

## **Tell Me About Yourself**

After reflecting upon my high school application process, I discovered that my race contributed to a lot of the self-doubts I was experiencing. This speculation led to questions about the effects of racism on, specifically, Asian adolescents as well as the complexity of the issue of affirmative action. While the economic, political, and social consequences of racism are often discussed, the psychological effects of it on developing individuals are seldom talked about. Ultimately, I discovered that internalized oppression negatively contributes to how adolescents of color view their merit, beauty standards, and their mental health.

This large-scale oil painting was inspired by my research, as well as my own experience with the intersection of my developing ethnic identity and high school admission. The obscured trophies represent merit; these are overlaid with clay eyes, constructed to exemplify Asian eyes. This illustrates the “model minority” myth and how Asian merit is often wrongly credited to our race and not our individual strengths. The organic shapes serve as a stylistic element, but also to acknowledge the more ambiguous aspects that influence high school acceptance and what is deemed as “merit.”

This painting embodies the questioning of my personal integrity—whether I actually deserved my spot or just happened to fill a diversity quota—I experienced after being accepted into a prestigious high school. This is an example of how one reality of racism, specifically affirmative action, manifests in an individual. Because racism towards Asians is often unrecognized, my hope is that this painting will highlight some of the issues Asian-Americans face daily. Regardless of your race, I hope this painting sparks connections to your own experience with ethnic identity and how it has influenced your life.

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# The Psychological Effects of Racism on Adolescents

Ming C.



After reflecting upon my high school application process, I discovered that my race contributed to a lot of the self-doubts I was experiencing. This speculation led to questions about the effects of racism on specifically Asian adolescents as well as the complexity of the issue of affirmative action. Ultimately, I discovered that internalized oppression negatively contributes to how adolescents of color view their merit, beauty standards and a large portion of their mental health. However, despite a systematic influx of negative messages in society towards people of color about their race, there are a few ways to combat them and take back control.

I often wonder if I got into my high school because of the fact that I'm Asian. I attend the Ethical Culture Fieldston School and even our school name exemplifies how progressive it is. However, Fieldston is simultaneously a college preparatory school and getting accepted, especially in high school, is extremely competitive. In middle school, three other kids from my grade were also applying to Fieldston. I remember being shocked to find out that one of my close friends didn't get in; she was one of the smartest and most motivated people I had known. All of the other kids who applied to Fieldston from my school were white, and my grades and SSAT score were either the same or worse than theirs. I remember coming home one day and seeing a thick envelope on the ground with the Fieldston logo on the upper left corner. I opened the letter and read the word, "*Congratulations*", and was overwhelmed with pride. I remember being proud of myself until I got an acceptance letter from Packer, another school that I applied to. You would think that I would have been more proud of myself since it meant "the more the merrier", but this wasn't the case. During the process, I knew my grades and SSAT scores alone couldn't get me into any school I wanted so I knew I had to excel during the interview. Let me tell you, I flunked that Packer interview so hard it's embarrassing. I try to block the memories out, but I remember being asked, "If you could meet anyone in the world who would it be?" I responded, "Barack Obama because I guess he's a cool dude." *A cool dude?! I was so nervous because it was my first interview and I forgot everything I learned: I slouched, forgot to make eye contact, and constantly stumbled on my words. With mediocre grades, test scores, and an awful interview, how could I have gotten in to Packer? At the time, I subconsciously knew it was because the school had a diversity quota and I just happened to fill it.*

This diversity quota is often referred to as 'affirmative action' which prioritizes groups historically discriminated against in the areas of education or employment. This example of affirmative action in my high school is contrary to most cases in colleges where many Ivy League schools actually limit the number of Asians they admit. In my case, Fieldston needed more Asians, which made me feel guilty and caused me to question my merit. In fact, a group of qualified Asian-American students that were rejected from many Ivy League colleges are currently suing Harvard for discriminating against Asians. They claim that race conscious admissions put them at disadvantages since Asians are held to a different standard than White students. "A Princeton study found that students who identify as Asian need to score 140 points higher on the SAT than whites to have the same chance of admission to private colleges, a difference some have called 'the Asian tax.'"<sup>1</sup> Many politicians blame this on affirmative action by claiming that schools disproportionately favor other minorities over Asians. However, some Asians feel that politicians who have previously never expressed any interest in voting rights, immigration and other issues surrounding minorities, use Asians as a political tool to attempt to get rid of affirmative action. Since the 1990's the percentage of Asian students attending Harvard

