

HUMAN CAPITAL

The 'Whitening' of Asian Americans

Recent lawsuits suggesting reverse discrimination have aligned the interest of white Americans and Asian Americans, raising complex questions about identity and privilege.

IRIS KUO AUG 31, 2018

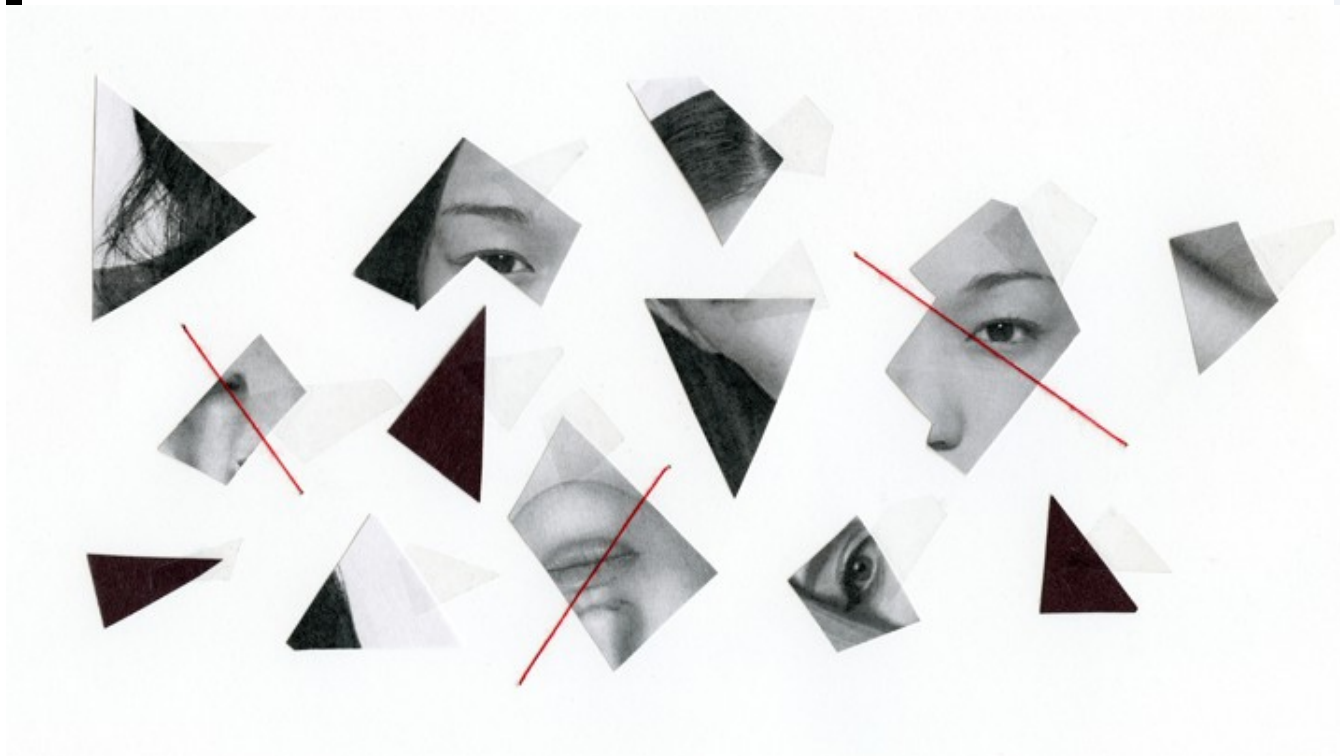


IMAGE SOURCE / COFFEEANDMILK / IAMBADA / GETTY / NAJEEBAH AL-GHADBAN

On Thursday, the U.S. Justice Department threw its support behind a group of Asian students suing Harvard for racially discriminating against them in admissions, writing in a legal filing that Harvard's admissions process "significantly disadvantages Asian-American applicants compared to applicants of other racial groups." The statement of interest, filed by the department's civil-rights division, builds on a case against Harvard by Students for Fair Admissions, an organization that opposes race-based affirmative action.

