How to talk about racism

To get tangled up in precise definitions would be to miss the point. It's better to be aware of the nuances, engage with each other with an open mind – and have that difficult conversation.

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For The Straits Times

Using a single word to describe something can lead to quibbles over the precise definition, while discussion of the thing itself is neglected. Recent debates about race and race relations have reminded me of this point.

Consider these examples: the 2019 Nets E-Pay advertisement featuring an actor who painted his skin to mimic those of other races; job advertisements calling for applicants who are proficient in Mandarin without any clear justification; and the recent incident where a Malay couple's wedding photograph was used for a Hari Raya decoration without their permission by the People's Association (PA).

Debates over these incidents quickly devolved into arguments about whether they were "discriminatory" or "racist",

with some accusing others of misusing these terms.

Amid arguments about the definitions of such words, the incidents themselves, and their impact, receded into the background.

For example, the PA made a public apology for the wedding photograph incident earlier this month and arranged to meet the couple, Sarah Bagharib and Razif Abdullah. However, it later withdrew its offer to meet up, saying that Ms Sarah had shared claims on social media that the incident "perpetuate(s) the racist culture" and was "racist".

PA said that while the error involving the use of the photo was "culturally insensitive", it was not "racist". Subsequent debates about the matter focused mainly on what exactly the word "racist" means.

SEEKING A DEFINITION

One might think that we should seek a clear, fixed definition of "racist" so we can easily tell whether something is "racist" or not. But this is easier said than done.

A single word can have many shades of meaning. The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines racism in terms of "continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race" or a belief that "people who belong

to other races are not as good, intelligent, moral, etc. as people who belong to your own race".

The Oxford English Dictionary focuses on "prejudice, discrimination or antagonism" on the basis of race, while Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary mentions "systemic" disadvantage.

These definitions are not identical. One can see the potential for hair-splitting: Is "antagonism" the same as "unfair or harmful treatment"? Moreover, the definitions contain even more words whose meaning is contentious, such as "systemic" and "discrimination".

But to get tangled up in definitions would be to miss the point. It is clear that all of the dictionary definitions describe something undesirable pertaining to race.

It is also clear that, in all the real-life incidents mentioned, something undesirable had happened, causing a sense of grievance that was related, directly or indirectly, to race.

These incidents raise important issues: What subtext did the Nets advertisement carry (intentionally or otherwise), and why did it cause offence?

What assumptions might certain employers have and why?

Why would it occur to anyone to use a racial minority couple's wedding photograph as a decoration for a religious festival? Had the two events – which are completely different in nature – been presented as though they were interchangeable?

What impact do such incidents have, who is affected, and how can these incidents be avoided?

In addressing these important questions, we should not reduce the potentially rich discussion to a simplistic argument over whether the incidents are "racist" or not.

I do not mean that definitions never matter at all. If, for instance, one faced a criminal charge of promoting "enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups", one would be

right to seek exact definitions of all those words. When it comes to bringing the coercive power of the state to bear on an accused person, precision is essential.

But when it comes to addressing societal problems on a broader level, we should not single-mindedly seek precise definitions of words before we use those words. The philosopher Ronald Dworkin noted that there are several concepts which evade definition because "people who use the concept do not agree about precisely what it means: when they use it, they are taking a stand about what it should mean".

I believe that racism, racial justice and racial harmony are such concepts. Discussing whether something is "racist" inevitably involves discussing what the concept of racism means. Therefore, an understanding of how the word "racism" can best be used is an ongoing quest, not a mere starting point.

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND

How can we participate meaningfully in such debates?

The starting point is that everyone has a rough sense that "racism", whatever that word means, is to be condemned.

But why? When we say that we are opposed to racism, or in favour of racial harmony, we are using those words as shorthand for certain underlying values and principles which we deem worthy of advancing.

Rather than trying to start with a dictionary definition of "racism", we should ask: What principles are those who seek to invoke the concept of "racism" trying to uphold, and how should those principles be applied in practice?

Those who claim to oppose racism can have various principles in mind. Some focus on preventing attacks motivated by malicious intent. Others focus on eradicating mentalities and assumptions, even unconscious ones, that can cause one to treat a person of a different race disadvantageously

for no good reason.

Yet others seek to uncover hidden patterns formed by the cumulative effects of individual actions, and their effects.

Nobody can doubt that all these matters are important. Therefore, we must be prepared to grapple with these difficult issues with an open mind, rather than trying to short-circuit the discussion by mechanistically labelling each incident "racist" or "not racist".

Suppose someone calls a cartoon "racist" because it insensitively treats a visual figure of a minority as a caricature. It might be tempting to stop at attempting to cursorily discard their views by saying that their definition of "racist" is wrong. It might also be tempting to shut down the conversation by accusing them of pursuing an agenda.

But instead, what we should do is to engage with the substance of what they say – in other words, to discuss insensitivity; why an image might be, or be construed as, a caricature; and what societal values are offended as a result. These conversations will be complex, but far more illuminating than quibbling over some terse dictionary-definition of the single word, "racism".

In such conversations, we should seek in good faith to understand others in the best possible light in which they may be understood. When they are unclear to us, we should not stop at condemning their views for the perceived lack of clarity. Rather, we should engage with them in an attempt to understand, always seeking to continue the conversations fruitfully and not to terminate them summarily.

These conversations will not be easy. They will take a great measure of patience. But we must have them.

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