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## Opinion | The biracial microaggressions at the center of a new Prince Charles scandal

By Sarah E. Gaither, assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke University : 6-7 minutes

Imagine that upon your engagement, instead of congratulations, you hear that your future father-in-law has begun musing about your future son or daughter's complexion. Now imagine how that would feel if you were biracial and the [first Black-identified person to marry into the modern British royal family](#), and none other than the next king of England was [allegedly speculating about the race of your hypothetical children](#).

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According to the new book "Brothers and Wives: Inside the Private Lives of William, Kate, Harry, and Meghan," written by Christopher Andersen, [Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, didn't have to imagine how that might feel — she lived it](#). Among other tidbits, royals expert Andersen claims Prince Charles discussed the potential melanin levels of his future grandchildren over breakfast with his wife, Camilla.

Charles' spokesperson told reporters that the claim "is fiction and not worth further comment." But we do know that this type of [identity questioning](#) is far too common for the multiracial demographic and that it often [impairs one's social belonging](#), which is key to feeling positively about yourself. In fact, [recent research](#) has shown that in a sample of 293 multiracial people, over 94 percent reported having experienced questions like "What are you?" as they relate to their physical appearance or skin color. And although not all multiracial people mind questions like those if they are asked out of genuine curiosity, these types of encounters can be dehumanizing and "othering."

Charles' reported comments also shine a spotlight on [racial microaggressions](#) — a subtle statement or behavior, whether intentional or not, that communicates something negative and yet still ambiguous about a person of color. While they are often small and even seemingly insignificant, microaggressions cause [significant psychological harm](#), research shows. And if you have ever heard a question like "Is your hair real?" or "Do you speak English?" or "Where are you from?" you also have most likely faced a racial microaggression.



The ambiguity of these encounters can create even more stress as recipients try to analyze and re-analyze motives and intentions. Coined by Harvard professor Chester Pierce in 1970, "microaggressions" are one of the more common forms of discrimination and prejudice today. Interestingly, although white people experience the fewest racial microaggressions regardless of where they might live, [living in racially diverse contexts](#) has been shown to reduce the microaggressions racial minorities face.

Much has been made of the [British royal family's seemingly lukewarm embrace](#) of Meghan Markle. Speaking with [Oprah Winfrey](#), [Prince Harry and Meghan also mentioned](#) an incident involving speculation about skin color, but refused to name names. Prince William has countered by arguing that the [royal family is "very much not racist."](#)

And to be fair, [Andersen, the book's author, said on NBC's "TODAY" show](#) that there may have been some distortion of Charles' comments as it made its way through the royal grapevine. "I mean, here's this beautiful biracial American woman and the world's most famous redhead. I'm a grandfather. Of course we all do this, speculate on it. But it was turned into something very toxic," he said. "It was weaponized by the 'Men in Gray' who run the palace organization." This shifts the blame, in a sense, to the royal advisers (the "Men in Gray"), but it also increases the ambiguity surrounding Charles' possible intentions.

And why even question the skin color of your grandchild in the first place? I, too, am biracial Black/white and recently had twins. I faced the same types of questions while I was pregnant — "I wonder if they will be Black? I wonder how dark or how white they might be?" I couldn't help but wonder why the potential complexion of my children was such a popular and seemingly acceptable topic.

I'm also not a member of the British royal family — but I do [study biracial identity](#) and perceptions for a living. This context colors my own interpretations of these types of comments, as the context of the monarchy surely influenced Harry and Meghan's. It is not at all unsurprising that some in the monarchy might have been concerned about the possible darkening of the white royal lineage.

[Critical race theory](#) argues this exact perspective — that race and racism are structural phenomena used to maintain the race-based power of white leaders. The unique dynamics of multiracial people further complicates this phenomenon. Labeling a multiracial person only as Black, for example, highlights the concept of monoracism, or the view that all people need to fit within neat, monoracial boxes, the same boxes that are used to maintain power and status.

And this is how something that seems so innocently ambiguous like a microaggression can in fact be so incredibly powerful — there is simply nothing micro about the impacts that words like these can have. They shape our policies, our perceptions and treatments of others, and how we feel about ourselves.

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Sarah E. Gaither

Dr. Sarah E. Gaither is an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience, a faculty affiliate at the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and the Center on Health and Society at Duke University where she focuses on social identities, perceptions and behaviors in diverse contexts across the lifespan.