

Your Shortcut to... Understanding Racism

It's been dressed up as science...It can get worse when people are worried...And despite the way humans have divided ourselves throughout history... genetically, we're all remarkably similar. This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to Understanding Racism, the podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the world around us. I'm Christie Kijurina.

And I'm Bryce Corbett.

Morning Bryce! Ooh, what are you doing?

I'm sorting, Christie.

I can see that. But why have you got piles of jellybeans all over the desk?

I've developed a system.

Interesting. Tell me...

Red ones here. Green ones there. Yellow. Orange. Speckled ones...

Right...

Then I've got the good ones...

The good ones?

Yep. And over here are the ones I don't trust.

But... they're jellybeans!?

Exactly. And now I know which ones are which.

But you haven't even tried them

I don't need to. Look at that one!

What about it?

It's suspicious!

It's purple

Exactly!

Bryce, you have sorted a whole bag of jellybeans into groups... and then decided what they're like based almost entirely on how they look.

Well, when you say it like that...It does sound a little silly.

And that is the perfect place to start. Because humans love putting things into groups and throughout history and even now, some humans have sorted other humans into groups based on things like skin colour, ancestry or where they come from. And then, based on those things decided they know what the people in those groups are like.

Today, we'll find out WHAT racism actually is, WHY our brains are so quick to sort people into groups, and HOW fear and difficult times have helped racist ideas grow and spread... plus what each of us can actually do to interrupt them. So grab your jellybeans, hold off on judging the purple ones... and let's dive in.

And listen carefully. There's a S'Quiz at the end...

WHAT

Okay, Bryce. Before you eat all of our evidence, let's start with a pretty important question. What exactly is racism?

Well,Christie, I think most people imagine the really obvious stuff. Someone shouting a racist insult. Saying one group of people is better than another. Refusing to let somebody do something because of the colour of their skin.

And all of those things can absolutely be racism. At its heart, racism is about judging or treating people differently because of their race, skin colour, ancestry or ethnic background.

But racism doesn't always arrive shouting.

Exactly. Sometimes it can be much quieter.

Moving to the other side of the bus because of an assumption you've made about the person sitting near you. Not choosing someone for your group because you think their English might not be very good.

Or assuming the Asian kid in your class must be brilliant at maths.

Hang on. Some people might say that's a compliment. Being good at maths is a good thing...

Sure. But you've still looked at one part of that person and decided you know something else about them. Maybe they're hopeless at maths. Or maybe they're brilliant at maths. But that's because they're them. Not because every person you've put into the same racial box must be the same.

You might hear people call things like racist jokes, comments or everyday assumptions "casual racism". Although Australia's Human Rights Commission makes a very good point... There's nothing casual about racism

Exactly. Because small things can add up. One joke. One assumption. One person moving away from you. One person deciding you probably won't fit in.

And the person doing one of those things might think, what's the big deal? But they might not see all the other times it's happened to that person. But Christie... we keep using the word "race". What actually is a race?

Well, Bryce, race is a way humans have grouped people together, usually based on things like skin colour, facial features or family ancestry.

So, basically, differences we can see?

Often, yes. But humans also have an enormous amount in common.

We all need food and water. We sleep. We laugh. We cry. We get embarrassed.

Our hearts pump blood around our bodies. Our lungs take in oxygen. We have the same basic bones, organs and body systems.

We even pull surprisingly similar faces when we bite into a sour lemon.

We do! And when scientists look even closer, right down inside our cells at our DNA, the similarities become even more remarkable. DNA is the instruction code inside almost every cell in your body. And at the level of its individual chemical code, any two humans are commonly described as being about 99.9 percent the same - no matter how different they might appear on the outside.

Ninety-nine point nine percent!?

Yep! Which means the things humans have sometimes used to divide people into big racial boxes, are only a tiny part of the whole human picture.

And the thing is ... those small differences between humans aren't bad either. Variation is part of what makes every person unique. Different hair. Different eyes. Different bodies. And, of course, our genes are only part of the story. Where we grow up, the people around us and everything we experience help shape who we are too. Imagine how boring the world would be if we all looked exactly the same ..

So, genetically, humanity doesn't divide neatly into a few boxes labelled with different races. Race is much more of a social idea humans have created to group people together.

Which leaves me with a pretty big question, Christie. If the science says we're all so incredibly similar... why are human brains so determined to sort people into "us" and "them"?

