifting around the school grounds like a feather, not bearing the true weight of its words. “People make these “funny” stereotypical comments all the time, especially about the food I eat. They’re the classic ‘fried

1 rice' kind of jokes," confirms half-Chinese student EC. She knows that people do not expect her to take it seriously because it was not seriously meant. SN, another student, also regularly experiences these stereotypical references to her Indian ethnicity. In a self-uploaded YouTube video she illustrates the many comments, jokes and questions thrown her way by "white people." "Do you have curry every night for dinner?" and "why don't you have a big red dot in the middle of your forehead, doesn't every Indian do that?" were among the many. In the video S hints at the concept of unawareness. "Covert racism is a problem because people don't realize they are doing it," confirms J, fully aware by contrast, having felt it at a young age. "When I was younger it made me feel ashamed to be Asian..." Despite articulations ability to break our bones, and though these incidents may seem innocent and small, their effect clearly seems to be more potent than perhaps intended. 2

Why the superiority?

Why are racial minority groups met with these discriminative comments and jokes? An article for TVNZ by Aidan Rasmussen blamed the whispered racism towards Asians on clashing of culture. "They're so different to us..." And Sonia Sly, a writer for thewireless.co.nz discovered through experience that "its...a fear and loathing of 'difference'..." *Difference*. Can different upbringings, beliefs and cultures really be the cause of all these racist jokes and comments? And is it only racially different people on the school grounds that are subject to this hushed hostility? When I asked my mother and father, both Danish immigrants, if they had ever experienced covert racism, they said no; they'd felt quite the opposite. I inquired about the reason behind their exemption: "it could be because we look like New Zealanders and are able to blend in." Their viewpoint brings into light the question of appearance and skin colour. Had the colour of their skin been different, would their reception into NZ also have been? As a Danish immigrant myself, I have never been the punch line of a racist joke in my 4 years school. So am I just a lucky exception, or does skin colour really still cloud people's judgement of others? J is often asked questions that seem to suggest so. "I get a lot of 'where are you from?' or "you speak pretty good English," despite the fact that J is born and raised in NZ. S experiences are similar. "Oh, you're telling me you're from NZ - no, I mean where are you from *originally*? Like, India?" People, based on appearance, make assumptions. They see people like J, E and S as different, and therefore treat them differently to other NZ European people. J has drawn a conclusion: "I think it has a lot to do with ignorance... People don't realize they're doing it, they haven't really thought about what's behind what they're saying... I think it is people being uneducated and unwilling to understand..."

Make it stop:

This ignorance makes J eager to stop covert racism by encouraging her fellow students to abandon their assumptions, attain a little empathy, but most of all, stop negatively connoting ethnic difference. "We are all people, simply experiencing life through a different pair of eyes and ears," after all. The school proudly promotes their "respect for different and support for individuality" but do these facts and examples justify this declaration? An older, wiser J has learnt to love her roots. "Now I see being Chinese as something to embrace." Is it possible that the level of covert racism at school is preventing others from loving their roots too? We may not be aware of this racist bone that so many people obviously carry, but if it were to break and disappear, perhaps we would feel its absence. 2