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<sup>1</sup> Hartocollis, Anemona, and Stephanie Saul. "Affirmative Action Battle Has a New Focus: Asian-Americans." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Aug. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/us/affirmative-action-battle-has-a-new-focus-asian-americans.html?module=inline](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/us/affirmative-action-battle-has-a-new-focus-asian-americans.html?module=inline).

has remained the same despite the fact that the population of Asians in the United States has more than doubled.<sup>2</sup> One main reason why the number of Asian students are limited at many IVY League colleges is because of stereotypes that disregard the diversity of Asian-Americans by lumping them into a single category that represents studious, hardworking, almost machine-like students. This notion that tends to ignore Southern Asians and Pacific Islanders, can be referred to as the model minority myth, which is a stereotype that all Asians are the “ideal” minority and that they tend to be economically more successful, work harder in school, have a lower crime rate and even have more successful familial lives. A common Asian stereotype is that we all look and act the same, that our minds are not very diverse or creative. This results in an unfair pressure for Asian applicants to distinguish themselves from the rest by proving their individuality.

Affirmative action first started with President Lyndon B. Johnson when he signed an executive order that required non-discriminatory practices in employment areas. However, it first appeared in the Supreme Court with the Regents of the University of California v. Bakke case (1978). At the University of California - Davis Medical School, there were 100 spots for incoming students.. Sixteen of those spots were allocated for specifically students of color. A man named Bakke, a white applicant, sued the school because he felt that this policy accepted students of color who were less “qualified” than him, preventing him from getting in to the school. Bakke argued that the policy violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as well as the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, which ensures equal protection under the law regardless of race, class, religion, etc. The supreme court ultimately ruled in Bakke’s favor with the argument that racial quotas didn’t provide equal opportunities because it put White people at a disadvantage. Although the Supreme Court argued that racial quotas were unconstitutional, they also ruled that affirmative action programs were allowed if they, “Served a compelling government interest and were narrowly tailored to meet that interest.” In this case, a “compelling government interest” referred to diversity within schools.<sup>3</sup>

Affirmative action causing me to question my personal merits and ultimately lowering my self-esteem is a form of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression is when members of an oppressed group affirm negative stereotypes within themselves or the group they identify with. An example of internalized oppression within America’s education system is how an Asian stereotype that we’re all good at math and sciences pushes Asian adolescents into these respective fields. Because of the model minority myth, Asian students receive more pressure from teachers than their white peers to excel academically. In, *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Beverly Daniel Tatum writes,

*“Asian students in America know that their teachers expect them to excel in math and science, and they may be encouraged to pursue those fields at the expense of other academic interests. Educators Pang Kiang, and Pak report that Asian Pacific American students often suffer from communication anxiety, feeling inadequate about their writing and speaking ability. This anxiety may contribute to a student’s choice to pursue subject areas, such as math, that*

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<sup>2</sup> Gersen, Jeannie Suk. “The Uncomfortable Truth About Affirmative Action and Asian-Americans.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 10 Aug. 2017, [www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-uncomfortable-truth-about-affirmative-action-and-asian-americans](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-uncomfortable-truth-about-affirmative-action-and-asian-americans).

<sup>3</sup> *Affirmative Action: Crash Course Government and Politics #32*, Crash Course, 26 Sept. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=gJgQR6xiZGs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=gJgQR6xiZGs).

require less verbal fluency. In this case, the model-minority stereotype actually serves to restrict their academic options.”<sup>4</sup>

This illustrates how after having expectations throughout middle and high school to be naturally skilled at math, Asian students internalize these stereotypes and ignore certain callings to fulfill this societal expectation. Aside from being good at maths, another stereotype is that Asians are quiet, submissive and content. Often times, the model minority myth is seen as a “positive” stereotype and further encourages Asians to stay quiet about their oppression. For the Asians who don’t achieve the academic success that is expected from them, they report feelings of failure and a lower sense of ethnic identity. Ultimately, these stereotypes cause Asians to envision one idea of success- academic achievement, and other forms like artistic, athletic or social success are repressed at a young age by teachers. Additionally, because of the expectation to stay silent, communication anxiety further perpetuates the pressure to go into math and science fields which allows the stereotypes to continue to exist without much question. While, this is just an example of how internalized oppression effects Asians academic and career lives, internalized oppression spans across all aspects of life for people of color.

