

## **‘Non-white’: Woman’s objection to police description becomes catalyst for change**

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By [Jessica Smith Cross](#) - Metro

A woman’s failure to stop at a red light one icy day may spark some change in the way police across Canada describe people by ethnicity.

Law student Sarah Rana returned home to the Kitchener-Waterloo area last August to fight a traffic infraction, preparing to argue that the icy road made it impossible for her to stop, and she received a disclosure package, which included the officer’s notes about her.

“In the notes (the officer) wrote, ‘female, very polite, non-white,’” said Rana. “The fact that she wrote ‘non-white’ was something that really struck me as unnecessary, irrelevant. I found it very offensive.”

“Non-white” was the only physical description of Rana included in the officer’s notes, she said.

When she returned home she wrote a letter to the mayor of Waterloo, the Waterloo police and the Ontario Ombudsman.

“To note that an individual is non-white is to construct white as the norm and denies the individual labelled access to the normative standard. It creates a sub-standard class of which those who do not meet the white standard are denied acceptance,” she wrote.

Waterloo Regional Police Service Deputy Chief Stephen Beckett contacted her and agreed it was a problem.

“We’re doing our best to resolve the issue and we certainly respect her and her position,” he told Metro later in an interview.

The officer had looked Rana up in the national CPIC (Canadian Police Information Centre) database, and put its “non-white” description of her in her notes, he said.

According to Beckett, one version of the CPIC system has officers enter a person as white or non-white, then provide extra details of the racial description in a “comments section” of the database.

“That further outraged me. How could something like that still exist?” she said.

Waterloo has already implemented some improvements to its local records management system to include more specific, sensitive descriptors of people for officers to choose from, said Beckett.

“But they don’t always cover everything, so we have an ‘other’ category as well,” he said. “We no longer use the term ‘non-white.’”

Rana’s complaint helped bring that to the force’s attention and Beckett is working with other groups to make a national change, he said. The National Police Information Services Advisory Board will be discussing the issue in January, and is considering using a fuller list of more sensitive racial and religious descriptors for officers to choose from.

“It does get very challenging for what people do want to be described as,” he said.

Part of the difficulty is officers don’t routinely ask people about their ethnicity.

Sometimes, race or religion is relevant to an investigation, such as in a hate-crime, said Beckett. In routine interactions with the public, an officer may try to make an observation about a person and record that. In other cases, they are relying on a potentially inaccurate witness description of the suspect.

As for Rana’s case, being of South Asian descent had nothing to do with the red-light incident.

The only reason the officer would have included anything about her ethnicity in her notes was as part of Rana’s appearance, which would only be needed if Rana would later argue she wasn’t actually the person driving the car, Beckett said.

Beckett could not say why any other details—such as her height or eye colour—weren’t mentioned in the notes.

“Federal systems are more difficult to change than local systems,” he said. “But I’m hoping in January we’ll be able to fix this.”

Local police services use different records management systems. For instance, the Toronto Police Service began using a new system called Versadex last month and is currently studying what the best descriptors are to give to officers to use, said spokesperson Meaghan Gray.

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### **DECONSTRUCTION EXERCISE QUESTIONS**

- 1) WHY WOULD SOMEONE BE SO UPSET AT BEING DESCRIBED AS “NON-WHITE?”**
  - 2) WHY WOULD SOMEONE DESCRIBE ANOTHER AS “NON-WHITE?”**
  - 3) HOW DOES/ MIGHT THE DISCRIPTION OF NON-WHITE INFORM POLICING PRACTICES?**
  - 4) HOW DOES/ MIGHT THIS POLICE PRACTICE IMPACT THE COMMUNITY?**
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