

This week's question to consider:

Ok. So, I can't ask where someone's from. I get it, I think. It's... intrusive, right? But my intent is connection. Is there another way I can connect with a person based on their experience of the world? Like... geographically? Can I truly not ask someone where they're from? I am soooo curious!

Pro tip: Again... sometimes you're just going to have to live with the curiosity.

When you pause to think about it for a moment, the whole notion of countries is absurd. Countries come into existence and go out of existence. They aren't permanent.

This is something interesting to contemplate in conjunction with identity, considering so many of us use this shorthand all the time; "I'm Canadian, I'm Egyptian."

It doesn't give a whole lot of context but it does satisfy pretty much everyone who asks this question, unlike "I'm from the East Coast."

That answer is rarely enough information for those who insist on asking this question. Which is how we get the "where are you really from" insistence.

I was co-teaching with a grade 8 teacher last spring, and in that class, we had set an antiracism project to consolidate/measure their learning. As she was completing her beautifully thought out, gorgeously executed antiracism promotion project, one student asked me the question.

"Madame, where are you *from*?"

I smiled at her, and leaned in to say, "Ohhh, if you weren't racialized, that would have been soooo racist," to which she replied, smiling big, "I know right?!"

Just an example of how some things sound different depending on who is speaking.

"I'm from Egypt," I told her. She lit up. "Me too!!!"

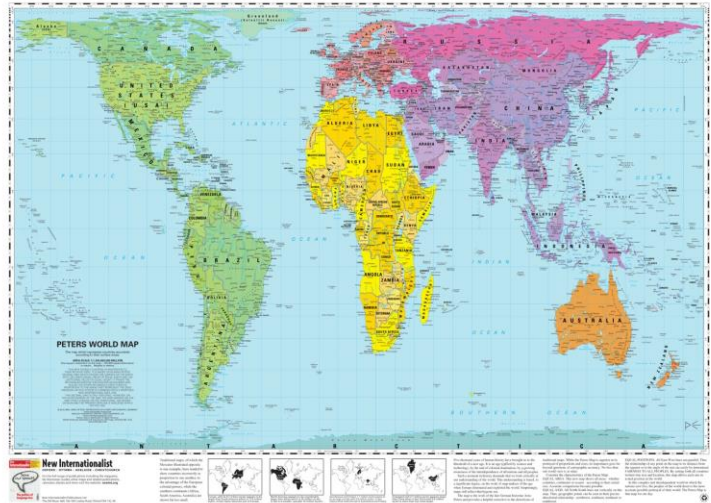
A question of this nature from a racialized student to a racialized teacher is not the same as the curiosity that finds a voice in white people. From this student, that question did contain a subtext of "why are you here?". The subtext here was "are you a *little* like me, or a *lot* like me?" For this human, it was about representation.

You can see the difference, yes? We're teasing out nuance now, beautiful people. You're ready.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes the danger of a single story as flattening someone's existence. A good way to begin understanding the scope of the inherent problem in having one-dimensional stories is to consider what the reverse looks like:

How might you set up your one table at a multicultural festival?

Say every teacher in your school is asked to set up a table that represents the East Coast, Canada, ASD-South, or their experience of living in New Brunswick. Something we all have in common.



Peters Map Projection (equal area to reality, axis, and position)
source: <https://www.oxfordcartographers.com/our-maps/peters-projection-map/>

Would there be commonalities among the tables? Inevitably. We share language here, and an experience of educational content, of weather patterns, of what it is to live in New Brunswick, and how this interacts with our understanding of the world.

Maybe there would be some kind of representations of water. Probably more than one person would have nature be importantly or physically represented on their table (I mean others, not me, I'm allergic to nature, I would have *zero* nature *physically* on my "this is NB" table). Maybe there would be representations of fish/fishing. Hopefully no dead fish, that's upsetting. But maybe? I don't know, I've not literally conducted this experiment. Regardless, I think we can agree that we would see many common themes.

But would everyone make/bring the same dish representing this area? I, for example, would bring storm chips. But would this be the same brand/flavour as other people bringing storm chips?

Would everyone play the same music, or have the same playlist? Unlikely. My nephew and I can't even agree on what to listen to in the car on the four-minute drive from my house to his mom's house.

Would each table share the same experience of the culture around here?

This exercise is an excellent mental exercise to conduct if you find yourself defaulting to a single story or point of view when you encounter a new culture. It's important to remember that people are multi-dimensional and reducing them to their country of origin *and stopping there* is harmful. This is how we end up reinforcing stereotypes.

I do want to mention that stereotypes by any other name is the brain's shortcut, which is a timesaving, categorization strategy we naturally do.

We are biologically wired to default to this sort of thing because it helps us identify danger and focus on new information. Knowing, however, that this is harmful when we keep those stereotypes intact, never challenging them, is where the opportunity arises for growth.

Remember, insisting on asking where someone is from if they aren't interested in talking about it is a microaggression. If you don't *need* to know, learn to live with the unanswered curiosity, beautiful people. It won't hurt you.

Recommended Resources

verywellmind.com article by Amy Morin (February 2022) | [Harmful Psychological Effects of Racial Stereotyping](#)
EdCAN Article by Dr. Mélissa Villella (March 2023) | [Racial microaggressions: what could we do to prevent them?](#)
TEd Talk by Taiye Selasi (2015) [16:04] | [Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm local](#)
TEd Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) [19:16] | [The danger of a single story](#)

With eternal curiosity, and comfort in the not knowing,

Your friendly neighbourhood Anti-Racism & Equity ~~Coach~~ Lead
Therese Trofimencoff (*she/they*)

Building Awareness

Recognizing your stereotypes and the potential damage they do is the first step in creating change. Fortunately, you can take steps to change harmful stereotypes.

- ❖ **Have compassion for yourself**
- ❖ **Educate yourself**
Make an ongoing commitment to educate yourself on the different types of bias as well as the histories and realities of racism and white supremacy.
- ❖ **Pay attention to the stereotypes you see in the media**
- ❖ **Breakdown your stereotypes**
- ❖ **Work to reduce the stereotypes you portray to others**
- ❖ **Connect with "safe people."**
- ❖ **Stay grounded**

excerpted from verywellmind.com article ([source](#))