WHY

Bryce, to understand why humans sort other humans into groups, we probably need to start with something that our brains are actually very good at...Spotting patterns.

Ahha! If I eat a red berry and spend the next three days feeling horribly sick, my brain might make a note: red berries... bad.

That's useful.

"And if I walk through the jungle and a tiger tries to eat me...my brain probably isn't going to carefully interview the next tiger I meet.

Name: Tiger

Occupation:...Run!!"

Making quick connections and recognising possible danger can help keep us safe. And throughout human history, belonging to a group has been incredibly important too.

Yeah. Humans have survived by working together. Sharing food, protecting each other, caring for children, hunting and building communities, so being able to quickly work out who's part of your group... and whether something unfamiliar might be a threat... could be useful.

But there's a fairly big difference between a tiger and a person you've never met. And our brains spot patterns... even when the pattern isn't fair or accurate.

I meet one rude person from a particular country and think, people from that country are rude.

Or you might hear a few stories about crimes committed by people from one cultural group and decide that whole group is dangerous. That's what is called a stereotype. A general idea about a whole group of people. And stereotypes are like brain shortcuts. They save us the effort of looking at every individual person and thinking more deeply. Which - more than anything else - is just lazy.

Handy for tigers...not so handy for humans. So, Christie, does that mean racism is just built into our brains?

No. And that's really important. Our brains might be quick to notice groups and patterns, but race isn't some simple ancient danger detector. The groups humans focus

on, and the ideas we attach to those groups, are also shaped by the society, stories and people around us.

In other words, our brains can sort... but we can make a decision about what boxes to use.

Exactly. And one thing that can make those boxes feel even stronger is fear. Because when people are frightened or uncertain, they really want to know what's causing the problem.

Say, a disease is spreading. Jobs are hard to find. Food is expensive. There's a war or some other big change. Complicated problems with complicated causes.

But then somebody offers a really simple answer. It's THEIR fault. And there's a word for blaming a person or group for a much bigger problem. It's called 'scapegoating'.

Which, strangely enough, really does involve a real goat. The word comes from an ancient ceremony where a goat symbolically carried away the wrongdoings of a community. These days, a scapegoat is someone unfairly blamed for a problem. And history is full of groups of people, or certain racial groups, being turned into scapegoats.

Mmm Hmm. Particularly when communities are scared, angry or going through difficult times. And sometimes those fears don't just spread by themselves. Powerful people can deliberately turn them up. By repeating that one group is dangerous...

Taking your jobs...

Causing your problems...

"Or doesn't belong.

And the more often people hear those ideas, the more familiar they can start to feel. Even if they're not true.

So maybe the big lesson is that our brains can make a quick judgement for all sorts of reasons. Pattern spotting. Belonging. Fear. Something we've been told. But we're not stuck with the first thing our brain serves up."

Your first thought can arrive quickly. But it doesn't have to be your final thought.

So, we've worked out WHY humans can fall into this kind of thinking. But Christie... HOW do those quick judgements become bigger patterns in the real world? And what can Australia's own history teach us about the way racism spreads?

HOW

Well, Bryce, Australia's history gives us a pretty uncomfortable answer. Because again and again, we've seen quick judgements about groups of people repeated... shared... and eventually turned into bigger patterns of racism.

And we should probably start with the people who were here long before Australia was called Australia... the racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has its own long and devastating history, beginning with colonisation.

That's right, Bryce. First Nations people were treated as inferior and subjected to laws and policies that controlled where people could live and work, and even removed children from their families.

But Australia also has a repeated pattern of becoming suspicious of whichever group of migrants seems newest at the time.

Yes, Chinese migrants arriving during the gold rushes back in the 1800s faced terrible racism and violence.

Then in 1901, the new Australian Parliament passed laws that became the basis of the White Australia Policy, designed to keep many non-European migrants out of the country. Which was ironic - because every single member of that new Australian Parliament was himself either a migrant or a descendant of one ...

Then - after the Second World War, migrants from places including Italy and Greece were mocked for their accents, names and food.

Later, refugees arriving from Vietnam and other parts of South-East Asia were told they were too different... or wouldn't fit in. Different group. Familiar echo.

And that's one way racism can keep going. The group might change... but the same fears and stereotypes get repeated. Like.. "they're too different."

"They don't belong."

