

Things white people ask Black people

Written by Essex Nesta

Opening a dialogue on race is a tricky ordeal, especially in Minnesota where we are viewed as liberal and interracial. Living in a community with many cultures, some of us find we rarely interact with other races on a personal level outside of the required politeness in the workplace and in other public arenas.

This lack of deep and authentic connection can build barriers to understanding cultures and customs outside of our own. One way we are taught to bridge the knowledge gap is to ask questions. But, how do you ask questions about race without offending others – even when no malice is intended?

NPR's Code Switch has taken this particular conversation about race in America to social media and has encouraged folks to share questions they have been asked pertaining to their race that were offensive or awkward on Twitter using the hashtag #theyasked.

I was not surprised to see that most of the folks posting questions were non-whites.

From time-to-time I am asked ridiculous questions with racial undertones that range from, "What happens when your hair gets wet?" to "You grew up with your Dad...really?" and "Aren't you afraid to live in North Minneapolis?!" and my favorite, "Do black women get upset when they see a black man with a white woman?"

The difficult part is that I am not sure the people asking these questions realize they are being offensive and may be surprised to know what they asked was perceived as inappropriate, rude and downright nosey. In our community, the "Minnesota nice" adds another wave of complexity.

So, does posting these questions on Twitter open the race dialogue and shine the light on offensive behavior or does it create an even bigger barrier? Reading the questions that were Tweeted was more sad than it was liberating or entertaining. The questions that were posed were the same questions my African-American, Latino, Asian and Jewish friends and I were asked growing up twenty years ago.

Has Minnesota changed?

When I was growing up, there were anecdotal race-based statements that highlighted differences that included wearing mixed match outfits, mayonnaise versus Miracle Whip and clapping on beat. We laughed about these things and didn't need to ask why they were associated with a particular race; we simply accepted them.

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We have a much more diverse cultural landscape than during my childhood, but for the most part, we still live in and socialize in very separate communities.

As I walk the rows of offices in my workplace, I see photos of families, neighbors and wedding parties of people who all look the same, including my own. The homogenous existence this represents may be the reason a Jewish colleague was asked if she celebrated Thanksgiving. "I'm American," she responded.

Being curious about other cultures really isn't the issue; it's that the questions asked are very specific, ignorant and judgmental and at they call attention to negative stereotypes that fuel separation and magnify the lack of culture in our culture. There is a difference between National Geographic curious and let's-see-if-the-stereotype-is-true curious. th

Even so, instead of being defensive, I answer the questions posed to me and then explain how it may be perceived as offensive – for future reference. The awe that results is the most awkward for me. In 2013, I can't understand why someone would be "pleasantly surprised" to learn that I grew up with a loving and doting professional father in a neighborhood (North Minneapolis) where I continue to feel safe and celebrated, that I don't get upset when I see a black man with a white woman and when my hair gets wet, it curls up.

The sadness lies in the fact that the #theyasked posts seem to bring forward racist assumptions hidden behind the veil of curiosity.

This weekend, I thought of questions I may have for people of other races and couldn't come up with any I have been holding in or have been too afraid to ask. Culturally speaking, I was always taught to mind my own business, travel, observe and pick up a book.

Share your experience and some of the questions you have been asked about your race on Twitter @Insightnews using the hashtag #InMNTheyAsked