
My Personal Experience Of Political Correctness: Reflective Paper

Personal Background

I was born and raised in Yiwu, China, a city near Shanghai. It is famous for its international wholesale market, which exports hundreds of thousands made-in-China merchandise to all around the world. My father used to run a local engine oil business, my mother is a housewife. When I was 13, I moved to Canada to live with my aunt, who had immigrated to Canada a few years ago. It was mainly because my parents got into some complicated troubles at that time, therefore they could not spare enough time and effort to take very good care of me. They also heard that Canada has very advanced education system, so they believed that sending me to Canada would be a great opportunity for me. I was so excited to start a new life abroad, mostly because I heard that Canadian high schools have very little homework. My friends were also jealous of me being able to escape the heavy workload and the weekly tests of Chinese high school. So Canada I went, along with nothing else but a suitcase that packed two pairs of pants and one jacket.

I lived in my aunt's apartment in the first two months of my arrival, then I moved to homestay for shorter commute distance to school. During my four years of high school, I had three homestay. First one is with 86-year-old Leo from Czechoslovakia. The second is with Martha and Frank from Columbia. The third is with Li and Huang from China. After graduating from high school, I started going to SFU. I also moved in with my boyfriend, Zhang. I started my university career with economics major, because I was not sure what I wanted to do with my life yet, and many of my Chinese friends had chosen economics. Two semesters after, I took an online statistics course and found it very interesting, so I decided to take more statistics course and maybe transfer to statistics major. However, the statistics major require a minor, preferably computer science. As I was trying to work on both the statistics major and the computer science minor, the workload was much heavier than my expectation, and the complexity of the math courses involved was really challenging. I lost many hair, weight, and confidence trying to catch up with the program. So I eventually transferred to the education faculty, which I really liked and loved. I am very happy to be where I am right now.

A Critical Event

In my past seven years of living in Canada, I have noticed that Canadians take political correctness very seriously, especially the way they talk. When talking with Canadians, I often sense that they are paying a lot of attention to their choice of words in order to avoid offending any minority groups.

One time I was in my Grade 12 art class, one of my classmate, Ocean, was chatting with her friends happily. Ocean was saying that people often astonished to learned her name, because it is also a common noun "Ocean", not a commonly used name , like Sara or Emily. She said that one time someone learned her name before meeting her in person, and that person assumed she is Chinese. And they all started to laugh.

I happened to pass by them. I was about to grab some acrylic paint from the shelf behind them. And suddenly they all stopped talking and laughing, and looked at me with a guilty and sorry look.

It was really awkward because I was not offended at all. Yes, it is a little stereotypical to think that people who have weird English name are usually Chinese, but to me, this types of thinking are not stigma. It is more of a funny joke, not an insult. In fact, I would laugh about Chinese people having weird English name, too. I knew Chinese whose names are Circle, Hill, Smile, Bright, Christmas, and X. And we laugh about it, we also make fun of it sometimes. It was not a big deal. So, what is it that imposed this sense of guilt? I did not know how to respond to their apologize. I could not accept it because I never need it in the first place, but I could not refuse it, either. Because I appreciate this mindfulness of cultural diversity and the efforts to make an inclusive environment in Canada, even though it limits how I say certain things or refer to people. As time passes, I started noticing myself developing the same habit. I hesitated when greeting people during holiday season. Should it be “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holiday”? Or should I say “Happy Lunar New Year” instead of “Chinese New Year?”?

Theoretical Discussion

“According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word sorry means “feeling sadness, sympathy, or disappointment, especially when something unpleasing has happened or been done.” It stands to reason that the official meaning of sorry can be used if a person feels regret about an action. This reasoning is consistent with Humber (2008) who notes that it is appropriate to use the word sorry if you have committed a wrong action. He notes that sorry will make the situation more pleasant, although, it will not solve your mistake. However, Canadians seem to use the word in a different way. Onstad (1999), for example, maintains that Canadian culture is “an apology-mad culture” (p. 23).

Most Canadians would acknowledge that the word sorry is an important part of the Canadian psyche. In terms of what research can tell us about this phenomenon, Onstad (1999) points out that people often apologize in the Canadian media, and because of this overuse of the word, sorry has almost become meaningless. It seems that many Canadians no longer know what the actual meaning of sorry is anymore but tend to use it as a reflex or as meaningless form of politeness (Keeler, 2017). How could a Canadian apology become meaningful? Wiebe (2018) believes that an apology will only become acceptable if it is accompanied by actual action because “words are meaningless unless actions and policies change” (p. 11).

Significantly, Keeler (2017) points out that an important Canadian value is being different from American culture. Although a number of authors have noted that Canadians apologize all the time—sometimes even as a reflex or nicety—the word sorry is reportedly not as common in the United States (Keeler, 2017). In fact, Keeler (2017) argues that in the United States, sorry is sometimes seen as a sign of guilt or even weakness. It seems that Canadians want to be seen as different from Americans, and one way they do this is by apologizing frequently. Conventional wisdom has it that people use sorry to express regret. However, Canadians could also use this word to avoid potential conflicts. Based on my own experiences, this way of using the word sorry is not the case in the Dutch culture.

It is well known that Canadian nation has a reputation for multiculturalism and peacemaking.

Hence, Canadians have a lot of pride and may want to maintain this positive self-image. Keeler (2017) notes that people who apologize quickly are more likely to minimize conflict. This practice can be witnessed in official Canadian communications. For example, Sillars (1998) notes that Canadian authorities use the apologize-tactic often in official apology statements. Keeler (2017) also believes that the Canadian government retains official relationships by repeating the diplomatic “sorry”. This practice could be understood as a way for the Canadian government to maintain its positive relationships with different groups and maintain political stability. In fact, Onstad (1999, p. 23) maintains that “the apology has become a convenient political tool” for Canada.”

Over seventy percent of Canadian confirmed that they are self-censored to avoid offending (Augus Reid, 2016). Political correctness is increasingly becoming a Canadian etiquette. Just like every superhero, great power comes with flaws. With the rise comes the opposing argument, the anti-political correctness, such as political correctness harms the clarity and conciseness of conversation, threaten culture identity and social attitudes (Lalonde, 2000). These opposing arguments, my personal critical events, and my early experience of living in a multicultural environment, these three factors led me into thinking about the controversy of political correctness. According to Lalonde (2000), there is two great questions to the political correctness controversy, “Why this apparently increasing focus in politics on achieving social and political change through changing culture and changing language?” and “For those who are politically committed to substantive social and political change (whether on the right or on the left), what place can a politics centred around culture and language have in a political strategy which is to have some chance of success?” This question has no perfect answer. I would say political correctness is beneficial to the society to promote equality. But it should not constraint itself in the form of language usage. The polite, politically correct languages are meant to be a reflection of the respect towards different culture and ethnicity, a diverse yet inclusive environment.

References

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