

Reporting racism among small steps being taken

BY BRENDA REIMER

LIKE many of you I am troubled by the disparity in Thunder Bay when many people experience racism directed against them but, as a white woman, I experience none. Has racism become normalized in our city? Is it something which we just accept?

Recently, Amy Siciliano, researcher for the Report Racism Incident Reporting Project, included some useful definitions and concepts in a report on this pilot project. I have tried to put in my own words some of the things which she shared. Some of these basic concepts help me to better understand what is happening in our community and point to what will be necessary for change to occur. In that spirit I share them with you.

What do we mean by race? It's not about categorizing humans by skin colour. That notion has been scientifically discredited for years. It is more a way of dividing people into hierarchical categories based on



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

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

certain physical or cultural characteristics.

If we belong to a dominant racial group we rarely need to think about our racial category because our race is rarely used to describe, target or exclude us as a group. For instance we often hear comments about native gangs, black on black violence or Muslim terrorists. Rarely do we hear the well-known criminal gang, the Hell's Angels, referred to as a

white gang known for its white-on-white violence. Nor is the label white or Christian terrorist used to describe mass-shooting events such as the one in Quebec City or Los Angeles.

Assumptions about those we identify as belonging to a particular race may be used to elevate their status (privilege) or to lower their status leading to discrimination or harm (racism). Racism is not just about discriminating against one group, but also about privileging another — the dominant group in society. Racism and privilege can operate both on an individual level and at a systemic or institutional level. Racism is tied to the social, political, economic and institutional power held by the dominant group in society.

No wonder we, as members of the dominant (white) race, are beginning to feel uncomfortable.

Studies now explore whiteness as a racial category. Because whites have never had to feel uncomfortable about their racial identity we

have a low tolerance to the racial stress which arises when what is racially familiar becomes disrupted. Disruptions take many forms. Perceived threats are seen in the changing racial composition of a community; the introduction of employment equity policies in the workplace; rising social awareness; acceptance of historical and contemporary racial injustices and responses to those injustices. All are changes to the status quo. We see all of these disruptions here in Thunder Bay.

White fragility is now used as a term to describe the state that arises when racial comfort (which whites are accustomed to) is perceived to be threatened. It typically triggers a range of defensive moves (anger, fear, frustration). These moves can be understood as an attempt to restore racial order from those who see race equity policies and practices as a zero-sum game, a game in which gains made by one racial group equate to losses for another.

How do we change our thinking

from a zero-sum game where your gain is my loss to a win-win game where all share the power and no one racial group is dominant? It's a complex challenge. However, I believe some small steps have begun in our city and I look forward to more.

One such step is the Report Racism Incident Reporting pilot project. If you experience or witness racism report it at lspc.ca/incident-report or call 211. It's confidential.

Referral to community resources is offered. The purpose is two-fold: to send a clear message that racism is not acceptable in our community and to identify patterns in locations or types of incidents reported.

26.03.18

Brenda Reimer has lived in Thunder Bay for about 45 years. She is retired from the workforce but involved in many community activities. She is secretary of Diversity Thunder Bay and co-chairs the working group for the Incident Reporting Project. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.