Tatum (2017)

TWO

The Complexity of Identity

"Who am I?"

THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IS A COMPLEX ONE, SHAPED BY INDIVIDUAL characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether? As social scientist Charles Cooley pointed out long ago, other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves.[1]

This "looking-glass self" is not a flat, one-dimensional reflection but a multidimensional one. Because a central topic of this book is racial identity in the United States, race is highlighted in these pages. Yet how one's racial identity is experienced will be mediated by other dimensions of oneself: male, female, or transgender; young or old; wealthy, middle-class, or poor; gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual; able-bodied or with disabilities; Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, or atheist.

Abigail Stewart and Joseph Healy's research on the impact of historical periods on personality development raises the question, Who is my cohort group?[2] Am I a product of the segregation of the 1940s and 1950s, or a beneficiary of the civil rights era? Did I come of age

as Barack Obama was entering the White House or after the election of Donald Trump? Did I ride the wave of the women's movement? Or cast my first vote for Hillary Clinton? Did I see the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center fall on 9/11? Am I the child of newly arrived immigrants from Africa, Asia, or the Middle East? Was I born before or after the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is a legal right? What historical events have shaped my thinking?

What has my social context been? Was I surrounded by people like myself, or was I part of a minority in my community? Did I grow up speaking standard English at home or another language or dialect? Did I live in a rural county, an urban neighborhood, a sprawling suburb, or on a reservation?

Who I am (or say I am) is a product of these and many other factors. Erik Erikson, the psychoanalytic theorist who coined the term *identity crisis,* introduced the notion that the social, cultural, and historical context is the ground in which individual identity is embedded. Acknowledging the complexity of identity as a concept, Erikson writes,

> We deal with a process "located" *in the core of the individual* and yet *also in the core of his communal culture.* . . . In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is, luckily, and necessarily, for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, "identity-consciousness."[3]

Triggered by the biological changes associated with puberty, the maturation of cognitive abilities, and changing societal expectations, this process of simultaneous reflection and observation, the self-creation of one's identity, is commonly experienced in the United States and other

Western societies during the period of adolescence.[4] Though the foundation of identity is laid in the experiences of childhood, younger children lack the physical and cognitive development needed to reflect on the self in this abstract way. The adolescent capacity for self-reflection (and resulting self-consciousness) allows one to ask, "Who am I now?" "Who was I before?" "Who will I become?" The answers to these questions will influence choices about who one's romantic partners will be, what type of work one will do, where one will live, and what belief system one will embrace. Choices made in adolescence ripple throughout the lifespan.

Who Am I? Multiple Identities

Integrating one's past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime. The complexity of identity is made clear in a collection of autobiographical essays about racial identity called *Names We Call Home.*[5] The multiracial, multiethnic group of contributors narrate life stories highlighting the intersections of gender, class, religion, sexuality, race, and historical circumstance, and illustrating that "people's multiple identifications defy neat racial divisions and unidimensional political alliances."[6] My students' autobiographical narratives point to a similar complexity, but the less-developed narratives of the late adolescents that I taught highlight the fact that our awareness of the complexity of our own identity develops over time. The salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives. The process of integrating the component parts of our self-definition is indeed a lifelong journey.

Which parts of our identity capture our attention first? While there are surely idiosyncratic responses to this question, a classroom exercise I regularly use with students and other adult audiences reveals a telling pattern. I ask them to complete the sentence, "I am _____," using as many descriptors as they can think of in sixty seconds. All kinds of trait descriptions are used—friendly, shy, assertive, intelligent, honest, and so on—but over the years I have noticed something else. Students

of color usually mention their racial or ethnic group: for instance, I am Black, Puerto Rican, Korean American. White students who have grown up in strong ethnic enclaves occasionally mention being Irish or Italian. But in general, White students rarely mention being White. When I use this exercise in coeducational settings, I notice a similar pattern in terms of gender, religion, and sexuality. Women usually mention being female, while men don't usually mention their maleness. Jewish students often say they are Jewish, while mainline Protestants rarely mention their religious identification. A student who is comfortable revealing it publicly may mention being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Though I know usually most of my participants are heterosexual, it is very unusual for anyone to include their heterosexuality on their list.

Common across these examples is that in the areas where a person is a member of the dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned. That element of the person's identity is so taken for granted that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture. In Eriksonian terms, the person's inner experience and outer circumstance are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within. In the absence of dissonance, this dimension of identity escapes conscious attention.

The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others' attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or "other" in their eyes. In my life I have been perceived as both. A precocious child who began to read at age three, I stood out among my peers because of my reading ability. This "gifted" dimension of my identity was regularly commented upon by teachers and classmates alike and quickly became part of my self-definition. But I was also distinguished by being the only Black student in the class, an "other," a fact I grew increasingly aware of as I got older.

While there may be countless ways one might be defined as exceptional, there are at least seven categories of "otherness" commonly experienced in US society. People are commonly defined as other on the

basis of race or ethnicity, gender (including gender expression), religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, and physical or mental ability. Each of these categories has a form of oppression associated with it: racism, sexism, religious oppression / anti-Semitism,[7] heterosexism, classism, ageism, and ableism, respectively. In each case, there is a group considered dominant (systematically advantaged by the society because of group membership) and a group considered subordinate or targeted (systematically disadvantaged). When we think about our multiple identities, most of us will find that we are both dominant and targeted at the same time. But it is the targeted identities that hold our attention and the dominant identities that often go unexamined.

In her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde captured the tensions between dominant and targeted identities coexisting in one individual. This self-described "forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two" wrote,

> Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm,* which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.[8]

Even as I focus on race and racism in my own writing and teaching, it is helpful to remind myself and my students of the other distortions around difference that I (and they) may be practicing. It is an especially useful way of generating empathy for our mutual learning process. If I am impatient with a White woman for not recognizing her White privilege, it may be useful for me to remember how much of my life I spent oblivious to the fact of the daily advantages I receive simply because I am heterosexual, or the ways in which I may take my class privilege for granted.

Domination and Subordination

It is also helpful to consider the commonality found in the experience of being dominant or subordinate even when the sources of dominance or subordination are different. The pathbreaking psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller, author of *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, identified some of these areas of commonality.[9]

Dominant groups, by definition, set the parameters within which the subordinates operate. The dominant group holds the power and authority in society relative to the subordinates and determines how that power and authority may be acceptably used. Whether it is reflected in determining who gets the best jobs, whose history will be taught in school, or whose relationships will be validated by society, the dominant group has the greatest influence in determining the structure of the society.

The relationship of the dominants to the subordinates is often one in which the targeted group is labeled as defective or substandard in significant ways. For example, Blacks have historically been characterized as less intelligent than Whites, and women have been viewed as less emotionally stable than men. The dominant group assigns roles to the subordinates that reflect the latter's devalued status, reserving the most highly valued roles in the society for themselves. Subordinates are usually said to be innately incapable of being able to perform the preferred roles. To the extent that the targeted group internalizes the images that the dominant group reflects back to them, they may find it difficult to believe in their own ability.

When a subordinate demonstrates positive qualities believed to be more characteristic of dominants, the individual is defined by dominants as an anomaly. Consider this illustrative example: Following a presentation I gave to some educators, a White man approached me and told me how much he liked my ideas and how articulate I was. "You know," he concluded, "if I had had my eyes closed, I wouldn't have known it was a Black woman speaking." (I replied pleasantly, "This is what a Black woman sounds like.")

The dominant group is seen as the norm for humanity. Jean Baker Miller also asserts that inequitable social relations are seen as the model for "normal human relationships." Consequently, it remains perfectly acceptable in many circles to tell jokes that denigrate a particular group, to exclude subordinates from one's neighborhood or work setting, or to oppose initiatives that might change the power balance.

