



THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Throughout West High's diverse community, many are subject to everyday racist comments. These small yet powerful statements are known as microaggressions, and they are rapidly increasing.

BY ISABELLE ROBLES & FENNA SEMKEN

A white girl from Africa moves to the United States. When she arrives in class the principal remarks, "I wanted to let everyone know that we've got a new student joining us. She just moved here all the way from Africa." The teacher looks to a black student and says, "Welcome!" only for the student to respond, "I'm from Michigan."

Although this scene from the movie *Mean Girls* might have appeared as a clever one-liner, seemingly innocent phrases and miscommunications like those

happen every day.

Although unintended, what the teacher in *Mean Girls* said was a brief, verbal statement that communicated a negative racial slight to a person of color. These statements are called racial microaggressions and are faced by West students and faculty.

Sharon Amazou '18 has been exposed to such minimally racist comments.

"There was this one time when I said I was from Africa, and [someone] replied with a, 'Really?

You don't look African,' and I don't know it kinda just got to me, like, how am I supposed to look?" Amazou said.

Nada Ibrahim '16, co-president of SSIKED, has been told in the past that she doesn't act like her race.

"My friends would be like 'Oh yeah, you're not black' whenever I'd say I'm black and I'm like 'What do you mean?' and they say 'Well, you don't act that way.' Is it a bad thing to be black? Does a black person act a specific way? I told her you shouldn't say that; I am black. Just

because I act a certain way doesn't mean I'm not a certain race," Ibrahim said.

Antonio Clipperton '17 recalls a time in which a person commented on his appearance. He was told that he looks 'so exotic.'

"I don't think I should be exotic because as a person, we're both the same, we're both people, we're both on the same level," he said. "When you put exotic you are kind of dehumanizing a person and putting them as like 'you are on a lower standard, you aren't on the



84%*

OF STUDENTS HAVE WITNESSED A RACIST COMMENT DIRECTED TOWARDS SOMEONE AT SCHOOL



24% FROM TEACHERS
76% FROM STUDENTS

*out of 345 students surveyed

same page as me.”

Amazon has also received comments that, although seem to take a complimentary tone, are racist. She has been told ‘You’re pretty for a black girl’ or ‘You don’t act black’. For Amazon, hearing these statements is difficult to respond to.

“In my opinion the hardest thing about it is how you should react to it,” she said. “It’s like, if you act all angry ... about it, people’ll say that you’re overreacting, that you shouldn’t take it so seriously. And I agree, things ignorant people say shouldn’t be taken so seriously, but I feel if you just brush it off you’re encouraging that type of behavior, and letting it just happen. So to me, it’s pretty much a lose-lose situation.”

Akar Jani ’16 thinks that oftentimes these statements go unnoticed because only a reaction will stimulate realization. For that reason, reaction is necessary, in his opinion.

“I think if they say it and then you react to it, it’s only then they realize [what they said],” he said. “People don’t feel like they should

respond, but they take it personally. They don’t realize until they’re told, and this is why it keeps happening, because no one wants to stand up to them.”

After years of dealing with microaggressions, Spanish teacher Carmen Gwenigale has found an appropriate reaction.

“I’m always one to walk away ... [but] if you decide to confront someone, confront them [by] trying to ... teach them where they’re wrong, but in an educational matter. Because if not, your message is not going to come across,” she said.

AP Psychology teacher, Travis Henderson, agrees that the smartest way to respond with comments is to try to politely correct them. This way, these unintended, culturally accepted comments can be intercepted.

“People should, if they hear a microaggression, not in a combative way, but in a kind way, should be like, ‘Wow, you just said this, here’s how some people might perceive it. Here’s a way of

maybe thinking about that a little differently.”

The Truth Squad, created by University of Iowa Sociology student Chanelle Thomas, helps students at West become more attuned to microaggressive statements and learn how to handle them.

“The Truth Squad is a place where students can come and learn about issues such as microaggressions. It is also important for individuals to learn how to heal and deal with the impacts of racism and racial microaggressions,”

Thomas said. “For example, the Truth Squad actively works toward exposing students to a community where they can find camaraderie, and learn how to engage in self-care. Most importantly, The Truth Squad is a place where students can come to increase their knowledge.”

Despite the efforts, Thomas believes microaggressions will be difficult to eradicate.

“I feel like microaggressions

are embedded into our culture. We went from a society that enslaved bodies, forced people into reservation camps and openly terrorized people of color, to a society that said ‘We don’t tolerate such behaviors anymore,’” Thomas said. “There are few people who are content with being racist, but most people don’t want to be viewed as such. Most people who engage in microaggressions aren’t even aware of their impact. That shows you how embedded it is in our culture.”

When encountered with these experiences, Gwenigale reminds students to keep their peace of mind.

“There will be moments where they do not get it, do not understand because they aren’t saying it from the badness, the meanness of their hearts, and there will be moments where they will just dismiss you again. My mom always used to tell me ‘You can’t fight crazy. If it’s not sinking in, if your message isn’t coming through, you just walk away, just let it go.”



Sharon Amazou '18