DIVERSITY PERSPECTIVES:
A Collection of Opinion Articles on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Understanding Tomorrow’s College Student

By the year 2020, minority students will account for 45% of the nation’s public high school graduates, up from 38% in 2009. For many colleges, this rapid growth confirms the urgency of planning for the next generation of diverse students. The college achievement gap is more important than ever, as leaders discuss the necessary evolution of the university in order to successfully prepare students for a global economy.

This limited edition collection of Chronicle opinion pieces provides multiple perspectives across higher education on some of the challenges surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion.

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My Life in the Classroom, Where Race Always Matters

By David Leonard

When you walk into a classroom, what’s your demeanor? Are you approachable, even casual? Or do you favor authority and formality?

Ever since Katrina Gulliver, a professor at University of New South Wales, lamented a “culture of familiarity” in the lecture hall, I’ve been reading professors’ reflections on these questions. Reflections from professors like Will Miller, who pushed back against Gulliver: “I have been known to occasionally teach in clothes that I could mow the lawn in,” he wrote, “and apparently a student or two have at some point said I was cool. That’s not my goal, however.”

I’m a casual dresser, too, but that’s not what struck me about Miller’s essay. What stood out was this line: I may be a white male, but this has nothing to do with why I am comfortable in a classroom.

Berkeley: Summer 1998

I still remember the excitement I felt when I taught my first class solo. No discussion sections, no grading demands from other professors: This was my syllabus, my approach, my opportunity to develop relationships with students. The course covered the civil-rights movement, and I was thrilled by the opportunity to share my passion for the untold stories of the movement.

As a white, male graduate student, I worried: Would my knowledge and academic background be enough to make students respect me as an authority on civil-rights history? But back then, I figured that my extensive reading list and my preparation were enough. Beyond that initial burst of anxiety, I gave little thought to what my whiteness meant inside the classroom.

About halfway through the class, we prepared to watch Spike Lee’s 4 Little Girls, a powerful documentary that chronicles the trauma and terror of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Ala. Wanting the students to sit with the film, to reflect, and to emotionally connect with it, I encouraged them to bypass the standard practice of detached, academic note-taking. “Sit back,” I said, “enjoy the film.”

Looking back, I cannot believe I said these words. But I’m not entirely surprised: My privilege needed to be checked. In my mind, I was simply reminding them to watch, listen, learn, and feel. Yet that’s not...
what came out of my mouth. What I said seemed
like an attempt to turn a film about terror into a
moment of pleasure and enjoyment.

A few weeks later, two African-American students
approached me separately. They each challenged
me to think about what I had said, why it was
significant, and how my whiteness mattered. They
were right. I was blinded by privilege and the belief
that “it’s all about the material,” not even ques-
tioning how I presented that material. My distance
from the history shaped how I talked about the
civil-rights movements and white-supremacist
violence. When I reached into my pedagogical
toolbox, steeped in whiteness and my middle-class
Los Angeles upbringing, I grabbed hold of “enjoy the
film” with little forethought about how such an in-
sensitive phrase might trigger emotions and anger.
It was the first of many lessons on how race always
matters in the classroom.

Berkeley: Spring 2002

As I approached the completion of my Ph.D., I was
afforded the opportunity to teach an upper-level
undergraduate ethnic-studies class with over
200 students. It was daunting. Between wrangling
eight teaching assistants (many of whom were my
friends), and lecturing to all those undergrads, I
was apprehensive—if not scared—for much of the
semester.

Over the years, I have been asked over and over
again: Did the students—either the legendarily
political Berkeley crew or the less-progressive stu-
dents who just were taking the course for a gen-
eral-education requirement—ever challenge me,
question why I was teaching the class, or simply
Even though I lectured about genocide, enslav-
ment, mass incarceration, and persistent white
supremacy, students offered little resistance.

This all changed, though, when a fellow graduate
student—an African-American man—delivered a
couple of guest lectures about the prison-industri-
al complex. After two mind-blowing and brilliant
talks, I was excited to continue the conversation
with the class. My students? Not so much. They
lamented the guest lecturer’s “attitude.” They
described him as “angry,” as “biased” and “sarcas-
tic,” and as “different from me.” Several students
seemed more interested in litigating his pedagog-
ical choices than discussing the injustices of the
American judicial system.

