

Racial stereotypes in media: Not just a bit of harmless fun

**Leonard Lim and
Mathew Mathews**

For The Straits Times

Singapore, with its polyglot population living and working together peacefully for the past five decades, often strikes international visitors as an oasis of social harmony.

However, undercurrents of racism do surface from time to time. Insensitive remarks or actions based on stereotypes about a certain race may cause offence, and social media amplifies both the effect and reach of the offence and the grievances of those who feel victimised.

But these incidents also offer good opportunity for Singaporeans to have open and civil conversations on what constitutes racial discrimination, as there are sometimes no clear lines, and these shift over time as social mores evolve.

In some instances, the markers are quite clear. There was a strong backlash against “blackface”, or the use of make-up by ethnic Chinese to impersonate a dark-skinned character, last year (on a Mediacorp television programme) and in 2012 (at a dinner and dance event).

Many, including Chinese Singaporeans, spoke out against what they regarded as appropriating someone else’s ethnicity and treating it like

entertainment. The authorities also imposed a financial penalty on Mediacorp for what was deemed racially insensitive content.

There is relatively strong consensus when it comes to employment practices, and this is probably shaped by fair-hiring legislation. About four in five respondents in last year’s Channel NewsAsia – Institute of Policy Studies (CNA-IPS) survey on race relations deemed not hiring someone because of his or her race as racist (the make-up of the 2,000 surveyed reflects Singapore’s racial composition).

But when it comes to poking fun at someone’s race, especially through stereotypes, the picture does not seem so clear. This was displayed in the range of opinions that surfaced after a local Indian actor’s recent post on Facebook. Mr Shrey Bhargava had expressed disappointment over how he was asked to adopt a thick Indian accent and “make it funny” during an Ah Boys To Men audition.

The CNA-IPS survey brought out similar sentiments. Compared to employment practices, there was relatively less consensus on whether making jokes about another race was racist.

About one in three said they would not consider this racist. In fact, 42 per cent of respondents reported that it was at least sometimes acceptable to make those jokes in the company of friends, although the proportion dropped to 23 per cent when the respondents were asked if it was acceptable to make such racist

jokes in public.

Such “casual racism” may be more commonplace than we think. About 60 per cent of respondents (regardless of race) had heard racist comments.

While many Singaporeans had presumably stayed silent previously, several were emboldened to share their experiences after a call by Mr Bhargava to do so. This could be an indication of the latent tension the minorities may be suppressing. Those who have been socialised to accept casual racism, especially through their childhood or at work, may begin to feel resentment towards society now, especially if they feel their objections are being brushed aside.

It is worth asking ourselves whether discriminatory actions or words that some of us deem to be harmless may unintentionally wound others’ feelings.

Such reflection may be especially pertinent for the majority race. Researchers point to the phenomenon of “majority privilege”, whereby members of the dominant ethnicity may fail to see things from the viewpoint of others who are not in the majority. For instance, in assessing whether making fun of a language associated with another race was acceptable, 59 per cent of Chinese survey respondents agreed that it was never acceptable. Among the minorities, the number was higher: 76 per cent of Indians and 69 per cent of Malays reject such actions.

While the facts in the Ah Boys To Men incident may never emerge for

one to determine the full story, majority privilege was clearly in operation in some of the reactions. Some pointed out that the Chinese are also routinely made fun of, and Mr Bhargava’s reaction was another instance of minorities being over-sensitive.

While parents, teachers, colleagues and employers can all play a role in their spheres of influence to call out casual racism, responsibility also falls on the local entertainment industry.

We cringe at how Asians and other minorities are sometimes still portrayed by Hollywood. Chinese men are bespectacled geeks, while the Asian woman is a bumbling domestic helper who speaks broken English. This, despite many men and women of Asian descent rising to prominent positions within academia and business in the United States.

In Singapore, minority actors have similarly lamented that they are often shoehorned into certain roles and seldom given opportunities for protagonists’ roles.

Racial stereotypes in the media,

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whether for comedic effect or otherwise, unfortunately reinforce our prejudices (and in the case of children, help in forming those prejudices) against those who look, talk and behave differently.

We then tend towards a narrow view of what constitutes members of “the other”, when in reality the make-up of “the other” is much more diverse. They hail from different backgrounds, and have an abundance of talent.

Further, the subliminal message to the audience is that statements or jokes that highlight and poke fun at a particular accent, mannerism or look are socially acceptable.

Some argue that the majority race is also subject to such treatment. They point to how several of the roles played by Chinese actors in Ah Boys To Men are premised on stereotypes – a sheltered mummy’s boy and “Lobang King”, an “Ah Beng” who has a knack for connecting his friends with good deals.

But that misses the point. These portrayals have more to do with personality types than racial differences.

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The recent episode involving Mr Bhargava will not be the last time that charges of casual racism and discrimination surface. Each provides an opportunity for reflection, and one question we might ask ourselves is whether we should insist that the status quo is fine, especially in the wake of growing protests from those who have been the subject of such “humour”.

We cannot call ourselves a truly inclusive society, if racial stereotypes in the media and in daily interactions continue to be the stimuli for some of our loudest laughs.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Leonard Lim is a research associate and Dr Mathew Mathews is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.