Another example of internalized oppression is exemplified in how the most popular type of plastic surgery for Asian and Asian-American women is creating a “double eyelid” as well creating a pointier, more stereotypically Caucasian nose. This is because women of color, specifically Asians, accept Eurocentric beauty standards by highlighting “whiter” features and hiding their natural ones. According to a study done by Eugenia Kaw, data from two doctors’ offices show that, “In 1990 eyelid surgery was the most common procedure undergone by Asian-American patients (40% of all procedures on Asian Americans at one doctor’s office, 46% at another), followed by nasal implants and nasal tip refinement procedures (15% at the first doctors office, 23% at the second)”<sup>5</sup> The American plastic surgery industry exploits a society centered around individualism by making it seem as though double eyelid or nasal implant surgery is an entirely individual choice. American society raises its children to be achievement oriented which is contrary to many other societies around the world that put a higher emphasis on community. In a cross-cultural study done by the American Psychological Association, American and Vanuatu adults were shown two videos of two different kids learning how to make a necklace. One kid was highly confirmative and copied everything the adult showed them how to do, while the other kid was low in conformity. When the adults were asked which child seemed more intelligent the Americans tended to say that the low conforming child was smarter because it indicated creativity whereas the adults from Vanuatu tended to say that the high conforming kid was more intelligent because it indicated competency.<sup>6</sup> This study reveals how America values individuality much more than other societies and how individualism is used as an excuse for conformity in the case of plastic surgeries. Many of the patients who received these surgeries believed that they were expressing their freedom by spending their money to have control over their personal aesthetic. However, these patients also expressed that they thought they would have an easier time finding a job or a mate after they appeared more “beautiful”.<sup>7</sup> Although they thought they were expressing individuality by making the choice of plastic

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<sup>4</sup>Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations about Race*. Basic Books, 2017.

<sup>5</sup>Weitz, Rose. *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance & Behavior*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>6</sup>“Cultural Differences.” *American Psychological Association*, American Psychological Association, 22 June 2017, [www.apa.org/pubs/highlights/peeps/issue-96.aspx](http://www.apa.org/pubs/highlights/peeps/issue-96.aspx).

<sup>7</sup>Weitz, Rose. *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance & Behavior*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

surgery, the emerging reality of their decision seems to actually use individuality as a veil for their more primary desire to succeed and be wanted, which they associated with whiteness. Ultimately, they internalized negative associations with stereotypical Asian facial features (small eyes, flat nose) ingrained in American culture. Aside from individuals and the media upholding negative connotations with Asian faces, plastic surgeons also keep these in existence by using medical terminology to problematize Asian eyes. People already view doctors as authoritative figures, so when a doctor says you have “excess fat” on your eyelids and that wanting a crease is completely “normal”, you begin to believe it. In *The Politics of Women’s Bodies*, Eugenia Kaw records a plastic surgeon as saying, “I would say 90% of people look better with double eyelids. It makes the eye look more spiritually alive.... With a single eyelid frequently they would have a little fat pad underneath [which] can half bury the eye and so the eye looks small and unenergetic.” This quote illustrates how even doctors, who should ideally take a neutral stance when it comes to a patient’s cosmetic preference, attach subjective aesthetic judgments, associating positive characteristics with White features and negative ones with distinctly Asian features. In a later chapter of the book, Marcia Ann Gillespie writes, “But I remember how as a teenager, I, like so many of my girlfriends, longed to look like Dorothy Dandridge. To be Black, but not too Black. [...] I never longed for blue eyes, never daydreamed about being white; and yet I wanted to be part of the rarified group considered beautiful.”<sup>8</sup> Although some people of color long to change their race completely, in regards to beauty standards, the majority of teenage girls want to keep their ethnic identity but just be on the “whiter” end of the spectrum. Growing up, I also felt this yearning; to still be Asian, but less Asian.

Adolescence is a time where a person is just gaining the ability to think abstractly. There are three stages: early, middle and late adolescence.<sup>9</sup> During the early stage biological changes occur (puberty) as well as the beginning of abstract thinking. Towards middle and late adolescence, abstract thought becomes more mature and a person's morals continue to form. Identity formation is necessary to have a stronger sense of self-control and awareness and ultimately segue into adulthood. In early adolescence, teens tend to behave similar to others in their peer group. However, towards the middle stage of development, the teenager increasingly has a stronger sense of self but also begins to have expectations for themselves and worries about fitting in.<sup>10</sup> This makes adolescence an extremely vulnerable period of time when environment, peers and family have a drastic effect on an individual’s development. This is because humans are constantly trying to define themselves in order to achieve stability. During the beginning period of identity development conformity plays a large role. According to a study done by a team at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany, conformity starts at a young age. In an experiment done with toddlers, toddlers skilled in something will hide it from their unskilled peers in order to be accepted while monkeys that were given the same experiment did not hide the skill from their peers.<sup>11</sup> This study exemplifies the significance of conformity to human beings and how this is already established at such a young age. When the majority represented looks a certain way (White), we instinctively want to look the same. Since we can’t

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<sup>8</sup> IBID

<sup>9</sup> Miller, Renee. “The Adolescent Stage of Human Development.” *LIVESTRONG.COM*, Leaf Group, 13 June 2017, [www.livestrong.com/article/560195-the-adolescent-stage-of-human-development/](http://www.livestrong.com/article/560195-the-adolescent-stage-of-human-development/).