Miller points out that dominant groups generally do not like to be reminded of the existence of inequality. Because rationalizations have been created to justify the social arrangements, it is easy to believe everything is as it should be. Dominants "can avoid awareness because their explanation of the relationship becomes so well integrated *in other terms;* they can even believe that both they and the subordinate group share the same interests and, to some extent, a common experience."[10]

The truth is that the dominants do not really know what the experience of the subordinates is. In contrast, the subordinates are very well informed about the dominants. Even when firsthand experience is limited by social segregation, the number and variety of images of the dominant group available through television, magazines, books, and newspapers provide subordinates with plenty of information about the dominants. The dominant worldview has saturated the culture for all to learn. Even the Black or Latinx child living in a segregated community can enter White homes of many kinds daily via the media. However, dominant access to information about the subordinates is often limited to stereotypical depictions of the "other." For example, there are many images of White men and women in all forms of media, and while the presence of people of color on prime-time TV and in the movies has steadily increased, stereotypical portrayals persist, limiting the diversity in range of life experiences that are depicted.[11]

Not only is there greater opportunity for the subordinates to learn about the dominants, but there is also greater need. Social psychologist Susan Fiske writes, "It is a simple principle: People pay attention to those who control their outcomes. In an effort to predict and possibly influence what is going to happen to them, people gather information about those with power."[12]

In a situation of unequal power, a subordinate group has to focus on survival. It becomes very important for the subordinates to become highly attuned to the dominants as a way of protecting themselves from them. For example, women who have been battered by men often talk about the heightened sensitivity they developed to their partners' moods. Being able to anticipate and avoid the men's rage was important to survival.

Survival sometimes means not responding to oppressive behavior directly. To do so could result in physical harm to oneself, even death. In his essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Richard Wright describes eloquently the various strategies he learned to use to avoid the violence of Whites who would brutalize a Black person who did not "stay in his place."[13] Though it is tempting to think that the need for such strategies disappeared with Jim Crow laws, their legacy lives on in the frequent and sometimes fatal harassment Black men and women experience at the hands of White police officers.[14]

Because of the risks inherent in unequal relationships, the subordinates often develop covert ways of resisting or undermining the power of the dominant group. As Miller points out, popular culture is full of folktales, jokes, and stories about how the subordinate—whether the woman, the peasant, or the sharecropper—outwitted the "boss."[15] In his now-classic essay "I Won't Learn from You," Herbert Kohl identifies one form of resistance, "not-learning," demonstrated by targeted students who are too often seen by their dominant teachers as "others":

> Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity. In such situations, there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the stranger's world.[16]

The use of either strategy, attending very closely to the dominants or not attending at all, is costly to members of the targeted group. Not-learning may mean there are needed skills that are not acquired.

Attending closely to the dominant group may leave little time or energy to attend to one's self. Worse yet, the negative messages of the dominant group about the subordinates may be internalized, leading to self-doubt or, in its extreme form, self-hate. There are many examples of subordinates attempting to make themselves over in the image of the dominant group—Jewish people who want to change the Semitic look of their noses, Asians who have cosmetic surgery to alter the shape of their eyes, Blacks who seek to lighten their skin with bleaching creams. Whether one succumbs to the devaluing pressures of the dominant culture or successfully resists them, the fact is that dealing with oppressive systems from the underside, regardless of the strategy, is physically and psychologically taxing.

Breaking beyond the structural and psychological 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. Miller writes that they "expose the inequality, and throw into question the basis for its existence. And they will make the inherent conflict an open conflict. They will then have to bear the burden and take the risks that go with being defined as 'troublemakers.'"[17]

The history of subordinate groups is filled with so-called troublemakers, yet their names are often unknown. 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.

Many of us are both dominant and subordinate. Clearly racism and racial identity are at the center of discussion in this book, but as Audre Lorde said, from her vantage point as a Black lesbian, "There is no hierarchy of oppression."[18] The thread and threat of violence runs through all of the isms. There is a need to acknowledge each other's pain, even as we attend to our own.

For those readers who are in the dominant racial category, it may sometimes be difficult to take in what is being said by and about those

who are targeted by racism. When the perspective of the subordinate is shared directly, an image is reflected to members of the dominant group that is disconcerting. To the extent that one can draw on one's own experience of subordination—as a young person, as a person with a disability, as someone who grew up poor, as a woman—it may be easier to make meaning of another targeted group's experience. For those readers who are targeted by racism and are angered by the obliviousness of Whites sometimes described in these pages, it may be useful to attend to your experience of dominance where you may find it—as a heterosexual, as an able-bodied person, as a Christian, as a man—and consider what systems of privilege you may be overlooking. The task of resisting our own oppression does not relieve us of the responsibility of acknowledging our complicity in the oppression of others.

Our ongoing examination of who we are in our full humanity, embracing all of our identities, creates the possibility of building alliances that may ultimately free us all. It is with that vision in mind that I move forward with an examination of racial identity in the chapters to follow. My goal is not to flatten the multidimensional self-reflection we see of ourselves but to focus on a dimension often neglected and discounted in the public discourse on race.

PART II

Understanding Blackness in a White Context

FOUR

Identity Development in Adolescence

"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?"

WALK INTO ANY RACIALLY MIXED HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIA AT LUNCHtime and you will instantly notice that in the sea of adolescent faces, there is an identifiable group of Black students sitting together. Conversely, it could be pointed out that there are many groups of White students sitting together as well, though people rarely comment about that. The question on the tip of everyone's tongue is, "Why are the Black kids sitting together?" Principals want to know, teachers want to know, White students want to know, the Black students who aren't sitting at the table want to know.

How does it happen that so many Black teenagers end up at the same cafeteria table? They don't start out there. If you walk into racially mixed elementary schools, you will often see young children of diverse racial backgrounds playing with one another, sitting at the snack table together, crossing racial boundaries with an ease uncommon in adolescence. Moving from elementary school to middle school (often at sixth or seventh grade) means interacting with new children from different neighborhoods than before, and a certain degree of clustering by race might therefore be expected, presuming that children who are familiar

with one another would form groups. But even in schools where the same children stay together from kindergarten through eighth grade, racial grouping begins by the sixth or seventh grade. What happens?

One thing that happens is puberty. As children enter adolescence, they begin to explore the question of identity, asking "Who am I? Who can I be?" in ways they have not done before. For Black youth, asking "Who am I?" usually includes thinking about "Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?"

As I write this, I can hear the voice of a White woman who asked me, "Well, all adolescents struggle with questions of identity. They all become more self-conscious about their appearance and more concerned about what their peers think. So what is so different for Black kids?" Of course, she is right that all adolescents look at themselves in new ways, but not all adolescents think about themselves in racial terms.

The search for personal identity that intensifies in adolescence can involve several dimensions of an adolescent's life: vocational plans, religious beliefs, values and preferences, political affiliations and beliefs, gender roles, and ethnic identities. The process of exploration may vary across these identity domains. James Marcia described four identity "statuses" to characterize the variation in the identity search process: (1) *diffuse,* a state in which there has been little exploration or active consideration of a particular domain, and no psychological commitment; (2) *foreclosed,* a state in which a commitment has been made to particular roles or belief systems, often those selected by parents, without actively considering alternatives; (3) *moratorium,* a state of active exploration of roles and beliefs in which no commitment has yet been made; and (4) *achieved,* a state of strong personal commitment to a particular dimension of identity following a period of high exploration.[1]

An individual is not likely to explore all identity domains at once, therefore it is not unusual for an adolescent to be actively exploring one dimension while another remains relatively unexamined. Given the impact of dominant and subordinate status, it is not surprising that researchers have found that adolescents of color are more likely to be actively engaged in an exploration of their racial or ethnic identity than are White adolescents.[2]

Why do Black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race? Because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them. Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us, and when young Black men and women enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies. A case in point: When my son David was seven, if asked to describe himself, he would have told you many things: "I'm smart, I like to play computer games, I have an older brother." Near the top of his list, he would likely have mentioned, "I'm tall for my age." At seven, he probably would not have mentioned that he is Black or African American, though he certainly knew that about himself and his family. Why would he mention his height and not his racial group membership? As a child, when David met new adults, one of the first questions they asked was, "How old are you?" When David stated his age, the inevitable reply was, "Gee, you're tall for your age!" It happened so frequently that I once overheard seven-year-old David say to someone, "Don't say it, I know. I'm tall for my age." Height was salient for David because it was salient for others.

When David met new adults, they didn't say, "Gee, you're Black for your age!" If you are saying to yourself, of course they didn't, think again. Imagine David at fifteen, six foot two, wearing the adolescent attire of the day, passing adults he doesn't know on the sidewalk. Would the women hold their purses a little tighter, maybe even cross the street to avoid him? Would he hear the sound of the automatic door locks on cars as he passes by? Would he be followed around by the security guards at the local mall? As he stopped in town with his new bicycle, would a police officer hassle him, asking where he got it, implying that it might be stolen? Would strangers assume he plays basketball? Each of these experiences would convey a racial message. At seven, race was not yet salient for David because it was not yet salient for society. But later it would be.