We (I’m indebted to one of my TA’s for her work
here) refused to hold this conversation in his ab-
sence, so we brought him back into the classroom.
And we pushed the class to reflect on why I was
seen as an objective, fair-minded, truth-telling,
and lovable “teddy bear,” whereas he was angry,
biased, and more interested in a political agenda
than the truths of history. The conversations that
resulted from these interventions were powerful,
spotlighting that race, racism, and privilege didn’t
just operate outside the classroom, in history and
in culture. They played a role within our learning
space as well.

The wages of whiteness were paid inside and
outside the classroom. I was seen as an objective
authority, I realized, in part because I was a white
male.

Pullman, Wash.: 2004

Since joining the faculty at Washington State
University, I have been known to swear in class. I’ve
worn ripped-up jeans along with a Lakers jersey. I
ask my students to call me David, though I do tell
them that if they are interested in formality, “Prof”
or “Dr.” are fine.
I’m less able to pass as a student these days—I’ve got a gray beard, a balding head, and an old person’s sartorial style—but I’ve embraced blending into student populations. For me, this isn’t simply about being cool or fitting in or feeling young. I consider it a pedagogical intervention: The idea is to challenge our collective understanding of what it means to be an intellectual, and to show that scholarly pursuits are not incompatible with the “everyday.” Sure, I could lecture on Bourdieu, but I could just as easily talk trash about another Lakers’ championship—remember, 2004 was a while ago—or talk shop about the latest Madden incarnation.

But my ability to do this—to maintain authority even while wearing a Zinedine Zidane or Terrell Owens jersey—is predicated on what George Lipsitz called “the possessive investment in whiteness.” In other words, institutional biases and individual prejudices reinforce one another. They certainly affect my place as a professor. My status as a white male is intertwined with the respect I receive. Women and scholars of color are not afforded this built-in respect, whatever their individual accomplishments, sartorial choices, degrees, or pedagogical styles. As a white male, I benefit from being seen as a professor, as an authority, before I actually say or do anything.

In my 12 years at Washington State, I have never had a student complain about my sartorial choices, my profanity, my propensity for “tangents,” or my professionalism. The same cannot be said about my colleagues, women and faculty of color, whose professionalism, authority, and preparedness is routinely challenged. My wardrobe of jerseys, hoodies, baseball hats, and sagging jeans is not subject to the evaluative scrutiny of future Mr. Blackwells. Contrast that with the women and people of color in the academy whose clothing selections are questioned and used to evaluate their expertise.

On the basketball court, it might be the shoes that make the player. In the classroom, though, it’s the privileges afforded along racial and gender lines that make the professor. Or it’s those privileges, at least, that color the ways students, faculty, and administrators measure a professor’s success.

Pullman, Wash.: May 2014

I have spoken, by now, in numerous classrooms, at conferences, and in many other venues; for the longest time, I felt uncomfortable with any sort of introduction that noted my academic background, publications, or accomplishments. I scoffed at pretense and formality; I was David.

I know now that was a luxury. More than my degrees or my publications, my whiteness was authenticating me. I had thought that by refusing the accoutrements of academe, I was bucking the system. Instead, I was merely cashing in on the societal privileges afforded to me because of my identity.

So what have I learned? My education is ongoing: I still wince at the lack of critical awareness I showed, early on, in giving underdeveloped introductions to guest speakers in class or at conferences, centering my sense of appropriateness and formality. And I haven’t started to demand a level of classroom formality that doesn’t work for me. But I’m more sensitive to the experiences of others. I’m more aware of how my whiteness matters. Not many of us would be naïve enough to think that the classroom is a colorblind nirvana, but too many of us still act as if that’s the case.

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Becoming White in Service of Diversity

By Gordon C. Nagayama Hall

Until recently, I had always checked the “Asian-American” box when asked to indicate my race.

Although my father was white, my mother was a Japanese-American and a native Californian who, because of her ancestry, was incarcerated in an internment camp during World War II. She named me Gordon Charles Hall because she wanted me to assimilate, but she also taught me the importance of civil rights and a Japanese-American identity. My professional career has focused on race, ethnicity, and culture. I have been elected president of national ethnic organizations in psychology, and I have championed efforts to culturally diversify the field of psychology. Checking the “Asian-American” box was an expression of my personal, political, and professional identity.