"They're dangerous."

"They're causing our problems." Echo, echo, echo ... Which brings us to something called an echo chamber. So, let's say I believe magpies are evil.

Awww why magpies?

One swooped me in 1997. I've never forgotten.

Right...

So I watch a YouTube video called MAGPIE ATTACKS INNOCENT MAN. Then I click on TEN TERRIFYING MAGPIE SWOOPS. Followed by WHY MAGPIES CAN'T BE TRUSTED.

And the internet's recommendation algorithms notice what you're watching.

That's right .. the algorithm robots notice that I like videos about angry magpies and so it serves up more angry magpie videos - because it wants to keep me watching ... or engaged.

Until, pretty soon, Bryce's online world is wall-to-wall terrifying magpies.

But Christie, by that time I will have seen hundreds of videos. Now I have evidence that they are evil ..

But, Bryce, how many videos have you watched of magpies quietly standing in parks?

They make videos of that?

Not very exciting ones.

Fair.

And that's the danger of an echo chamber. You hear the same ideas bouncing around so often that they can start to feel obviously true.

Echo... echo... echo...

And echo chambers existed long before the internet. They can be your friends, your family, the people you work with, the radio station you listen to, the TikTok influencer you follow. If everyone around you keeps saying, "You know what those people are like..."

And no one ever questions it....echo... echo... echo...And today the internet can make that echo much faster, much louder and much more personalised. And racist ideas can spread the same way.

And here's the thing... those groups we spoke about earlier...those groups of people who were once described as too different - the Chinese who worked the goldfields, the Italians and Greeks who arrived after the Second World War, the Vietnamese who came here in the 1970s...they became part of Australia.

They started businesses. Became doctors, scientists, teachers, artists and athletes. Raised families. Built communities. They even, as we've seen this past few weeks, grew up to play for Australia in the soccer World Cup - take a look at that team and see how many wonderful different races and cultures are represented ...

And of course when these people arrived, they brought food, music, languages, traditions and ideas that changed Australian life.

Imagine Australia without pasta. Or souvlaki. Or doner kebabs or baklava ..

Or the dim sim! Or sushi! Or banh mi! Hardly worth living in, right?

Christie, this has suddenly become a very difficult Shortcut to record before lunch.

The point is, Bryce, nearly half of Australians have at least one parent who was born overseas. So the people once labelled "different" don't just live in modern Australia...they helped make modern Australia.

Which makes you wonder whether, when we you the same old fears being spouted about a new group...

...we should stop and recognise the echo.

Okay. But racism is a huge issue, Christie. It's been around for a very long time. What can one kid listening to this actually do?

Well the good news is, Bryce, you don't have to solve racism by yourself.

Phew

But you can interrupt it. Make the echo wobble. If someone says, "Those people are all like that"... ask a question. 'Are they all?' 'How do you know?' And if your own brain makes a quick assumption about somebody, pause. First thought... not necessarily the final thought.

Be curious about people rather than assuming you already know them. And if somebody makes a racist joke or comment, and you feel safe to do so, you can say something... like "That's not funny." or even just ask, "What do you mean by that?"

One good question can make an echo wobble. And if racism is happening to you, you don't have to stand there and give the other person a history lesson. Walk away if you need to. Tell a teacher, parent, coach or another adult you trust.

And sometimes challenging racism doesn't mean making a huge speech. It might mean noticing who's always left out. Remembering someone's name. Refusing to laugh at the joke or making room at the table. Humans might be sorting machines, Christie. We notice patterns. We form groups. We have quick reactions. But we're also thinking machines.

As we've said, your first thought can arrive quickly ...but it doesn't have to be your final thought.

Speaking of which, I've reconsidered my jellybean sorting system.

Excellent.

I now have two groups.

Oh, yeah. Which are?

Eaten... and about to be eaten.

THE S'QUIZ

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening...

1. What percentage of our DNA do all humans have in common? Is it:

- a) 50 %
- b) 89%
- c) 99.9%
- c) 99.9%"

"2. Which animal is associated with the idea of placing the blame on a person or a group for a much bigger problem?...They are called a scape...what?

Is it:

- a) goat
- b) shark
- c) mouse
- a) scape - goat"

"3. True or False - Social media algorithms are designed to make sure we see lots of different people, ideas and points of view.

False"

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of Understanding Racism.

Now get out there...and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.