Understanding Racial-Ethnic-Cultural Identity Development

Psychologist William Cross, author of *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity,* offered a theory of racial identity development

that I found to be a very useful framework for understanding what is happening not only with David but also with those Black students in the cafeteria.[3] Since the publication of that model in 1991, Cross and other researchers from the Ethnic and Racial Identity in the 21st Century Study Group have deepened our collective understanding of the central importance of the development of a group identity among youth of color. As William Cross and Binta Cross assert, it is clear that "racial, ethnic, and cultural identity overlap at the level of *lived experience*" to the point that there is little reason to discuss them separately.[4] What in the past (including in previous editions of this book) were referred to as models of racial identity development are now better understood as racial-cultural identity or racial-ethnic-cultural (REC) identity models.[5]

Most children of color, Cross and Cross point out, "are socialized to develop an identity that integrates competencies for transacting race, ethnicity and culture in everyday life."[6] But how does that identity development take place in the life of a young Black adolescent? From early childhood through the preadolescent years, Black children are exposed to and absorb many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the idea that Whites are the preferred group in US society. The stereotypes, omissions, and distortions that reinforce notions of White superiority are breathed in by Black children as well as White. Simply as a function of being socialized in a Eurocentric culture, some Black children may begin to value the role models, lifestyles, and images of beauty represented by the dominant group more highly than those of their own cultural group. On the other hand, if Black parents are what I call race-conscious—that is, actively seeking to encourage positive racial identity by providing their children with positive cultural images and messages about what it means to be Black—the impact of the dominant society's messages are reduced.[7]

In either case, in the prepuberty stage, the personal and social significance of one's REC-group membership has not yet been realized, and REC identity is not yet under examination. Before puberty, David and other children like him could be described as being in a pre-awareness state relative to their REC identity. When the environmental cues

change and the world begins to reflect their Blackness back to them more clearly, they begin to develop a new social understanding of their own REC-group membership and what that means for them and others. During adolescence their understanding evolves to include not just more about themselves but also more about their group, including an "understanding of a *common fate or shared destiny* based on ethnic or racial group membership and that these shared experiences differ from the experiences of individuals from other groups."[8]

Transition to this new understanding is typically precipitated by an event or series of events that force the young person to acknowledge the personal impact of racism. As the result of a new and heightened awareness of the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism. Research suggests that this focused process of examination of one's racial or ethnic identity may begin as early as middle or junior high school.[9]

In a study of Black and White eighth graders from an integrated urban junior high school, Jean Phinney and Steve Tarver found clear evidence for the beginning of the search process in this dimension of identity. Among the forty-eight participants, more than a third had thought about the effects of ethnicity on their future, had discussed the issues with family and friends, and were attempting to learn more about their group. While White students in this integrated school were also beginning to think about ethnic identity, there was evidence to suggest a more active search among Black students, especially Black girls.[10] Phinney and Tarver's initial findings, and the findings of more than two decades of subsequent studies,[11] are consistent with my own study of Black youth in predominantly White communities, where the environmental cues that trigger an examination of REC identity often become evident in middle school or junior high school.[12]

Some of the environmental cues are institutionalized. Though many elementary schools have self-contained classrooms where children of varying performance levels learn together, many middle and secondary schools assign students to different subject levels based on their perceived ability, a practice known as tracking. Though school administrators

often defend their tracking practices as fair and objective, there usually is a recognizable racial pattern to how children are assigned, which often represents the system of advantage operating in the schools.[13]

For example, in a study of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District in North Carolina, Roslyn Mickelson compared the placements of Black and White high school students who had similar scores on a national standardized achievement test they took in the sixth grade. More than half of the White students who scored in the ninetieth to ninety-ninth percentile on the test were enrolled in high school Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) English, while only 20 percent of the Black students who also scored in the ninetieth to ninety-ninth percentile were enrolled in these more-rigorous courses. Meanwhile, 35 percent of White students whose test scores were below the seventieth percentile were taking AP or IB English. Only 9 percent of Black students who scored below the seventieth percentile had access to the more-advanced curriculum.[14]

This disproportionate access to the most rigorous college preparatory curriculum is so common that in 2014 the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights issued a "Dear Colleague" letter to school districts across the country "to call your attention to disparities that persist in access to educational resources, and to help you address those disparities and comply with the legal obligation to provide students with equal access to these resources without regard to race, color, or national origin."[15]

Because Black children are much more likely to be in the lower track than in the honors track in racially mixed schools, such apparent sorting along racial lines sends a message about what it means to be Black. One young honors student I interviewed described the irony of this resegregation in what was an otherwise integrated environment, and hinted at the identity issues it raised for him. "It was really a very paradoxical existence, here I am in a school that's thirty-five percent Black, you know, and I'm the only Black in my classes. . . . That always struck me as odd. I guess I felt that I was different from the other Blacks because of that."

In addition to the changes taking place within school, there are changes in the social dynamics outside school. For many parents, puberty raises

anxiety about interracial dating. In racially mixed communities, you often begin to see what I call the birthday party effect. Young children's birthday parties in multiracial communities are often a reflection of the community's diversity. The parties of elementary school children may be segregated by gender but not always by race. However, at puberty, when the parties become sleepovers or boy-girl events, they become less and less racially diverse.

Black girls, especially in predominantly White communities, may gradually become aware that something has changed. When their White friends start to date, often they do not. The issues of emerging sexuality and the societal messages about who is sexually desirable can leave young Black women feeling they are in a very devalued position. One young woman from a Philadelphia suburb described herself as "pursuing White guys throughout high school" to no avail. Since there were no Black boys in her class, she had little choice. She would feel "really pissed off" that those same White boys would date her White friends. For her, "that prom thing was like out of the question."[16]

Though Black girls living in the context of a larger Black community may have more social choices, they too have to contend with devaluing messages about who they are and who they will become, especially if they are poor or working-class. As social scientists Bonnie Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way point out, "The school drop-out, the teenage welfare mother, the drug addict, and the victim of domestic violence or of AIDS are among the most prevalent public images of poor and working-class urban adolescent girls. . . . Yet, despite the risks inherent in economic disadvantage, the majority of poor urban adolescent girls do not fit the stereotypes that are made about them."[17]

Resisting the stereotypes and affirming other definitions of themselves is part of the task facing young Black women in both White and Black communities. That task has been made more complicated for Black adolescent girls because they are continually confronted with hypersexualized and other negative representations of Black women in the popular culture. Access to a broad range of cable stations, magazines, music videos, and web-based media catering to African Americans has given the hip-hop generation of young people wide exposure to Black

people on the screen. Yet the familiar stereotypes of the past "have been transformed into contemporary distortions: the welfare queen, who is sexually promiscuous and schemes for money; the video vixen, a loose woman; and the gold digger who schemes and exploits the generosity of men."[18]

Black girls, who may experience puberty as young as nine or ten, are bombarded with these sexualized images of Black women "all of the time."[19] They have to struggle with coming to terms with their own changing bodies and how others, particularly male peers, are responding to those changes, even as they try to make sense of what the world expects them to be, a cognitively challenging task for an early adolescent. Again, proactive, race-conscious parenting can make a positive difference during this developmental period. "Black girls who receive protective and affirming racial/ethnic socialization and beauty messages at home may be less likely to accept negative stereotype images as reflective of all black women or themselves."[20]

As was illustrated in the example of David, Black boys also face a devalued status in the wider world. The all-too-familiar media image of a young Black man with his hands cuffed behind his back, arrested for presumed criminal activity, has primed many to view young Black men with suspicion and fear. In the context of predominantly White schools, however, Black boys may enjoy a degree of social success, particularly if they are athletically talented. The culture has embraced the Black athlete, and the young man who can fulfill that role is often pursued by Black girls and White girls alike. But even these young men will encounter experiences that may trigger an examination of their racial identity.