It was also a necessity if I wanted to reveal my Asian ethnicity, particularly before I added my wife’s last name, “Nagayama,” as an additional middle name when we married. Being counted as an Asian-American has been important in professional settings to help create a critical mass that deserves attention and a voice. When the U.S. Census Bureau began allowing respondents to indicate more than one racial group, I continued to check only “Asian-American” out of concern that checking more than one box might disadvantage the Asian-American population by decreasing its numbers.

But a few months ago, I officially decided to become white.

I requested that my institution, the University of Oregon, change my race from Asian-American to white after I learned that Asian-American faculty members were not considered underrepresented in the psychology department relative to their availability in our field. The implication was that if we had a job opening, other racial groups should be the focus of our efforts to diversify our faculty, and that more Asian-Americans would not bring more diversity.

Another implication was that there were too many Asian-Americans in our department.

Of the 28 tenure-line faculty members, the most recent institutional data indicate that there are 14 white men, eight white women, five Asian-American men (including me), and one Hispanic woman. Among all tenure-line faculty members at my university, the data show that 36 percent are women, 9 percent Asian-Americans, 5 percent Hispanic, 1 percent African-American, and less than 1 percent American Indian or Alaska Native.

The notion that it is not desirable to exceed a certain number of Asian-Americans seems like an invisible fence—a form of psychological incarceration. A white colleague remarked that no one seems
to complain that we have too many white faculty members when we add to their numbers. The psychologist Alice Chang has characterized Asian-Americans as a minority of convenience: They are counted as a minority group when it is convenient (when they can enhance a college’s faculty-diversity image, for example), but not when it is inconvenient (such as when a department would lose out on resources aimed at increasing faculty diversity if it included them).

All that was required to change my race was my request. A university administrator told me my request had been granted and recorded in official records.

So what were the effects of changing my race to white? I don’t know if having one fewer Asian-American faculty member will tip the balance toward Asian-Americans being underrepresented in our department, but officially changing my race was at least a symbolic protest against an apparent quota system. Although the reduction of one minority professor may seem trivial, such a change usually does not go unnoticed in contexts in which diversity is limited.

The immediate personal effects of changing my race to white amounted to good-natured kidding from my friends. “Welcome to the world of privilege,” they said. One advised me that if I ate at an Asian restaurant I should ask for that metal-spring device that turns your chopsticks into giant tweezers. “This will affect your basketball game,” another told me (although it would be hard for my basketball game to get much worse). I also heard: “You can now tell white people apart.” And: “You won’t be ‘randomly’ screened at airport security.” Another colleague wondered if I could start a movement in which people of color deliberately checked “white” in an effort to get institutions to diversify.

Some will say that checking a racial box is trivial, and that I am making a mountain out of a molehill. A common criticism is that racial identity is much more complex than a single question and should be assessed more comprehensively. I agree. But I also believe there is merit in using a single question. A group of people who checked the white category would be different than a group who checked a different racial category. I know this from personal experience with both groups.

Another criticism is that asking about one’s race is an invasion of privacy. The motivation behind this criticism may be fear of discrimination. Will I be disadvantaged because I am white? Or because I am not? The most recent institutional demographic data at the University of Oregon indicate that 6 percent of our faculty and 2 percent of students do not report their race, which implies that the vast majority of faculty members and students do not see checking the race box as an invasion of privacy. Moreover, without race data, institutions would not be accountable for their hiring patterns.

What if I had checked the white box all along? Perhaps my life and career would have had a different trajectory. Perhaps I would have had different friends and colleagues, different research interests, possibly an easier life.

The decision on which box to check, however, has not entirely been my own. Although I have experienced acceptance among whites, sooner or later I get the question, “What are you?” This question communicates to me that I am different, don’t belong, and can’t fully belong because I am not white.

For those who may object to my experiences as atypical, I would welcome the chance to be fully included.

After all, I am now officially part of the white group.

Gordon C. Nagayama Hall is a professor of psychology and associate director of research in the Center on Diversity and Community at the University of Oregon.
On two occasions recently, I have heard an African-American female professor described as “mean” or “difficult” or someone who takes herself too seriously.

The first case involved a colleague who had been invited to join a trip overseas that was to be led by an African-American professor. While my colleague got along well with the trip leader, other faculty members had told her the woman was “difficult.”

Not long afterward, I spoke with a student who told me she was having a similar problem with a different African-American female professor. This professor came across as overly authoritative, frequently reminding the class of her status, the student told me: “She wants us to know that she is the professor and we are the students.” Apparently the professor was clear about the distinction between students and professors, and gave students specific instructions to address her as Dr. So-and-so.

