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Understanding Intent vs Impact

In [Blog](https://shegeeksout.com/category/blog/) (<https://shegeeksout.com/category/blog/>),

[Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](https://shegeeksout.com/category/diversity-inclusion/) (<https://shegeeksout.com/category/diversity-inclusion/>), by Fatima Dainkeh / November 14, 2019

This is part one of two. Read part two: [Intent vs. Impact: 5 examples of how your support for Black lives \(or lack thereof\) may be causing harm](https://shegeeksout.com/intent-vs-impact-5-examples-of-how-your-support-for-black-lives-or-lack-thereof-may-be-causing-harm/) (<https://shegeeksout.com/intent-vs-impact-5-examples-of-how-your-support-for-black-lives-or-lack-thereof-may-be-causing-harm/>).

I recently came across a [Twitter thread](#)

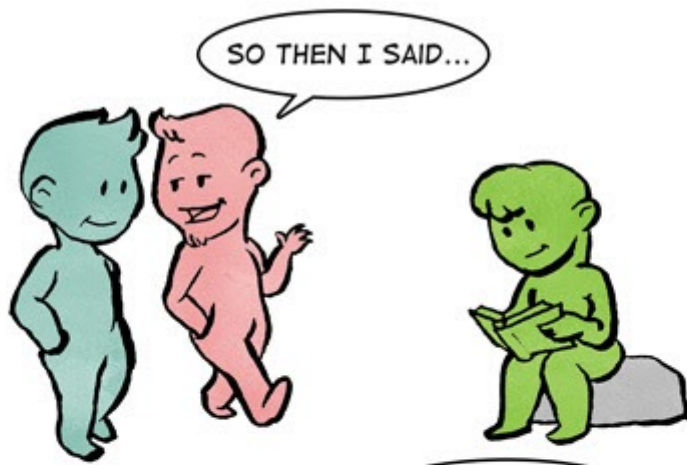
([https://twitter.com/KimCrayton1/status/1185966244291383296?](https://twitter.com/KimCrayton1/status/1185966244291383296?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fcdn.embedly.com%2Fwic)

[ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fcdn.embedly.com%2Fwic](https://twitter.com/KimCrayton1/status/1185966244291383296?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fcdn.embedly.com%2Fwic)

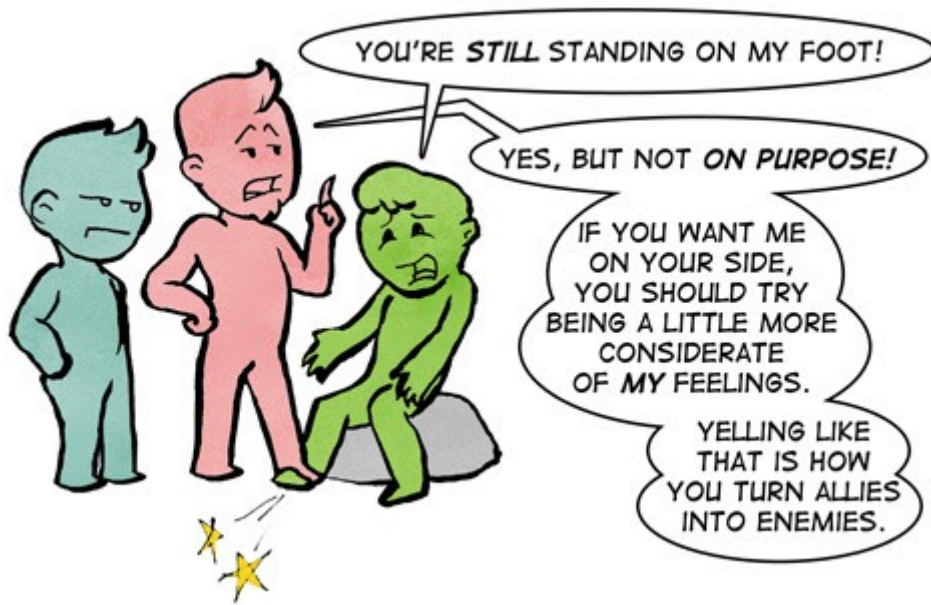
seemed to have started off with two women in tech speaking about diversity and inclusion with regards to programming and coding. [Aimee Knight \(https://twitter.com/Aimee_Knight\)](https://twitter.com/Aimee_Knight), a White software architect tweeted the following (now deleted): “Grateful I didn’t start my programming in 2019. All these pissed off, cussing, looking to start arguments in the name of empathy and diversity... you’re literally scaring people from wanting to enter this industry by your behavior.” [Kim Crayton \(https://twitter.com/KimCrayton1\)](https://twitter.com/KimCrayton1), a Black technology business strategist, was one of the main people responding and sharing the conversation between Aimee, herself and other Twitter users. After receiving opposition from various users, Aimee shared that she acknowledged anger was valid and in order to help people with anger and potential neurological damage, she would offer to pay for someone to seek counseling. This quickly sparked multiple reactions and replies from other Twitter users, some of whom disagreed with Aimee, while others supported and defended her comments. Ultimately, the conversation ended with [insults and some Twitter blocking \(https://twitter.com/KimCrayton1/status/1189563049713324037\)](https://twitter.com/KimCrayton1/status/1189563049713324037).

