

# MORE THAN JUST *a comment*

*Microaggressions are a big issue and they should be recognized and responded to always, instead of being overlooked and disregarded*

**I** STOOD IN line at the Fairway Hen House, waiting to pay for the can of tomato sauce that my mom needed for dinner, when I felt a tap on the shoulder.

“Wow sweetie, your skin is so pretty and exotic.”

Turning to face a bubbly middle-aged white woman who I’ve never met before, I plastered on a smile and replied with a forced “thank you.”

Growing up Black in the Kansas City area where 71% of the population is white, according to Data USA, means grappling with microaggressions — subtle actions that perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination. They are easy to brush aside but should be denormalized due to the impacts they have on people of color.

The grin on the woman’s face was so genuine that I knew she called me “exotic” as a compliment. But an adjective used to describe fruit, tropical locations and animals feels dehumanizing when applied to people — that should be obvious.

I should’ve said something.

Before I could decide whether to speak out against her comment or walk away, the woman’s hands were on my head, fingers running through my dark curls. She gushed about my “unique” appearance.

I just smiled and nodded, as if I wasn’t being treated like some exhibit at the petting zoo.

The normalization of such microaggressions makes responding to them complicated. It’s often seen as overreacting or being a

“snowflake” for getting offended by something so “small.”

I never want to cause a scene.

Target employees will follow me around like I’m about to pull off the biggest heist of the year, and I’ll just put my head down and make sure to keep my hands out of my pocket.

I’ll laugh awkwardly after someone tells me I’m “acting white” for enjoying activities like debate or writing. I can’t remember how many times I’ve thanked someone for making a surprised comment about how “well spoken” I am.

I just walk away when kids at school make jokes about my favorite food being fried chicken and I simply ignore the obvious stares in class whenever the continent of Africa is mentioned.

Though seemingly innocent, microaggressions always dampen my self esteem. They make me feel degraded as they reinforce the idea that I am regrettably different or that I don’t belong— and that angers me.

I think about how my white counterparts have the privilege to be seen and viewed based on their actions whereas my identity is constantly invalidated by my race.

Microaggressions have become so ingrained in daily interactions that they’ve almost become a twisted form of social etiquette. It’s wrong that marginalized individuals are expected to be accustomed to these subtle jabs.

When compared to other acts of discrimination like hate crimes or slurs, ignorant jokes, casual remarks or poorly-phrased questions— can seem especially

insignificant.

I used to think that microaggressions weren’t worth getting upset about. At least not when there were instances of people getting brutally attacked just because of the color of their skin — who cares if I have to deal with a little ignorance?

But the constant jabs at my identity add up. Extreme acts of racism don’t take away from the impacts of microaggressions. Being offended by microaggressions doesn’t make me hypersensitive or a “snowflake.” I deserve to be treated with the same dignity and respect as anyone else, I shouldn’t have to settle for subtle prejudice just because there are worse possible situations.

I need to work on speaking up against microaggressions and turning my awkward laughs into, “It’s actually not okay to say that.” It’s hard, but I urge other minorities to challenge themselves as well.

And for everyone else: think before you speak. Ask sincere questions if you don’t understand someone else’s culture. And never call a person “exotic.”

## *unwelcome* INTERACTIONS

*Common examples of different types of microaggressions and what they communicate*

### WHAT IS SAID

“Where are you from?”

“I don’t see race/color.”

“I know what you go through.”

“I would’ve never guessed you’re...”

vs.

### WHAT IT MEANS

You aren’t a “real” American citizen.

I’m denying the significance of your culture.

Your struggles aren’t valid or important.

Every person of your race is the same.