By the time I heard the second complaint, I had nearly completed my first semester as a faculty member, and better understood the dynamics facing African-American female professors. I am willing to guess that the trip leader who was described as “difficult” had reached a point where she was fed up with her students’ and colleagues’ constantly questioning her and, in response, developed a tough skin and a cold disposition.

I took a moment on the last day of class to be candid with the student who had complained.

I referred back to a lesson about health disparities and health behavior that I had used in my medical-sociology class. “Remember what we learned earlier this semester about health behaviors?” I asked.

I had taught my students that one erroneous argument about the cause of health disparities among socioeconomic groups is that poor people do not care about their health, and therefore do not exercise or eat healthy foods, etc. That theory is sometimes used to explain why those in lower socioeconomic positions have shorter life expectancies and are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses. I explained that we see the problem as what is immediately visible to us—the health behavior of poor people. However, if we use our sociological imaginations, we can consider how socioeconomic differences create differences in opportunity (for a healthy diet and exercise) that then produce differences in health behaviors.

The student nodded in agreement. Similarly, I continued, we may take issue with what is immediately visible to us about this professor—her cold disposition.

“You are looking at a manifestation of a larger problem of race in institutions of higher education,” I told the student. The behavior of the overly authoritative professor was a symptom of being devalued and disrespected by students and colleagues, I said. While unfortunate, I assured the student that such dynamics were part and parcel of the minority and female academic experience.
My student then used her sociological imagination to describe how this woman's place in history had probably played a significant role as well. She said, "Yeah, this woman started in the 1970s. It must have been really tough being a black professor then." I was satisfied with her use of the sociological imagination and ended the conversation by confirming the astuteness of her insight.

I was truthful with the student about how being a black academic is an uphill battle (something I first saw while teaching in graduate school). Indeed, I almost made the decision during that first semester to "go mean" on my own students. I told her that I had felt I was at a crossroads—frustrated about being devalued by my colleagues and disrespected by my students. I had an internal conversation about whether I would continue to be my jovial self or purposefully be cold and differentiate myself from my students and colleagues. However, such behavior would be only a symptom of a larger problem that I was having as a minority female professor. And if I had decided to act coldly, I would merely be seen as "difficult" or as having an "attitude."

On one hand, we forget that white privilege gives certain groups (in particular, white males) immediate merit and authority. No one questions their authority or whether they deserve their status in the university—or anywhere else for that matter. On the other hand, we forget that minorities and women, especially minority women, are not granted authority even after earning a doctorate and being hired in a very competitive academic market. It is an uphill battle for authority; they must prove their merit. For women and minorities, it is a frustrating process, and feeling as if they don’t have the same status creates distance between them and their colleagues and their students. I believe that helps explain why some minority professors become so overwhelmed that they “go mean.” They become cold and, dare I say it, angry.

After having been a professor for just a few months, I understand how this could happen. It's a symptom of years of devaluation and disrespect.

Although at first I did not identify with the "mean" African-American female professor, at times I have feared that I was staring at a reflection of my future self.

If I had decided to act coldly I would merely be seen as ‘difficult’ or as having an ‘attitude.’

Now, when I become overwhelmed by this pattern, I set clear boundaries that indicate I am the authority figure. Of course, I do not say to my students, "I have a doctorate, and I am running the show." I use more subtle messages to indicate that I am a warm person—I will help you if you need it, and my office door is open—but also that I am in charge of this class. Whether they think I deserve to be in this position is another matter. I deal with this issue by doing the best job I can, and working hard to be prepared for every class so students do not have any grounds to question my professionalism.

Yet I see the benefit of going mean. It creates a distance that inhibits questioning a professor’s authority or devaluing that person. But I prefer to use other strategies to create a comfortable learning environment and an appropriate distance between myself and my students.

I have decided against going mean.

Deidre L. Redmond is an assistant professor of sociology at Murray State University.
Racial harassment—hazing, theme parties, angry rants, and so much more—is, sadly, still a regular feature of life on college campuses. We know all too well the litany of such events, and the inevitable press releases, meetings, task forces, and reports that follow. And, after a pause, the next vicious incident.

The cycle of harassment is odd, when you think about it, because most of us are pretty nice people, most of the time. And when it comes to race, most of us (most of us who are white, at least) believe that Nice is what it’s all about—that if we are pleasant, or at least inoffensive, we have done our part to make our campus inclusive.