Sometimes the experience is quite dramatic. Lawrence Otis Graham, a prominent New York attorney and author, wrote an essay, published in the *Washington Post*, about an encounter his son had that left both of them shaken. Here's an excerpt:

> It was a Tuesday afternoon when my 15-year-old son called from his academic summer program at a leafy New England boarding school and told me that as he was walking across campus, a gray Acura with a broken rear taillight pulled up beside him. Two men leaned out of the car and glared at him.
>
> "Are you the only nigger at Mellon Academy*?" one shouted.
>
> Certain that he had not heard them correctly, my son moved closer to the curb, and asked politely, "I'm sorry; I didn't hear you."
>
> But he had heard correctly. And this time the man spoke more clearly. "Only . . . nigger," he said with added emphasis.
>
> My son froze. He dropped his backpack in alarm and stepped back from the idling car. The men honked the horn loudly and drove off, their laughter echoing behind them.[21]

Even though the writer had imagined his privileged socioeconomic status would protect his son from such experiences, the incident forced the teen (and his dad) to think about his racial identity in a new way.

Malcolm Little, later to be known as Malcolm X, was just a little younger, thirteen perhaps, when he had his own identity-shifting encounter. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a classic tale of racial identity development, and I assigned it to my Psychology of Racism students for just that reason. As a junior high school student, Malcolm was a star. Despite the fact that he was separated from his family and living in a foster home, he was an A student and was elected president of his class. One day he had a conversation with his English teacher, whom he liked and respected, about his future career goals. Malcolm said he wanted to be a lawyer. His teacher responded, "That's no realistic goal for a nigger," and advised him to consider carpentry instead.[22] The message was clear: you are a Black male, your racial group membership matters, plan accordingly. Malcolm's emotional response was typical—anger, confusion, and alienation. He withdrew from his White classmates, stopped participating in class, and eventually left his predominantly White Michigan town to live with his sister in Roxbury, a Black community in Boston.

No teacher would say such a thing now, you may be thinking, but don't be so sure. It is certainly less likely that a teacher would use the

*The name of the boarding school was fictionalized by the author.

n-word, but consider these contemporary examples shared by high school students. A young ninth-grade student was sitting in his homeroom. A substitute teacher was in charge of the class. Because the majority of students from this school go on to college, she used the free time to ask the students about their college plans. As a substitute she had very limited information about their academic performance, but she offered some suggestions. When she turned to this young man, one of few Black males in the class, she suggested that he consider a community college. She had recommended four-year colleges to the other students. Like Malcolm, this student got the message.

In another example, a young Black woman attending a desegregated school to which she was bused was encouraged by a teacher to attend the upcoming school dance. Most of the Black students did not live in the neighborhood and seldom attended the extracurricular activities. The young woman indicated that she wasn't planning to come. The well-intentioned teacher was persistent. Finally the teacher said, "Oh come on, I know you people love to dance." This young woman got the message, too.

Though I have described single episodes in these examples, the growing racial awareness characteristic of this adolescent stage can be triggered by the cumulative effect of many small incidents—microaggressions—that the young person begins to experience.[23] Sometimes the awakening comes vicariously through a highly publicized racial incident involving someone with whom the adolescent identifies, like the shooting of Trayvon Martin or Jordan Davis.[24] Sometimes it comes through online experiences of racial discrimination.

Increasingly, online racial discrimination is impacting adolescents of color. According to a Pew Research Center study of teens and technology, at least 95 percent of American youth have access to the internet, and adolescents of color spend a lot of time using it—four and a half more hours per day on average than their White peers.[25] In a large comprehensive study of a diverse group of adolescents over a three-year period (2010–2013), more than half of the adolescents of color had experienced an act of online racial discrimination directed at them, defined as "denigrating or excluding individuals or groups on the basis of

race through the use of symbols, voice, video, images, text and graphic representations. . . . These experiences include racial epithets and unfair treatment by others due to a person's racial or ethnic background, such as being excluded from an online space."[26] More than two-thirds had witnessed an act of online racial discrimination directed at someone else.

Though the adolescents of color in the study included a mix of African American, Latinx, Asian, and biracial teens, researchers found that African American youth experienced "a particularly virulent form of online racial discrimination" on such popular online platforms as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. For example, one student shared, "The worst thing that happened to me on the internet is that someone threatened to kill me because of my race." Another reported, "Almost every day on Call of Duty: Black Ops [a video game involving other online players] I see Confederate flags, swastikas and black people hanging from trees in emblems and they say racist things about me and my teammates." Another game-related incident was this one: "Me and my friends were playing Xbox and some kid joined the Xbox Live party we were in and made a lot of racist jokes I found offensive."[27]

Another well-publicized example is the targeting of Black freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania in the days immediately following the 2016 presidential election. Online hackers in Oklahoma added the Penn students to a social media account that included racial slurs and a "daily lynching" calendar. Among the messages the students received was a photo of people hanging from a tree. The response of those who were targeted by the messages (and their friends who experienced the incident vicariously) was visceral. Wrote one, "Quite honestly I just can't stop crying. I feel sick to my stomach. I don't feel safe."[28]

In these examples, the intrusion of racism into young people's lives comes uninvited and across all physical boundaries into their own homes through an Xbox or computer, or into the palms of their hands through their smartphones, often from unknown sources. The online expression of overt racial prejudice of the kind too often seen in real life during the pre–civil rights era is disturbing, and it has an adverse impact on its recipients. Tynes reports that online racial discrimination

is linked to depressive symptoms, anxiety, lower academic motivation, and increased problem behavior.[29] These are all characteristics one might see in young people struggling with core questions of REC identity in a world that devalues their group identity.

Coping with Encounters: Developing an Oppositional Identity

What do these encounters have to do with the cafeteria? Do experiences with racism inevitably result in so-called self-segregation? While certainly a desire to protect oneself from further offense is understandable, it is not the only factor at work. Imagine the young eighth-grade girl who experienced the teacher's use of "you people" and the dancing stereotype as a racial affront. Upset and struggling with adolescent embarrassment, she bumps into a White friend who can see that something is wrong. She explains. Her White friend responds, in an effort to make her feel better perhaps, and says, "Oh, Mr. Smith is such a nice guy, I'm sure he didn't mean it like that. Don't be so sensitive." Perhaps the White friend is right and Mr. Smith didn't mean it, but imagine your own response when you are upset, perhaps with a spouse or partner. Your partner asks what's wrong and you explain why you are offended. In response, your partner brushes off your complaint, attributing it to your being oversensitive. What happens to your emotional thermostat? It escalates. When feelings, rational or irrational, are invalidated, most people disengage. They not only choose to discontinue the conversation but are more likely to turn to someone who will understand their perspective.

In much the same way, the eighth-grade girl's White friend doesn't get it. She doesn't see the significance of this racial message, but the girls at the "Black table" do. When she tells her story there, one of them is likely to say, "You know what, Mr. Smith said the same thing to me yesterday!" Not only are Black adolescents encountering racism and reflecting on their identity, but their White peers, even when they are not the perpetrators (and sometimes they are), are unprepared to respond in supportive ways. The Black students turn to each other for the much-needed support they are not likely to find anywhere else.

In adolescence, as race becomes personally salient for Black youth, finding the answer to questions such as, "What does it mean to be a young Black person? How should I act? What should I do?" is particularly important. And although Black fathers, mothers, aunts, and uncles may hold the answers by offering themselves as role models, they hold little appeal for most adolescents. The last thing many fourteen-year-olds want to do is to grow up to be like their parents. In their view, it is the peer group, the kids in the cafeteria, that holds the answers to these questions. They know how to be Black. They have absorbed the stereotypical images of Black youth in the popular culture and are reflecting those images in their self-presentation.

Based on their fieldwork in US high schools, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu described a psychological pattern they observed among African American high school students at this stage of identity development.[30] They theorized that the anger and resentment that adolescents feel in response to their growing awareness of the systematic exclusion of Black people from full participation in US society leads to the development of an oppositional social identity. This oppositional stance both protects one's identity from the psychological assault of racism and keeps the dominant group at a distance. Fordham and Ogbu wrote:

> Subordinate minorities regard certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans. At the same time they emphasize other forms of behavior as more appropriate for them because these are not a part of white Americans' way of life. To behave in the manner defined as falling within a white cultural frame of reference is to "act white" and is negatively sanctioned.[31]

Certain styles of speech, dress, and music, for example, may be embraced as "authentically Black" and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain. The peer group's evaluation of what is Black and what is not can have a powerful impact on adolescent behavior.

