

Unintentional insults need to stop

EDITORIAL

A Spanish-speaking boy who “must be Mexican,” two Asian girls — one Chinese, one Vietnamese — who “look like sisters” and a Haitian boy who “doesn’t act black.” They hear these comments every day, but that doesn’t make it less infuriating. These assumptions are called “microaggressions” but their consequences should not be minimized.

The term “microaggression,” coined by psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce, refers to an unintentionally prejudiced comment or action. They occur because we have stereotypes of which we are not consciously aware.

Often, those who frequently experience microaggressions choose not to correct their peers because “they didn’t mean it that way” or “they don’t know better.” But there is no excuse for cultural ignorance.

We live in 21st century America, where citizens originate from all six habitable continents and social media spreads messages about racism and social justice and understanding. The fact that we let outdated stereotypes dominate our perceptions is simply disappointing.

Failing to correct microaggressions has major personal consequence and sets us on a path of ignorance and prejudice. And that can have devastating consequences on individuals.

Research by psychology professor Claude Steele has shown that African-Americans and woman perform worse on academic tests when reminded

of stereotypes about their race or gender beforehand. This was particularly with noticeable when African-American participants’ scores on an intelligence test plunged after being reminded of their “inferior intelligence.”

We, as humans, tend to internalize others’ opinions of ourselves, and the result is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The result is the black girl who thinks she’ll never succeed, the Asian boy who thinks he has to achieve perfection in every subject. The result is people who beat themselves up every day because of other people’s expectations, whether they fit them or not.

Steele called this problem the “stereotype threat.”

Don’t spread the ignorance by accepting it. Ignoring microaggressions to avoid conflict only causes more problems.

The only true solution for microaggression is promoting a culturally aware society. While modern teenagers are learning math and science, they should also be learning about cultures and experiences other than their own.

But that’s not always practical. We can’t force others to learn about our culture, but that doesn’t mean we can’t correct them when they are being wrong and offensive. There’s a difference between “calling someone out” and politely defending yourself.

As a society, we need to push past the stereotypes that drive this inadvertent racism. We are all different, but that’s not a bad thing.

“ONE TIME I TOLD THIS GIRL THAT I WAS CUBAN, AND THEN SHE CAME UP TO ME AND SAID ‘OH, SO YOU’RE MEXICAN?’”

—MARIAH FARROW, 10

“SOMETIMES PEOPLE WILL CALL ME A CHINK AND STUFF, OR THEY’LL EXPECT ME TO BE OUTRAGEOUSLY SMART BECAUSE I’M ASIAN.”

—JULIANNA ALTHAUS, 10

“THIS ONE KID JUST ASSUMED I JUST SPOKE SPANISH. THEY ASSUMED I SPOKE SPANISH AND NO ENGLISH.”

—JAMIE RODRIGUEZ, 10

Cultural education is something we can start right here at Hillsborough, where students’ roots can be traced across the globe. **Turn the page to read some of their stories.**