To which I say: Forget nice. Not as a personal virtue of being gentle or kind, but as an institutional strategy for inclusion. I am a social psychologist and faculty member in a learning community focused on understanding issues of race and culture at Hope College, in Michigan. In class, in workshops, on trips, and in the residence hall, we have created a strong community among students from many backgrounds—which has fostered cross-cultural understanding and improved graduation rates, and has tripled the number of black and Latino students at Hope in the past 10 years. The student body is now 85 percent white, down from 96 percent a little more than a decade ago.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to be on the margins of any campus where the power structure remains overwhelmingly white. When one of our minority students is subjected to harassment, I see up close the shock and pain that follow. Often, harassment crystallizes myriad other, smaller events that the student has been experiencing all along. As a rule, harassment isn’t the exception to the student’s experience of the campus; it’s the exclamation point.

Those of us who work closely with marginalized students know that nice is a cover for people whose real goal is the preservation of the status quo. It’s an attempt to avoid real change. The hope is that if everyone will be sufficiently, if superficially, pleasant, there won’t be any pressure to alter the underlying power structures. You see, if you’re nice enough:

- You don’t have to ask why some people attend your school but others don’t, and why some graduate but others don’t.
- You don’t have to recruit a diverse faculty and staff to serve an increasingly diverse student body.
- You can redefine daily “micro-aggressions”—a racially tinged assumption, an offhand remark—as innocent, unintentional, or unrepresentative. Only macro-aggressions—major incidents that make the news—have to be taken seriously.
- You can offer diversity opportunities for those who are interested and let everyone else off the hook.
• You can measure success by the number of people who come hear your “diversity speakers,” while paying no attention to what those speakers say.

• You can have an administration in which nearly everyone who makes key decisions is white—and, quite often, male—and refuse to acknowledge that’s a problem.

• Most important: If you’re nice, you can believe it simply isn’t fair for anyone to ask for anything else. If the sole requirement for being inclusive is for those of us in the majority to be individually nice people, and we believe that we are, then all other requests, complaints, or perspectives are unworthy of serious attention. You can dismiss the dissatisfied as bitter, angry, or unreasonable.

If you’re nice, you can believe it simply isn’t fair for anyone to ask for anything else.

That is why most universities respond quickly, if not always effectively, to incidents of racial harassment—once they are publicized. When people aren’t nice, they puncture our rationale for keeping things as they are. But the things that really matter are far more important than nice: Genuine community. Representative leadership. Respect. A seat at the table. A voice that is heard. When you’re in the minority, you don’t want to stand on the margins while a nice majority continues to operate as if you weren’t even there. You don’t want to have to be a “good fit.” You want to really belong, to be recognized as someone who has something important, something positive, to contribute.

The irony is that when an organization is truly inclusive—when leadership is representative, and policies and practices reflect a wide range of traditions and perspectives—those in the majority don’t have to work so hard at being nice.

In 2007 four white students at the University of the Free State, in Bloemfontein, South Africa, made a video mocking a group of black custodians. The video showed one of the students apparently urinating into a bowl of stew, which was later served to the custodians. Although the students later pleaded guilty in South African court to injuring another person’s dignity, the university’s then-new rector, Jonathan Jansen—the first black person to hold that position—did not seek to punish them, but instead took a number of steps to make the university more inclusive.

Under his leadership, the university has established an Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice; integrated classrooms and residence halls; nurtured promising young scholars from all racial backgrounds; trained student leaders to help improve the campus climate; revised the undergraduate curriculum to promote a cross-disciplinary approach to solving key social problems; and worked closely with low-performing high schools to increase the number of qualified black students attending the university—all while raising admissions requirements.

The rector recognized that there are two dimensions to race: The first is understanding and respecting cultural difference. We have roots in different places, differences that are amplified by pervasive segregation, and we need to learn how to communicate effectively and respectfully with one another. The second dimension is access to power and resources. The United States is highly stratified by race; our life opportunities vary sharply by the racial or cultural groups to which we belong. That’s why nice will never cut it.
Is it possible to follow Jonathan Jansen’s lead in our own colleges? To strive for representative leadership? To incorporate the history, traditions, and values of many groups into our curriculum? To develop a strong community that affirms both common goals and diverse perspectives? To embed inclusion into our daily lives and continuing efforts, abandoning the hope that a one-time fix will suffice?

