

# Ask about my credentials, not my race

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"I was never asked about my race in school. Not by my friends, teachers or school administrator. I am fortunate to have been schooled at egalitarian schools.

The first time I was asked to specify and state in writing my race was when I started looking for a job soon after my school days in the early 1990s.

Many official forms and job application forms, including those of multinational companies, asked for the applicant's race. In the case of all the jobs I had applied for, I was required to speak and write only in English. I found having to indicate my race irrelevant.

Initially, as a first-time job applicant, I dutifully ticked the "race" box on those forms. But more than 16 years ago, I took a decision to stop doing so on such forms.

Likewise for phone interviews: Whenever I was asked for my race even before being asked about my qualifications at the start of the phone call, I would immediately decline to proceed with the interview.

I would also inform the other party the reason for my rejection was that I disagreed with the racial profiling even before the consideration of my qualifications, to check my suitability for the job.

I had never felt discriminated before these "first-job interviews". Thankfully, since then, I have not felt discriminated in a work situation again.

What is my race?



PHOTO: COURTESY OF SALEEMAH ISMAIL  
 Ms Saleemah Ismail, who is of mixed parentage, says one advantage is that she is able to travel all across Asia and feel right at home.

I am intrigued when asked this question. The answers I get as to why I am being asked are varied and say more about the questioners than about me.

I also get a variety of responses to my reply. If I say I am Singaporean, the response would always be a refusal to accept such a statement. If I say that I am Malay, the response would be that I don't look Malay. If I say Indian, the response would be that I don't look Indian.

My father is of Malay origins. My mother has a South Indian father and a bi-racial mother who was half South Indian and half Orang Asli from the jungle of today's Pahang/Perak.

The advantage about looking the way I do is that I feel I belong and am at home everywhere in

Asia. I have been mistaken for a Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, Balinese, Sri Lankan, Filipino and most other Asian nationalities. To me, it is a privilege to be able to travel all across Asia and feel at home, and that I belong. In Singapore, I don't feel like I'm in a minority race.

But we are not living as one united people – regardless of race, language or religion – yet. There are still many prejudices that exist in all sectors here. We need to work from the ground up to address these prejudices.

We are not there yet – but we are getting there. I know from first-hand experience because all I have to do, to see the progress of our nation as one united people, is to walk out of my door. I am a scale to test how far we have gone – and still have to go."