Reflecting on her high school years, one Black woman from a White neighborhood described both the pain of being rejected by her Black classmates and her attempts to conform to her peers' definition of Blackness:

> "Oh you sound White, you think you're White," they said. And the idea of sounding White was just so absurd to me. . . . So ninth grade was sort of traumatic in that I started listening to rap music, which I really just don't like. [I said] I'm gonna be Black, and it was just that stupid. But it's more than just how one acts, you know. [The other Black women there] were not into me for the longest time. My first year there was hell.

Sometimes the emergence of an oppositional identity can be quite dramatic as the young person tries on a new persona almost overnight. At the end of one school year, race may not have appeared to be significant, but often some encounter takes place over the summer and the young person returns to school much more aware of his or her Blackness and ready to make sure that the rest of the world is aware of it, too. There is a certain in-your-face quality that these adolescents can take on, which their teachers often experience as threatening. When a group of Black teens are sitting together in the cafeteria, collectively embodying an oppositional stance, school administrators often want to know not only why they are sitting together but what can be done to prevent it. We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. What *is* problematic is that the young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be Black, based largely on cultural stereotypes.

Oppositional Identity Development and Academic Achievement

Unfortunately for Black teenagers, those cultural stereotypes do not usually include academic achievement. Despite that fact, the majority

of Black students (more than 85 percent) express a desire to go on to college or other postsecondary education.[32] Certainly their families want that for them, with almost 90 percent of low- and moderate-income African American parents indicating a desire for their children to earn a college degree, according to a recent UNCF study.[33] In fact, according to a Pew Research Center survey, African American and Hispanic parents are significantly more likely than White parents to say that it is essential that their children earn a college degree.[34] As has been the case historically, these parents of color see college education as the ticket to their children's life chances, yet too often their children's academic performance lags behind that of their White counterparts. Does the fear of being accused of "acting White" by one's peers play a role in the academic behavior of Black adolescents in the process of defining their REC-group identity?

Researchers have explored this question with mixed results. It seems that the variability in their findings might be explained by the variability in the school settings in which the research was conducted.[35] In studies investigating the link between academic performance and concerns about "acting White," researchers have found that school context matters. In the hypersegregated schools that many Black students now attend, Black students represent the top of the class as well as the bottom. In that context, adolescents may be labeled pejoratively as "acting White" because of speech patterns, style of dress, or musical tastes, but not likely because of their academic performance. Yet in the context of racially mixed high schools where the AP and IB classes are overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, White and the regular and special education classes are disproportionately Black and Hispanic, in the minds of the students who attend those schools, academic success can become part of the "acting White" label some Black students seek to avoid. In those schools, academic opportunity is too often correlated with being White.[36] This point is underscored by the research of Karolyn Tyson.

> Black students in my studies rarely equated whiteness with academic ability and/or high achievement unless patterns of achievement by race (and usually social class) in their own school settings were

> stark. . . . A burden of acting white . . . was most relevant to black students in school settings where only Whites (usually wealthy Whites) or disproportionately few Blacks had opportunities to participate in higher-level programs and courses. . . . Students who had not experienced such explicit linking of race and achievement—those who attended all-black schools or schools that had more racially balanced classrooms—rarely recalled ever being accused of acting white specifically because of their achievement or achievement-related behaviors.[37]

Particularly in the context of schools where racial status has been linked to achievement, during the active exploration phase of REC identity development, when the search for identity leads toward cultural stereotypes and away from anything that might be associated with Whiteness, academic performance may decline. The response to the charge of "acting White" in this context can be a shift in attitude. Edward L., a seventeen-year-old student in Mickelson and Velasco's study, says, "I've seen this happen to a couple of people, like, to fit in, they'll just change their whole . . . their whole attitude . . . the way they dress, the way they think, they'll stop doing work, you know. They won't do any type of work, homework."[38] Most of the academically successful students they interviewed, however, described themselves as being able to brush off that kind of peer pressure, even though it made them uncomfortable.

What's going on with those Black students who are not academically successful? Of course, their REC identity is developing, too. But lack of school success may lead to defining identity through other means—being a good athlete, being cool or tough, becoming the class clown—and seeking affirmation in other ways. Everyone wants and needs affirmation. "Excelling in one or more of these areas provides an identity that elicits respect, fear, and/or admiration from other students and simultaneously diverts attention from low academic performance."[39] Tyson adds, "Ridiculing the high achievers is a way of regaining a sense of dignity and power in the face of their own disappointment and resentment. . . . When black students disproportionately experience

low achievement in the context of disproportionate white high achievement, some emphasize their black authenticity, seeking dignity in racial solidarity."[40]

The Black college students I have interviewed, almost all of whom were raised in predominantly White communities, commonly described some conflict or alienation from other African American teens because of their academic success in high school. For example, a twenty-year-old woman from a Washington, DC, suburb explained: "It was weird, even in high school a lot of the Black students were, like, 'Well, you're not really Black.' Whether it was because I became president of the sixth-grade class or whatever it was, it started pretty much back then. Junior high, it got worse. I was then labeled certain things, whether it was 'the Oreo' or I wasn't really Black." Others described avoiding situations that would set them apart from their Black peers. For example, one young woman declined to participate in a gifted program in her school because she knew it would separate her from the other Black students in the school.

Academically successful Black students in racially mixed schools typically want to maintain acceptance among their Black peers, but they also need a strategy to find acceptance among their White classmates, particularly since they may be one of very few Blacks in their advanced classes. Fordham described one such strategy as *racelessness,* wherein individuals assimilate into the dominant group by de-emphasizing characteristics that might identify them as members of the subordinate group.[41] Lawrence Otis Graham's son seemed to be using this strategy when he told his father why he did not want to report his racial encounter to the school authorities. "His chief concern was not wanting the white students and administrators to think of him as being special, different, or 'racial.' That was his word. 'If the other kids around here find out that I was called a nigger, and that I complained about it,' my son pleaded, 'then they will call me "racial," and will be thinking about race every time they see me. I can't have that.'"[42]

Jon, a young man I interviewed, offered a classic example of this strategy as he described his approach to dealing with his discomfort at being the only Black person in his advanced classes. He said, "At no

point did I ever think I was White or did I ever want to be White. . . . I guess it was one of those things where I tried to de-emphasize the fact that I was Black." This strategy led him to avoid activities that were associated with Blackness. He recalled, "I didn't want to do anything that was traditionally Black, like I never played basketball. I ran cross-country. . . . I went for distance running instead of sprints." He felt he had to show his White classmates that there were "exceptions to all these stereotypes." However, this strategy was of limited usefulness. When he traveled outside his home community with his White teammates, he sometimes encountered overt racism. "I quickly realized that I'm Black, and that's the thing that they're going to see first, no matter how much I try to de-emphasize my Blackness."

A Black student can play down his or her Black identity in order to succeed in school and mainstream institutions without rejecting his or her Black identity and culture.[43] Instead of becoming raceless, an achieving Black student can become an *emissary,* someone who sees his or her own achievements as advancing the cause of the racial group. For example, social scientists Richard Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff describe how a successful Black student, in response to the accusation of acting White, connected his achievement to those of other Black men by saying, "Martin Luther King must not have been Black, then, since he had a doctoral degree, and Malcolm X must not have been Black since he educated himself while in prison." In addition, he demonstrated his loyalty to the Black community by taking an openly political stance against the racial discrimination he observed in his school.[44]

Similarly, Mickelson and Velasco found that some of their interviewees were motivated by the challenge of "representing the race" in the face of other people's projection of stereotypes.

> They considered the acting-white label to be part of the insidious legacy that impugned black people's intelligence. . . . They deliberately embraced the challenge to do well, to work hard, and to succeed to prove the doubters wrong. They knew they were intelligent, they knew they could handle high-level classes, and they consciously wanted to disprove any notion that black students were not as intellectually competent as white students. And they wanted to reclaim academic achievement as entirely consistent with acting black.[45]

These examples make clear that an oppositional identity can *potentially* interfere with academic achievement, but that is not always the case. There are alternative responses that can lead to academic success. It may be tempting for educators to blame the adolescents themselves for their academic disinterest, in instances where that occurs. However, the questions that educators and other concerned adults must ask are these: What is it about the curriculum and the culture of academic opportunity within the school that reinforces the notion that academic excellence is a largely White domain? What curricular interventions might we use to encourage the development of an empowered emissary identity?