Not only would that lead to fewer racist incidents, but it would also make our responses to them more effective and more credible. More important, it would ease the daily grind of marginalization that gives overt harassment such power. And that would be a whole lot better than nice.

Charles W. Green is a professor of psychology at Hope College.
The issue of race has always been a problem in my Cape Verdean family—and in my life. We constantly argue about whether we’re white or black. My dad says he stayed with my mom to better his race, by lightening the color of his children, and I’d better not mess up his plan by bringing a black boy home.

It wasn’t until I was away at college that I started to question him seriously about his past. It was in Mozambique that my father’s views about race were formed. As the Cape Verdean son of an official in the administration of a Portuguese colony, my father led a privileged life, living in a big house with many servants.

All of that changed when he went away to a boarding school attended almost entirely by the children of white Portuguese settlers. My dad was neither Portuguese nor white, so he was constantly bullied, beaten up, made fun of, and humiliated. The whiter students called him “nigger” and other epithets, the very names he now calls people who are darker than he is. Had my dad’s family stayed in Cape Verde, where color lines are blurred and there is no outright racism, I believe my dad would not be the way he is.

My mother is the lightest in our family, and her thin, fine hair goes with the rest of her features. She has round dark eyes and a straight, European-looking nose, the thin lips associated with being white, and a pale complexion. My brother and I both inherited many of her features, but our noses differ. Mine is broader and his is straighter, on account of our having different dads. And even though we have similar features and complexions, we have different mind-sets. We both identify strongly as Cape Verdean; he, however, identifies with being white, whereas I identify with being black.

It gets complicated when my family talks about skin color. They believe that black is ugly, but so is being “too white”; our Cape Verdean color is just right. The reality is that Cape Verdians are mixed both culturally and racially, and are many different shades.

My elementary school, after we moved to the United States, was attended mostly by Cape Verdean children of all colors, some Latinos, African-Americans, and a few whites. I never thought of myself as a “minority.”

That changed when I transferred to a private all-girls Quaker high school attended primarily by white Jewish girls. Overnight I became not only a minority but, because of my mixed racial background, also “exotic” and very much the “other.” In this society, I wasn’t just Cape Verdean—I was black. My parents had told me I was a white Cape Verdean, but being in a majority-white school made me think maybe I wasn’t white enough.
I remember the first time I felt that I was better than my cousins because I was lighter. I was 7, and my hair was down to my waist. I was standing in front of the mirror having my cousins detangle my hair when the “hair problem” reared its ugly head. My cousins always fought with each other over who would comb my hair, which was soft and curly and long—not “black” hair.

My cousins and I had just come back from the beach, and all of us had washed and combed our hair. Mine was air-drying; theirs was being flat-ironed and pulled in every direction by their mother to make it straight. My young cousin asked her mother why my hair didn’t need to be straightened like hers. “Because her hair is nice and is not kinky like yours,” her mother replied with a sigh. I beamed. To me at age 7, those words meant that I had won, that, despite my African features, I had one thing they didn’t have—nicer hair—and therefore I was whiter. I was too young to understand that my hair’s being “whiter” made me less black.

Today I find myself wishing my hair were kinkier in order to qualify truly as “black.” I do not use chemicals to make it straight; all it needs is one good pass of the flat iron—just like a white girl’s hair. Being able to walk out of the shower and let my hair air-dry into my hairstyle is a freedom that my black friends do not have. Because of my hair, the black community has identified me as not being truly black. Thus I have to prove to them that I am African and that I, too, have experienced racism. It’s a constant struggle for me to identify as black, and I wonder how many more years I will have to fight to amass sufficient cultural capital to be considered black by other blacks.

The privileges I supposedly receive in America because of my light skin have been detailed to me by my friends at college who are considerably darker than I am. They say that white people will treat me with more respect because I am light-skinned; that if I straightened my hair more often, I could easily be taken for a “maybe” white girl; and that I will be able to get jobs a darker-skinned person will not. With each such “privilege,” my separation from black people becomes increasingly clear.

When I have challenged the idea that my hair can determine the course of my life, my black college friends say, “Of course your hair matters! It’s been proven by scientific research that when a black girl wears her hair straight to a job interview, then she is more likely to get hired than if she wears her hair natural.”