<sup>10</sup> IBID

<sup>11</sup> Stetka, Bret. “Conformity Starts Young.” *Scientific American*, 1 Mar. 2015, [www.scientificamerican.com/article/conformity-starts-young/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/conformity-starts-young/).

always control this, we begin to see that there's something innately wrong with ourselves and immediately accredit it to our race.

One theory of evolutionary psychology states that racism is present because it was favorable to the survival of one group of human beings to deplete the resources of another. This was because early human beings survival was based solely on access to food, water and shelter which they would share with only people in their close circle, who incidentally had similar genetic makeup.<sup>12</sup> This theory of racism does not provide justification for the oppression of others, but merely an explanation of how are inhumanness is part of our humaneness. However, nowadays racism is the systemic oppression of a group of people (people of color) based on their ethnicity. It can also be defined as racial prejudice such as stereotypes or discrimination. This means that there is an inherent system of advantage for White people. In, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Daniel Tatum reflects,

*"A White feminist scholar identified a long list of societal privileges that she received simply because she was White. She did not ask for them, and it is important to note that she hadn't always noticed that she was receiving them. They included major and minor advantages. Of course she enjoyed greater access to jobs and housing. But she also was able to shop in department stores without being followed by suspicious salespeople and could always find appropriate hair-care products and makeup in any drugstore. She could send her child to school confident that the teacher would not discriminate against him on the basis of race. She could also be late for meetings and talk with her mouth full, fairly confident that these behaviors would not be attributed to the fact that she was White. She could express an opinion in a meeting or in print and not have it labeled the 'White' viewpoint. In other words, she was more often than not viewed as an individual, rather than as a member of a racial group."*<sup>13</sup>

This illustrates the often unnoticed advantages of whiteness. Systemic racism is apparent since it controls people's everyday lives. Many White people claim they're not racist because they don't actively hate and discriminate against people of color. Although this may be true, *all* White people benefit from the system of racism and this, in itself, upholds racist values. In *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, the author's student conducted an experiment on a group of preschoolers' misconceptions about Native Americans. In this experiment, a group of preschoolers were asked to draw a Native American but were confused by this question. After that, they were asked to draw an Indian and instantly drew a stereotypical Indian like the ones depicted in Disney's, *Pocahontas*.<sup>14</sup> Almost every drawing featured feathers or weapons. This illustrates how preconceived racist notions are implanted in even preschoolers. The preschoolers in this experiment can be compared to White adults who don't consider themselves racist because they don't actively hate. No preschooler consciously discriminates and no one is born a racist, a sexist, an anti-Semite, etc. However, even if they say they don't have stereotypes, they grew up in a racist culture which automatically changes their perceptions of people of color. Although it is often unacknowledged, White people do suffer from systemic racism just not nearly as much as people of color. Many White people were recorded saying that they feel socially incompetent in mixed race social groups, alienated when a child marries a

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<sup>12</sup>Taylor, Steve. "The Psychology of Racism." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 19 Jan. 2018, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/out-the-darkness/201801/the-psychology-racism](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/out-the-darkness/201801/the-psychology-racism).

<sup>13</sup> Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations about Race*. Basic Books, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> IBID

person of another race, and ignorant as to why they lost a close friend of color.<sup>15</sup> Despite these effects of racism on Whites, people of color suffer much more brutally.