The Search for Alternative Images

An oppositional identity discouraging academic achievement is not inevitable even in a racist society. If young people are exposed to images of African American academic achievement in their early years, as they look ahead to see what older students are achieving or as they read about the accomplishments and contributions of a diverse group of women and men in their textbooks, they will be less likely to define school success as something for Whites only. They will know that there is a long history of Black intellectual achievement. In this context, some have speculated about the potentially positive impact of the Obama presidency on the aspirations and academic achievement of young Black youth who, during Obama's eight years in office, embraced President Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama, as role models and highly visible examples of Black academic achievement. During the 2008 campaign, teachers and students from a predominantly Black middle school in Washington, DC, were interviewed about this "Obama effect." One of the teachers, noticing an increase in homework completion, teared up as she described the positive changes she saw in her students during the

Obama campaign. "She said, 'It was really moving for me to hear students who don't typically do well in school speak of, you know, different things that they know they can do because of what Barack Obama has shown them.'"[46]

Though he came of age before the election of Barack Obama, the point about the importance of visible role models was made quite eloquently by Jon, the young man I quoted earlier. Though he made the choice to excel in school, he labored under the false assumption that he was "inventing the wheel." It wasn't until he reached college and had the opportunity to take African American studies courses that he learned about other African Americans besides Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Frederick Douglass—the same three men he had heard about year after year, from kindergarten to high school graduation. As he reflected on his identity struggle in high school, he said:

> It's like I went through three phases. . . . My first phase was being cool, doing whatever was particularly cool for Black people at the time, and that was like in junior high. Then in high school, you know, I thought being Black was basically all stereotypes, so I tried to avoid all of those things. Now in college, you know, I realize that being Black means a variety of things.

Learning his history in college was of great psychological importance to Jon, providing him with role models he had been missing in high school. He was particularly inspired by learning of the intellectual legacy of Black men at his own college:

> When you look at those guys who were here in the Twenties, they couldn't live on campus. They couldn't eat on campus. They couldn't get their hair cut in town. And yet they were all Phi Beta Kappa. . . . That's what being Black really is, you know, knowing who you are, your history, your accomplishments. . . . When I was in junior high, I had White role models. And then when I got into high school, you know, I wasn't sure but I just didn't think having White role models was a good thing. So I got rid of those. And I basically just, you know, only had my parents for role models. I kind of grew up thinking that we were on the cutting edge. We were doing something radically different than everybody else. And not realizing that there are all kinds of Black people doing the very things that I thought we were the only ones doing. . . . You've got to do the very best you can so that you can continue the great traditions that have already been established.

This young man was not alone in his frustration over having learned little about his own cultural history in grade school. Time and again in the research interviews I conducted, Black students lamented the absence of courses in African American history or literature at the high school level and indicated how significant this new learning was to them in college, how excited and affirmed they felt by this newfound knowledge. The comments they made to me are now echoed in the student demands for curricular inclusion that spread across college campuses so rapidly in 2015.[47] Sadly, many Black students never get to college, alienated from the process of education long before high school graduation. They may never get access to the information that might have helped them expand their definition of what it means to be Black and, in the process, might have helped them stay in school. Young people are developmentally ready for this information in adolescence. We ought to provide it.

Not at the Table

As we have seen, Jon felt he had to distance himself from his Black peers in order to be successful in high school. He was one of the kids *not* sitting at the Black table. Continued encounters with racism and access to new, culturally relevant information empowered him to give up his racelessness and become an emissary. In college, not only did he sit at the Black table, but he emerged as a campus leader, confident in the support of his Black peers. His example illustrates that one's presence at the Black table is often an expression of one's identity development, which evolves over time.

Some Black students may not be developmentally ready for the Black table in middle school or high school. They may not yet have had their own encounters with racism, and race may not be very salient for them. Just as we don't all reach puberty and begin developing sexual interest at the same time, REC-group identity development unfolds in idiosyncratic ways. Though my research suggests that early adolescence is a common time for Black students to begin actively identifying with their REC group, one's own life experiences are also important determinants of the timing. Young people whose racial identity development is out of sync with their peers' often feel in an awkward position. Adolescents are notoriously egocentric and assume that their experience is the same as everyone else's. Just as girls who have become interested in boys become disdainful of their friends still interested in dolls, the Black teens who are at the table can be quite judgmental toward those who are not. "If I think it is a sign of authentic Blackness to sit at this table, then you should too."

The young Black men and women who still hang around with the White classmates they may have known since early childhood may be snubbed by their Black peers. This dynamic is particularly apparent in regional schools where children from a variety of neighborhoods are brought together. When Black children from predominantly White neighborhoods go to school with Black children from predominantly Black neighborhoods, the former group are often viewed as trying to be White by the latter. We all speak the language of the streets we live on. Black children living in White neighborhoods often sound White to their Black peers from across town and may be teased because of it. This can be a very painful experience, particularly when the young person is not fully accepted as part of the White peer group either.

One young Black woman from a predominantly White community described exactly this situation in an interview. In a school with a lot of racial tension, Terri felt that "the worst thing that happened" was the rejection she experienced from the other Black children who were being bused to her school. Though she wanted to be friends with them, they teased her, calling her an "Oreo cookie" and sometimes beating her up. The only close Black friend Terri had was a biracial girl from her neighborhood.

Racial tensions also affected her relationships with White students. One White friend's parents commented, "I can't believe you're Black. You don't seem like all the Black children. You're nice." Though other parents made similar comments, Terri reported that her White friends didn't start making them until junior high school, when Terri's Blackness became something to be explained. One friend introduced Terri to another White girl by saying, "She's not really Black, she just went to Florida and got a really dark tan." A White sixth-grade "boyfriend" became embarrassed when his friends discovered he had a crush on a Black girl. He stopped telling Terri how pretty she was and instead called her "nigger" and said, "Your lips are too big. I don't want to see you. I won't be your friend anymore."

Despite supportive parents who expressed concern about her situation, Terri said she was a "very depressed child." Her father would have conversations with her "about being Black and beautiful" and about "the union of people of color that had always existed that I needed to find. And the pride." However, her parents did not have a network of Black friends to help support her.

It was the intervention of a Black junior high school teacher that Terri feels helped her the most. Mrs. Campbell "really exposed me to the good Black community because I was so down on it" by getting Terri involved in singing gospel music and introducing her to other Black students who would accept her. "That's when I started having other Black friends. And I thank her a lot for that."

The significant role that Mrs. Campbell played in helping Terri open up illustrates the constructive potential that informed adults can have in the identity development process. She recognized Terri's need for a same-race peer group and helped her find one. Talking to groups of Black students about the variety of living situations Black people come from and the unique situation facing Black adolescents in White communities helps to expand the definition of what it means to be Black and increases intragroup acceptance at a time when that is quite important.

For children in Terri's situation, it is also helpful for Black parents to provide ongoing opportunities for their children to connect with other Black peers, even if that means traveling outside the community

they live in. Race-conscious parents often do this by seeking out a historically Black church to attend or by maintaining ties to Black social organizations such as Jack and Jill. Parents who make this effort often find that their children become bicultural, able to move comfortably between Black and White communities and able to sit at the Black table when they are ready.

Implied in this discussion is the assumption that connecting with one's Black peers in the process of identity development is important and should be encouraged. For young Black people living in predominantly Black communities, such connections occur spontaneously with neighbors and classmates and usually do not require special encouragement. However, for young people in predominantly White communities, they may only occur with active parental intervention. One might wonder if this social connection is really necessary. If a young person has found a niche within a circle of White friends, is it really *necessary* to establish a Black peer group as a reference point? Maybe not, but it certainly helps.

As one's awareness of the daily challenges of living in a racist society increases, it is immensely beneficial to be able to share one's experiences with others who have lived them. Even when White friends are willing and able to listen and bear witness to one's struggles, they cannot really share the experience. One young woman came to this realization in her senior year of high school:

> [The isolation] never really bothered me until about senior year when I was the only one in the class. . . . That little burden, that constant burden of you always having to strive to do your best and show that you can do just as much as everybody else. Your White friends can't understand that, and it's really hard to communicate to them. Only someone else of the same racial, same ethnic background would understand something like that.