In a tranche of legal filings in June, Students for Fair Admissions released documents it claimed supported its claims; one report in particular, by Harvard's own internal research division, found Asian applicants would comprise 43 percent of the admitted class if only academic performance were considered. In a model that factored in Harvard's preference for legacy and athlete students,

extracurriculars, and personal traits, the number of admitted Asians would fall to 26 percent, while the number of white students admitted would increase. But once “demographics” were factored in, the proportion of admitted Asians and whites would both fall—to 18 percent and 44 percent respectively. The takeaway: Admissions policies that factor in race hurt both Asians and whites.

The case is, on the surface, about discrimination against Asians. But it is one of several recent legal actions that, on a deeper level, call into question the status of a certain subset of Asian Americans by aligning them with white people. (A Harvard spokeswoman said the study released by Students for Fair Admissions had been conducted with limited admissions data, and its results were preliminary and incomplete; a separate analysis that Harvard commissioned found no evidence of discrimination. Regarding the lawsuit, another school spokeswoman said Harvard does not discriminate in admissions and will fight to continue to pursue a diverse student body.)

Early this year, the white male engineer James Damore sued his former employer Google for discrimination on the basis of his race and gender, alleging the company institutes illegal hiring quotas, the results of which, according to his lawsuit, was that “Caucasian and Asian males were not being selected for jobs and promotions due solely to their status as non-females or non-favored minorities.”

In another lawsuit filed in January of this year, a former YouTube employee, Arne Wilburg, who is a white man, also sued YouTube’s parent company, Google, alleging that its hiring practices systematically discriminated against not only against white men, but against Asian men as well. Google will “vigorously defend” itself, a spokeswoman said, adding, “We have a clear policy to hire candidates based on their merit, not their identity. At the same time, we unapologetically try to find a diverse pool of qualified candidates for open roles, as this helps us hire the best people, improve our culture, and build better products.”

Notably, the man who spearheads the organization suing Harvard, Edward Blum, has sued schools before on similar grounds—but in those cases, it was on behalf of white, not Asian, students. In 2008 he helped represent Abigail Fisher, who sued the University of Texas at Austin for allegedly using her white race against her in its admissions process. On the same day Blum’s group sued Harvard in 2014, it also filed a discriminatory admissions lawsuit in a North Carolina district court against

the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, once again on behalf of white students.

The Harvard and Google cases combine Asians with whites in a seemingly unified cry of so-called reverse discrimination—even though, at 6 percent of the population in 2017, Asians are statistical minorities, and at nearly 77 percent, whites are not. These legal actions seem to be about race-blind equal opportunity. But in reality, they are making a case that, in the elite echelons of society, Asians are, like white people, a privileged class that is being brought down as other racial groups rise.

[Harvard's impossible personality test]

The term “Asian-American” refers to a hugely diverse group, comprising dozens of nationalities, religions, and ethnicities, as well as a variety of education levels and socioeconomic statuses. But much of the push to align whites and Asians as similar racial groups, both injured by employment and educational policies that consider race as a factor, ignores the vast diversity that exists among Asian-Americans. While Asians are the highest-earning of any racial and ethnic group in the United States with a median annual income of \$51,288 in 2016, income inequality is also the highest among Asians, who have displaced blacks as the most economically divided racial or ethnic group in the U.S., according to a recent analysis from the Pew Research Center. The Google and Harvard cases largely home in specifically on Asians with high educational, socioeconomic, or employment statuses, intimating that the fate of this stratum of Asians is intertwined with that of whites.

This alignment of certain Asians with whites evokes historical instances of ethnic groups migrating from minority status to becoming part of the majority racial group. Sociologists have a name for this phenomenon: “whitening.” It refers to the way the white race has expanded over time to swallow up those previously considered non-whites, such as people of Irish, Italian, and Jewish heritage. In the next wave of whitening, some sociologists have theorized, Asians and Latinos could begin to vanish into whiteness, as some assimilate culturally into white norms and culture, and become treated and seen by whites as fellow whites. “The idea of who is white and which groups belong and don’t belong to it has been malleable and has changed. It is different across place and time,” Jonathan Warren,

a University of Washington sociology professor who has written about whitening, told me.