People of color face disadvantages in their daily lives whether it's related to employment, housing or just finding the right hair care. While the social, economic and political context of racism is often discussed, the psychological effects are not as much. Just as ethnic identity is a part of identity, these develop over time. According to a study done about the *Impact of Ethnic Identity and Age Among Immigrant and United States-Born Asian Adults*, it found that one theory, the "buffering" theory views ethnic identity as a defense mechanism to discrimination and therefore a positive impact on mental health. This causes people to pick out the good parts in the racial identity that they identify with. It also found that the "exacerbating" theory views ethnic identity having a negative impact on mental health. One study showed that individuals with higher ethnic centrality are more responsive to subtle forms of discrimination.<sup>16</sup> In this study, there was a large range of discoveries as to how ethnic identity correlates with depression and other negative mental health affects which was credited to the range of age. Due to the fact that seniors and adults have less of a reaction to stress as young people, and also because of a generational gap in what is considered "racist", it was concluded that adolescents are more sensitive to discrimination. Additionally, it was found that adults tend to identify more strongly with their ethnicity, but because of the relatively unstable identity of adolescence, they had a weaker sense of ethnic identity. Ultimately, the results of the study was that, "Discrimination was positively correlated with distress, such that more reports of discrimination were associated with more distress. Ethnic identity was found to have a negative correlation with distress, stronger ethnic identity being associated with less distress."<sup>17</sup> Although the complete accuracy of this experiment is doubtful due to the difference in experience and ages of each person examined, this experiment nevertheless provides insights on how ethnic identity can serve as a defense mechanism or as something that makes a person more vulnerable. Aside from sensitivity to discrimination, there is also a lot of trauma regarding racism, specifically for Black people. In an interview done by Jenna Wortham for the *New York Times*, she writes about a psychologist and professor, Monica Williams, who recalled a "high functioning" patient who experienced extreme anxiety and withdrawal after hearing about discrimination in her workplace. Due to the long and excruciating history of racism towards Black people in America, it is common for a Black person to have a severe emotional reaction to discriminatory events miles away from their hometown. However, many doctors, who are more often than not, White, don't recognize this trauma or treat it legitimately.

Although there is constant subliminal messaging in the media, in the workplace, schools, home, etc. about the inferiority of people of color, there are a few ways to resist them. The first is to be conscious of your privilege. In my case, although I am a woman of color, I'm nonreligious and I come from a privileged socioeconomic status. Additionally, I have lived in New York my entire life and have only attended relatively liberal schools. In the two schools that I have attended, racism is a heavily discussed topic and students of color's voices want to be heard. Living in one of the most diverse cities in the world gives me the opportunity to engage with people from many different backgrounds. I often face a cognitive dissonance when I think about

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<sup>15</sup> IBID

<sup>16</sup> Yip, Tiffany, et al. "Racial Discrimination and Psychological Distress: The Impact of Ethnic Identity and Age Among Immigrant and United States-Born Asian Adults." *Current Neurology and Neuroscience Reports.*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2008, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/).

<sup>17</sup> IBID



my privilege. On one hand I feel oppressed and often the only Asian in social settings, but on the other hand I feel like I have so much privilege and that I'm not doing enough with it. Although it's important to note that there is no "hierarchy of discrimination", sometimes I feel like I pass as a person of color, but don't necessarily receive the harsh discrimination other people of color do, which is a result of the intersecting facets of my identity. Beverly Daniel Tatum writes, "Breaking beyond the structural and physiological limitations imposed on one's group is possible, but not easily achieved. To the extent that members of targeted groups do push societal limits--achieving unexpected success, protesting injustice, being 'uppity'--by their actions they call the whole system into question. [...] Preserving the record of those subordinates and their dominant allies who have challenged the status quo is usually of little interest to the dominant culture, but it is of great interest to subordinates who search for an empowering reflection in the societal mirror."<sup>18</sup> In this quote the author uses the term "subordinate" to refer to marginalized groups, and the term "dominant" to refer to White people. This quote illustrates a multitude of ways to challenge America's racist system of oppression as well as combat internalized oppression. Secondly, I think that it is also helpful to have a strong sense of ethnic identity and just identity overall. In order to do so, which is a necessary defense mechanism against racism, parents and teachers of children of color must address racism where it's present as well as provide and acknowledge positive role models of color. Lastly, it's also important to promote diversity in education systems and the workplace. Not only because diversity exposes children to kids who grew up in different situations, but also because it's necessary to hear all different perspectives in order to solve common problems. Additionally, although affirmative action is not perfect, it is also necessary in order to correct historical wrongs. The psychological effect of racism on an individual's identity is seldom talked about. Whether it is feeling pressure to go into a certain field, act a certain way or hold certain beauty standards because of your race, there are strong links between racism and mental health. Aside from the harsh political, social and economic disadvantages many people of color endure, there is much trauma, self-doubt and even self-hate regarding ethnic identity. In the case of my high school application I think it's important to prove to myself going forward that my past successes were because of my merit and not because of my race. However, America's system of racism poses questions as to how do adolescents, who are relatively much more sensitive to racism, develop healthily with lower levels of self-doubt? And how much control do people of color really have over our decisions despite the perpetual negative messages we are sent from society? How can we take back control?

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<sup>18</sup>Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations about Race*. Basic Books, 2017.

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