When one is faced with what Chester Pierce calls the "mundane extreme environmental stress" of racism, in adolescence or in adulthood, the ability to see oneself as part of a larger group from which one can draw support is an important coping strategy.[48] Individuals who do not

have such a strategy available to them because they do not experience a shared identity with at least some subset of their racial group are at risk for considerable social isolation and depression.[49]

Of course, who we perceive as sharing our identity may be influenced by other dimensions of identity, such as gender, sexual orientation, social class, geographical location, skin color, or ethnicity. For example, research indicates that first-generation Black immigrants from the Caribbean tend to emphasize their national origins and ethnic identities, distancing themselves from US Blacks, due in part to their belief that West Indians are viewed more positively by Whites than those American Blacks whose family roots include the experience of US slavery. To relinquish one's ethnic identity as West Indian and take on an African American identity may be understood as downward social mobility.[50]

Also, immigrants from the Caribbean, as well as those from African countries, are from social contexts in which they were in the numerical majority and Blacks occupied positions of power, a legacy of European colonialism notwithstanding. Thus the racial socialization for African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants may be significantly different from that of American-born Blacks.[51] Second-generation Black immigrants, however, without an identifiable accent to mark them as foreigners, may lose the relative ethnic privilege their parents experienced. In that context, they may be more likely to seek racial solidarity with Black American peers in the face of encounters with racism.[52] Whether it is the experience of being followed in stores because they are suspected of shoplifting, seeing people respond to them with fear on the street, or feeling overlooked in school, Black youth can benefit from seeking support from those who have had similar experiences.

An Alternative to the Cafeteria Table

The developmental need to explore the meaning of one's identity with others who are engaged in a similar process manifests itself informally in school corridors and cafeterias across the country. Some educational institutions have sought to meet this need programmatically with the creation of school-sponsored affinity groups.

Twenty years ago several colleagues and I evaluated one such effort, initiated at a Massachusetts middle school participating in a voluntary desegregation program known as the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program.[53] The historical context for our evaluation was the fact that the small number of African American students who were being bused from Boston to this suburban school had achieved disappointing levels of academic success. In an effort to improve academic achievement, the school introduced a program, known as Student Efficacy Training (SET), that allowed Boston students to meet each day as a group with two staff members. Instead of being in physical education or home economics or study hall, they were meeting, talking about homework difficulties, social issues, and encounters with racism. The meeting was mandatory, and at first the students were resentful of missing some of their classes. But the impact was dramatic. Said one young woman,

> In the beginning of the year, I didn't want to do SET at all. It took away my study and it was only METCO students doing it. In the beginning all we did was argue over certain problems, or it was more like a rap session, and I didn't think it was helping anyone. But then when we looked at records . . . I know that last year out of all the students, sixth through eighth grade, there was, like, six who were actually good students. Everyone else, it was just pathetic, I mean, like, they were getting like Ds and Fs. . . . The eighth grade is doing much better this year. I mean, they went from Ds and Fs to Bs and Cs and occasional As. . . . And those seventh graders are doing really good, they have a lot of honor roll students in seventh grade, both guys and girls. Yeah, it's been good. It's really good.

Her report was borne out by an examination of school records. The opportunity to come together in the company of supportive adults allowed these young Black students to talk about the issues that hindered their performance—racial encounters, feelings of isolation, test anxiety, homework dilemmas—in the psychological safety of their own group. In the process, the peer culture changed to one that supported academic

performance rather than undermined it, as revealed in these two students' comments:

> Well, a lot of the Boston students, the boys and the girls, used to fight all the time. And now, they stopped yelling at each other so much and calling each other stupid.

> It's like we've all become like one big family, we share things more with each other. We tease each other like brother and sister. We look out for each other with homework and stuff. We always stay on top of each other 'cause we know it's hard with African American students to go to a predominantly White school and try to succeed with everybody else.

The faculty, too, were very enthusiastic about the outcomes of the intervention, as seen in the comments of these two classroom teachers:

> This program has probably produced the most dramatic result of any single change that I've seen at this school. It has produced immediate results that affected behavior and academics and participation in school life.

> My students are more engaged. They aren't battling out a lot of the issues of their anger about being in a White community, coming in from Boston, where do I fit, I don't belong here. I feel that those issues that often came out in class aren't coming out in class anymore. I think they are being discussed in the SET room, the kids feel more confidence. The kids' grades are higher, the homework response is greater, they're not afraid to participate in class, and I don't see them isolating themselves within class. They are willing to sit with other students happily. . . . I think it's made a very positive impact on their place in the school and on their individual self-esteem. I see them enjoying themselves and able to enjoy all of us as individuals. I can't say enough, it's been the best thing that's happened to the METCO program as far as I'm concerned.[54]

Although this intervention is not a miracle cure for every school, it does highlight what can happen when we think about the developmental needs of Black adolescents who are coming to terms with their own sense of identity. It might seem counterintuitive that a school involved in a voluntary desegregation program could improve both academic performance and social relationships among students by *separating* the Black students for one period every day. But if we understand the unique challenges facing adolescents of color and the legitimate need they have to feel supported in their identity development, it makes perfect sense.

Though they may not use the language of racial identity development theory to describe it, most Black parents want their children to achieve an internalized sense of personal security, to be able to acknowledge the reality of racism and to respond effectively to it. Our educational institutions should do what they can to encourage this development rather than impede it. When I talk to educators about the need to provide adolescents with identity-affirming experiences and information about their own cultural groups, they sometimes flounder because this information has not been part of their own education. Their understanding of adolescent development has been limited to the White middle-class norms included in most textbooks; their knowledge of Black history limited to Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. They sometimes say with frustration that parents should provide this kind of education for their children. Unfortunately Black parents often attended the same schools the teachers did and have the same informational gaps. We need to acknowledge that an important part of interrupting the cycle of oppression is constant reeducation, and then sharing what we learn with the next generation.

Group Identity and Stereotype Threat

As we have seen, developing a strong and positive sense of group identity can be a source of psychological protection for members of stigmatized groups, particularly when the exploration of that identity has moved beyond the negative stereotypes to a more accurate and complete

understanding of the strengths and assets of one's group. However, there is one context in which a strong identification with one's group can be a source of vulnerability, and that is in relationship to a condition known as stereotype threat. As defined by social psychologist Claude Steele, stereotype threat is "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype."[55] In essence, stereotype threat is a kind of performance anxiety that can impact academic performance because "[stigmatized students] must contend with the threatening possibility that should their performance falter, it could substantiate the racial stereotype's allegation of limited ability."[56]

Anyone can experience stereotype threat under the right circumstances. For example, researchers have shown that talented female math students perform less well on a "math ability" measure when they are told that their scores will be compared to those of men than they do when that information is not provided. White male golfers perform less well on a golf course when they are told their performance is part of a measure of "natural athletic ability" than they do when no such information is provided.[57] Two decades of research has demonstrated that when an individual identifies with a group (e.g., race or gender) as part of their social identity and that group is stereotyped in negative ways, the person is at risk for lower performance relative to the stereotyped dimension of that identity.[58]

In the case of Black students, the more they identify with their group and the more invested they are in doing well academically, the more vulnerable they can become to stereotype threat.[59] They know that "intellectually inferior" is a stereotype about their group, and they want to disprove it. That added pressure can inhibit performance, especially in high-stakes testing situations.