This Twitter conversation reminded me of an important concept in the work we do – intent vs impact. What this means is that [our intentions don’t always align with what we say or do, and this can impact how others receive what we say or do \(https://thebias.com/2017/09/26/how-good-intent-undermines-diversity-and-inclusion/\)](https://thebias.com/2017/09/26/how-good-intent-undermines-diversity-and-inclusion/). It’s possible that Aimee was merely relaying her concerns on how to bring more people from underrepresented backgrounds into tech by telling the world that we should *stop* calling people out when they’re doing something racist or sexist (or in her words that we should stop being argumentative). It’s also possible that she thought she was being nice by offering to pay for counseling services for people who are angry. However, this doesn’t address the fact that Black and Hispanic populations are [underrepresented groups in the tech field \(https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-and-hispanic-underrepresentation-in-tech-its-time-to-change-the-equation/\)](https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-and-hispanic-underrepresentation-in-tech-its-time-to-change-the-equation/). The reasons for this are many, including the [lack of access to resources \(https://www.wired.com/story/computer-science-graduates-diversity/\)](https://www.wired.com/story/computer-science-graduates-diversity/) starting in grade school. Those that disagreed with Aimee’s tweets did so because they understand what structural racism and sexism are and how they operate. And, they wanted her to realize that naming these -isms were not ‘starting arguments’, but asking people to recognize the truths about the workforce and industry.

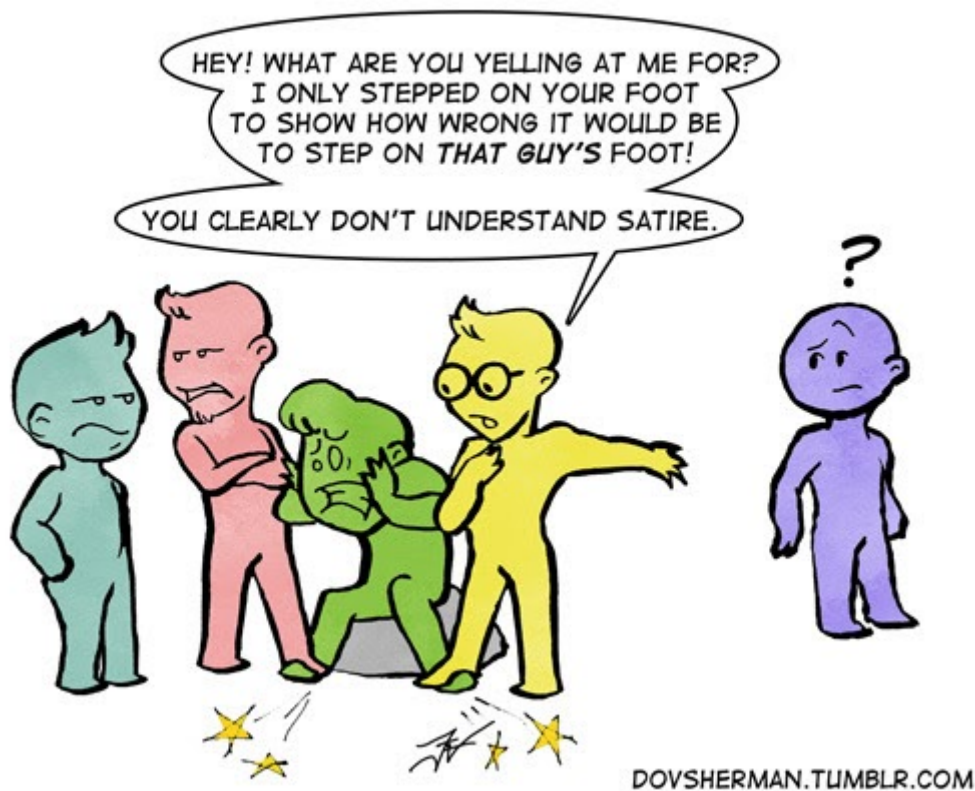
If I were to visually explain what happened in this Twitter thread, it would look like this:



(<http://bellebrita.com/2018/02/intent-vs-impact/>)



(<http://bellebrita.com/2018/02/intent-vs-impact/>)



(<http://bellebrita.com/2018/02/intent-vs-impact/>)

What we say and do, regardless of our intentions, can impact people in so many ways, especially when we are not aware of the social implications. Here are some things I think we can all consider when thinking about intent and impact:

For those of us with good intentions (e.g. “But I didn’t mean to…”):

Remember that you can’t dictate how someone reacts to your responses. It isn’t your personal fault why someone reacts a certain way, but that doesn’t mean that just because you have good intentions, they should always react in a favorable manner. We all come from different backgrounds and we experience the world differently based on our social identities. Experiences in life can feel and be hard for many people and it can be a lot to carry sometimes. Here’s a quick [video about microaggressions](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDd3bzA7450) to explain how past negative experiences can build up over time and cause greater impact than what you think might be warranted.

Sincerely apologize. Again, you have no control over whether someone will accept your apology or not but it shows that you care.

Learn about structural racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination. Many times we say harmful things when we don't know other perspectives or historical facts that show how certain groups have been treated. Try to understand why what you said or did was harmful, and don't place that burden of teaching on the impacted person.

Forgive yourself and move on. Let's face it, at some point we will all say something problematic because we are exposed to and engage in a culture that is problematic. You will probably make more mistakes and people may call you in or out (http://www.racialequityvtnea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Interrupting-Bias_-_Calling-Out-vs.-Calling-In-REVISED-Aug-2018-1.pdf) on those mistakes. This can be hard, but it's important not to take it personally, especially if the conversation or action is related to harmful historical and institutional practices towards communities that have been marginalized. Watch this Ted Talk by Jay Smooth about how to have conversations on race, where he tackles how to address it if you've made a mistake (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbdxeFcQtaU>).

For those of us being impacted (e.g. “It still hurts...”):

Ask for clarification or repeat what you heard before responding (if you choose to). It can be obvious when someone explicitly and intentionally says or does something harmful. Other times, what is being said or done isn't as clear to you or the other person. If you have the mental and emotional energy, it can be helpful to clarify what someone is trying to say. This can provide an opportunity for the person to realize that they might've said something inappropriate or allow you to understand where they are coming from. From there, you can then think about how you want to respond.

Recognize that you are in control of your own emotions and reactions. Research shows that people who experience bias and discrimination have worse health outcomes (<https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventions-resources/discrimination>) in comparison to those who don't. Stressful experiences, whether implicit or explicit, can negatively impact your health. How we perceive or respond to these experiences can either decrease or increase our stress levels. Decide how you want to respond, especially as it relates to your well being.

Find support from someone or a group of people that you trust to share your experiences with. Depending on where you are in your career and who you work for, reporting incidences of bias and discrimination to human resources or your manager may be an option for you. If you

don't feel safe or don't want to bring attention to an incident, connect with friends, family, a community group, or someone else you feel safe to share your experiences with.

Remember that it's not your job to teach. You can choose to explain why what someone said or did was wrong depending on the relationship and the moment, but that is absolutely your choice and you aren't under any obligation to do so.

Conversations can be hard and each of us will have our own way of reacting to what someone says or does. The main goal is to understand the social, cultural, and political world we live in, how our social identities affect everyday interactions, and how we show up when our intentions and impact aren't aligned. The more we become aware actively practice the tips above, we'll all be able to have better, more meaningful conversations.

Want to learn more about intent vs impact and how you can address it in the workplace? We offer workshops that can help!

Learn more about our [diversity and inclusion workshops \(https://shegeeksout.com/corporate-training/corporate-diversity-workshops/\)](https://shegeeksout.com/corporate-training/corporate-diversity-workshops/).

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