

Racism, words, and intent

BY BRIANNE VESCIO

ISSUES of racism consistently dominate headlines in the media, yet it is still claimed that racism in our community is rare, or caused by a few 'bad apples.' Its persistence seems to say otherwise.

News stories will often describe a controversial statement made by a respected individual. Usually, these headlines are followed by additional stories, editorials, or remarks made in online comments debating some common themes: Was it racist or not? He is a good person; therefore, it was not racist. There was no way she meant it in that way. Those comments are offensive to us. People are too sensitive, they should get over it.

Does this sound familiar? The debate is often ignited because the public's image of the individual who made the comments does not fit with what comes to mind when they think of the label 'racist.'

The person who made the offensive remarks may be seen as powerful, prestigious, virtuous, likeable, friendly, admirable, or funny — qualities that conflict with what it means to be racist.

People commonly believe the 'folk theory' of racism: that it exists only among uneducated, backward, ignorant, marginalized, irrational, and hateful people.

People also tend to place a high degree of importance on the speaker's



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Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding or race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

beliefs and intentions. For example, they may dismiss the comments as a 'slip of the tongue,' or 'a private joke,' or they may insist that the comment 'wasn't meant to be taken that way.'

These factors allow the audience to conclude that no, those words were not racist because the speaker is respectable and did not mean them in that way — which often leads to the belief that those who took offense are divisive and over-reacting.

However, the folk theory of racism is inaccurate. It perpetuates a stereotype of who can be considered racist, and excuses those who do not fit into this narrow category.

The folk theory brushes aside, minimizes, and erases any contra-

dictions that don't fall in line. It also pinpoints racism onto specific individuals and dismisses how it works within a cultural system — the institutional racism that is woven into our history, our policies, our language, our government, our economic system, our educational system, and our criminal justice system.

Attempting to judge the speaker's intent distracts the audience from recognizing the harm caused by the words. The issue is not the underlying thoughts and beliefs of the speaker; it is the hurt inflicted upon the community affected.

Speculating on the speaker's beliefs and intentions and dismissing the effects of the words allows the audience to criticize those who take offense for trying to 'stir up trouble where there is none.' But words are just words; can they actually cause real harm?

Yes, words can perform actions and have real effects on a person's life.

For example, a judge might state that a person is sentenced to five years in prison or a priest could pronounce a couple husband and wife. Language can be used to comfort people or harm them. The Criminal

Code of Canada recognizes this fact by listing violations such as uttering threats and charges relating to hate speech. Racist words are powerful and can attack communities, harm individuals, and propagate stereotypes.

Racism is woven into our society in many ways, and surfaces frequently — whether intentional or not. In striving to create healthier communities, people must stop making excuses for offensive comments/actions and stop blaming those who are hurt by them, while opening up to apologizing, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and working towards developing a mutual understanding.

In this article, I draw upon the work of Jane H. Hill, Regents' Professor of Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Arizona and author of over 100 articles and seven books. Much of her work deals with linguistic expressions of racism.

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The positive qualities of a person who made an offensive remark may conflict with what it means to be racist.