How does stereotype threat impede test-taking performance for Black students? In some of the research Steele and his colleagues conducted, computers were used to administer standardized tests, which allowed the researchers to study the test-taking behavior of the students in some detail. They found that:

> Black students taking the test under stereotype threat seemed to be trying too hard rather than not hard enough. They reread the questions, reread the multiple choices, rechecked their answers, more than when they were not under stereotype threat. The threat made them inefficient on a test that, like most standardized tests, is set up so that thinking long often means thinking wrong, especially on difficult items like the ones we used.[60]

This result was particularly noted when students were asked to check a box indicating their racial group membership before taking the test. The act of checking the box brought racial-group membership (and resulting performance anxiety) to mind. When they were administered the same test without being asked to designate their race at the beginning, stereotype threat was not triggered and their performance on the test was significantly better—in fact, it equaled the performance of White peers taking the same exam.[61]

Any situation in which the stigmatized identity is made more salient for the individual is likely to induce stereotype threat—not just in test-taking situations but in daily life, like being the only Black student in an advanced math or science class, for example. The student in such a circumstance is likely to have a heightened awareness of being "the only one."[62] However, there are strategies that caring adults (family members as well as educators) can use to reduce the impact of stereotype threat to the benefit of young people. Providing role models from the stigmatized group whose achievement defies the stereotypes is one important strategy. Indeed, researchers found that having a strong racial identity was most helpful to young Black girls and their academic success only when that identification included a belief that being African American is associated with achievement.[63] In my former role as the president of Spelman College, the oldest historically Black college for women, I witnessed daily the inspirational power of an environment where Black women were surrounded by examples of African American academic achievement, past and present, leading to exceptionally high rates of success in STEM fields, where Black women have historically been most underrepresented.[64]

What is hopeful about our growing understanding of stereotype threat and related theories is that they can guide us to change how we teach and what we say. As Steele puts it: "Although stereotypes held by the larger society may be hard to change, it is possible to create educational niches in which negative stereotypes are not felt to apply—and which permit a sense of trust that would otherwise be difficult to sustain."[65] Receiving honest feedback you can trust as unbiased is critical to reducing stereotype threat and improving academic performance. How you establish that trust with the possibility of stereotype swirling around is the question. The key to doing this seems to be found in clearly communicating both high standards *and* assurance of belief in the student's capacity to reach those standards.

Again, Claude Steele, this time joined by Geoffrey Cohen, offers important insights. To investigate how a teacher might gain the trust of a student when giving feedback across racial lines, they created a scenario in which Black and White Stanford University students were asked to write essays about a favorite teacher. The students were told that the essays would be considered for publication in a journal about teaching and that they would receive feedback from a reviewer who they were led to believe was White. A Polaroid snapshot was taken of each student and attached to the essay as it was turned in, signaling to the students that the reviewer would be able to identify the race of the essay writer. Several days later the students returned to receive the reviewer's comments, with the opportunity to "revise and resubmit" the essay. What was varied in the experiment was how the feedback was delivered.

When the feedback was given in a constructive but critical manner, Black students were more suspicious than white students that the feedback was racially biased, and consequently, the Black students were less likely than the White students to rewrite the essay for further consideration. The same was true when the critical feedback was buffered by an opening statement praising the essay, such as "There were many good things about your essay." However, when the feedback was introduced by a statement that conveyed a high standard (reminding the writer that the essay had to be of publishable quality) and high expectations (assuring the student of the reviewer's belief that with effort and attention to

the feedback, the standard could be met), the Black students not only responded positively by revising the essays and resubmitting them, but they did so at a higher rate than the White students in the study.[66]

The particular combination of the explicit communication of high standards and the demonstrated assurance of the teacher's belief in the student's ability to succeed (as evidenced by the effort to provide detailed, constructive feedback) was a powerful intervention for Black students. Describing this two-pronged approach as "wise criticism," Cohen and Steele demonstrated that it was an exceedingly effective way to generate the trust needed to motivate Black students to make their best effort. Even though the criticism indicated that a major revision of the essay would be required to achieve the publication standard, Black students who received "wise criticism" felt ready to take on the challenge, and did. Indeed, "they were more motivated than any other group of students in the study—as if this combination of high standards and assurance was like water on parched land, a much needed but seldom received balm."[67]

Another factor in how stereotype threat is experienced has to do with how students think about their own abilities. Many students, like many teachers, believe intelligence (or lack of it) is a fixed, unchanging characteristic. Years of family members, friends, and teachers remarking, "What a smart boy/girl you are!" certainly reinforces this personal "entity theory" of intelligence. The alternative view of intelligence as changeable—as something that can be developed over time—is less commonly fostered, but it can be. Educator Verna Ford has summed up this alternative theory for use with young children quite succinctly: "Think you can—work hard—get smart."[68]

Educational psychologist Carol Dweck's research suggests that young people who hold the "entity" belief in fixed intelligence see academic setbacks as an indicator of limited ability. They are highly invested in appearing smart and consequently avoid tasks on which their performance might suggest otherwise. Rather than exerting more effort to improve their performance, they are likely to conclude "I'm not good at that subject" and move on to something else. Students who view intelligence as malleable—an "incremental theory"—are more likely to

see academic setbacks as a sign that more effort is needed and then exert that effort. They are more likely to face challenges head-on rather than avoid them in an effort to preserve a fixed definition of oneself as "smart."[69] The incremental theory of intelligence as malleable—something that expands as the result of effective effort—fosters an academic resilience that serves its believers well.

Researchers Aronson, Fried, and Good wondered if a personal theory of intelligence as malleable might foster a beneficial academic resilience for students of color vulnerable to stereotype threat. Specifically, they speculated that if Black students believed that their intellectual capacity was not fixed but expandable through their own effort, the negative stereotypes that others hold about their intellectual ability might be less damaging to their academic performance. To introduce this alternative view of intelligence, they designed a study in which Black and White college students were recruited to serve as pen-pal mentors to disadvantaged elementary school students. The task of the college students was to write letters of encouragement to their young mentees, urging them to do their best in school. However, one group of college students was instructed to tell their mentees to think of intelligence as something that was expandable through effort, and in preparation for writing the letters, they were given compelling information, drawn from contemporary research in psychology and neuroscience, about how the brain itself can be modified and expanded by new learning. The real subjects of the study, however, were the college students, not their pen pals. Although the letter writing was done in a single session, the college students exposed to the malleable theory of intelligence seemed to benefit from exposure to the new paradigm. Both Black and White students who learned about the malleability of intelligence improved their grades more than did students who did not receive this information. The benefit was even more striking for Black students, who reported enjoying academics more, saw academics as more important, and had significantly higher grades at the end of the academic quarter than those Black students who had not been exposed to this brief but powerful intervention.[70]

What worked with college students also worked with seventh graders. Lisa Sorich Blackwell, Kali Trzesniewski, and Carol Dweck created

an opportunity for some seventh-grade students in New York City to read and discuss a scientific article about how intelligence develops and its malleability. A comparable group of seventh-grade students did not learn this information but read about memory and mnemonic strategies instead. Those students who learned about the malleability of intelligence subsequently demonstrated higher academic motivation, better academic behavior, and higher grades in mathematics than those who learned about memory. Interestingly, girls, who have been shown to be vulnerable to gender stereotypes about math performance, did as well as or better than boys in math following the intelligence-is-malleable intervention, while girls in the other group performed well below the boys in math. As was the case with the Aronson, Fried, and Good study, the intervention with the seventh graders was quite brief—in this case only three hours—yet the impact was significant.[71]

The outcomes of numerous studies lead to this conclusion: "By encouraging students to adopt a malleable view of intelligence—either through directly teaching students about this perspective or by creating learning environments that embrace the incremental view rather than entity view of intelligence—we can help students overcome stereotype threat."[72] We can shift a student's focus from the anxiety of *proving ability* in the face of negative stereotypes to the confidence of *improving with effort* despite the negative stereotypes. Embracing a theory of intelligence as something that can develop—that can be expanded through effective effort—is something all of us can do to reduce the impact of stereotype threat and increase the achievement of all of our students.

FIVE

Racial Identity in Adulthood

"Still a work in progress . . . "

When I was in high school, I did not sit at the Black table in the cafeteria because there were not enough Black kids in my high school to fill one. Though I was naive about many things, I knew enough about social isolation to know that I needed to get out of town. As the child of college-educated parents and an honor student myself, it was expected that I would go on to college. My mother suggested Howard University, my parents' alma mater, but although it was a good suggestion, I had my own ideas. I picked Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. It was two hours from home, an excellent school, and of particular interest to me was that it had a critical mass of Black and Latinx students, most of whom were male. Wesleyan had just gone coed, and the ratio of Black male students to Black female students was seven to one. I thought it would improve my social life, and it did.

I thrived socially and academically. Since I had decided in high school to be a psychologist, I was a psychology major, but I took a lot of African American studies courses—history, literature, religion, even Black child development. I studied Swahili in hopes of traveling to Tanzania, although I never went. I stopped straightening my hair and had a large Afro à la Angela Davis circa 1970. I happily sat at the Black table in the dining hall every day. I look back on my days at Wesleyan with great pleasure. I maintain many of the friendships I formed there, and I