A dark-skinned Dominican friend said, “When I have my hair curly, I always get curious looks, but when I have my hair straight, I don’t. Watch. Straighten your hair for one day and see the difference in the comments you get.”

So I decided to straighten my hair for one day and walk around the campus to see what would happen. Sure enough, people came up to me asking to touch my hair, and I got lots of positive comments: “Your hair looks so pretty.” “Your hair is so long!” “Can I touch it? Wow, it’s so silky!”

White standards of beauty had won; my straight hair got me more attention than my curly hair. The most dramatic difference I noticed was that white boys who had never paid attention to me gave me flirty smiles and talked to me. Not once while I was wearing my hair curly had white boys struck up a conversation with me on a nonacademic topic.

Despite all of the attention I get with straight hair, I still prefer my natural hairstyle, which I believe makes me appear more ethnic, more black.
I identify as black, but in the eyes of the world I am neither black nor white. When I try to affiliate with black student organizations, black students often don’t know what to make of me. They say, “I don’t know what you’re doing here,” implying that, as a light-skinned girl, I don’t know what it is to be truly black. They seem to consider themselves the arbiters of who is truly black, and I get lost in the shuffle.

Although I am African and I identify mostly with African-American culture, I feel as if I’m not being taken seriously at black group events because of my light skin. To make up for the lack of recognition by fellow black people, I tend to adopt my friends’ accents and mannerisms to appear “more black.” I leave my hair curly to keep from looking “too white.” I stay out in the summer sun as much as possible to get a tan and appear “more black.” I take classes in African-American studies, where I often feel that comments from lighter-skinned and African students are delegitimized because we have not gone through the same experiences as the African-American students.

I will continue to state that I am black, despite being labeled a “nigger lover” by my family, being made fun of as the whitest person in a group of “truly black” people, and always having to fight to be accepted as black. Maybe someday those racial categories can be dissolved and I’ll no longer have to choose.

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I have come to loathe the word “underprivileged.” When I filled out my college applications, I checked off the Latino/Hispanic box whenever I was asked to give my ethnicity. My parents in turn indicated their income, hoping that we would qualify for financial aid. But while I waited for acceptances and rejections, several colleges I was considering sent me material that made me feel worthless rather than excited about attending those institutions.

The first mailing I received was a brochure that featured a photograph of African-American, Asian, and Latino teens standing around in a cluster, their faces full of laughter and joy. The title of the brochure was “Help for Underprivileged Students.” At first I was confused: “Underprivileged” was not a word that I associated with myself. But there was the handout, with my name printed boldly on the surface.

The text went on to inform me that, since I was a student who had experienced an underprivileged life, I could qualify for several kinds of financial aid and scholarships. While I appreciated the intent, I was turned off by that one word—“underprivileged.”

Even those who have had no opportunities would not want their social status rubbed in their faces.

I had never been called that before. The word made me question how I saw myself in the world. Yes, I needed financial aid, and I had received generous scholarships to help me attend a private high school on the Upper East Side of New York. Surely that didn’t mean that I had lived a less-privileged life than others. My upbringing had been very happy.

What does “underprivileged” actually mean? According to most dictionaries, the word refers to a person who does not enjoy the same standard of living or rights as a majority of people in a society. I don’t fit that definition. Even though my family does not have a lot of money, we have always had enough to get by, and I have received an excellent education.

What angered me most about the label was why colleges would ever use such a term. Who wants to be called underprivileged? I’m sure that even those who have had no opportunities would not want their social status rubbed in their faces so blatantly. People should be referred to as underprivileged only if they’re the ones who are calling themselves that.
Misfortune, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. It’s not appropriate to slap labels on people that they might not like or even agree with. Social research has found that those who are negatively labeled usually have lower self-esteem than others who are not labeled in that way. So why does the label of “underprivileged” persist?

Most colleges brag about the diversity of their students. But I don’t want to be bragged about if my ethnicity is automatically associated with “underprivileged.” Several colleges that had not even received information on my parents’ finances just assumed that I was underprivileged because I had checked “Latino/Hispanic” on their applications.

That kind of labeling has to stop. Brochures and handouts could be titled “Help for Students in Need” rather than “Help for Underprivileged Students.” I am sure that many people, myself included, are more than willing to admit that they require financial aid, and would feel fine about a college that referred to them as a student in need.

That’s a definition I can agree with. I am a student in need; I’m just not an underprivileged one.

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