Image Source / Getty / Najeebah Al-Ghadban

The recent lawsuits echo the process by which whitening previously took place—in part, with the political and legal alignment of non-white groups with pro-white interests. While some Irish Americans once socialized and lived among black Americans and held anti-slavery views, they were courted by and ultimately joined the pro-slavery Democratic party, and came to pride themselves on their newfound whiteness and embrace anti-black stances. Centuries later, they are considered white people in the United States. Class, too, has influenced how minority groups have been viewed over time. According to Matthew Jacobson, a history professor at Yale, the idea of whitening stems in part from Brazil, where there's a Portuguese phrase that translates to “money whitens.” The idea is that “if you move up the economic ladder you get magically whitened,” Jacobson says. “Some idea like that has been transposed into the U.S.”

Asians as a whole are not, of course, considered white people: The 2018 census form allows respondents to select from a number of Asian ethnicities. And not all academics agree that whitening will take place for Asian and Latino communities—Warren and Jacobson both say it isn't happening, at least not to the degree it did previously. That's partly because, as Jacobson notes, Asians and Latinos suffer from racial stereotypes such as the “model math student,” and the “immigration menace,” as he called it, that mark them as foreigners and non-whites.

My own family and I immigrated to the United States when I was a toddler, and I grew up in small towns in the South. I was often the only Asian in my class, and there were times my classmates had no qualms about excluding or ridiculing me for my culture and race. My experience is not that of a white person's. And there are plenty of ways in which Asians, including those with high socioeconomic status, do not have privilege. They are the least likely of any racial group to be promoted into management positions. They are often little represented or whitewashed in the media, or harmfully stereotyped.

[The thorny relationship between Asians and Affirmative Action]

While my parents and I are Taiwanese immigrants who didn't have much money when we arrived in the U.S., we eventually climbed the economic ladder and became comfortably middle class. As an adult, I consider myself a member of the socioeconomic group that a Pakistani-American friend of mine half-jokingly calls “bougie Asians.” I'm well-educated, with a degree from an Ivy League school, and

live in one of the most expensive cities in the world. In the course of reading and writing about these cases, I've had to think hard about my own experiences as a Taiwanese-American woman, and whether I'm perceived as a minority—or being pushed by outside forces in the direction of a white person's status.

When I have asked myself whether or not I have ever been granted white privileges, I have found myself growing uncomfortable. I recounted to a friend strange instances where potential employers made offhand comments about how they could “tell” that I was a hard worker. “How would they know?” I remarked, annoyed. “I don't even work that hard.” My friend, who is black, paused, then said, “That”—the unearned assumption that I'm a hard worker— “sounds like the kind of thing that would get you a job.”

It's a fair point. Being in the good graces of white people helped me win plum housing deals. It helped bring me pay raises and perhaps even jobs themselves. This isn't to say that I haven't come by my accomplishments honestly. But I do not fear for my life when the police are around. No one has ever crossed the street when I've approached or followed me around a store. For the most part, I do not believe I am negatively racially profiled by law enforcement, in housing opportunities or at retail stores. I'm not under any illusions about the way white society perceives me. But the racism and discrimination I face as a relatively privileged East Asian woman is, in some instances, markedly different than that of other minority groups, including Asians of other backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses.

[Why Whites and Asians have different views on personal success]

Still, it's disconcerting to be put in a separate category from other people of color. When I studied at Columbia Business School from 2015 to 2016, the admissions office co-hosted with student groups a recruiting event called Diversity Matters that aimed to “celebrate diversity and inclusion” at the school. It was staffed by student associations representing black, LGBTQ, female, Hispanic, and veteran students. Asian student groups were conspicuously excluded. The message was both subtle and damaging: Asians do not contribute to the diversity of the campus. (Columbia Business School and Columbia University did not respond to requests for comment.) There's perhaps extra irony in that Columbia University president Lee Bollinger has been a vocal proponent of affirmative action; previously, as the

president of the University of Michigan, he argued for student-body diversity in the Supreme Court case *Grutter v. Bollinger*, in which a white student sued the university's law school.

In researching the Harvard and Google cases, and the history of whitening, and reflecting on my own experiences, I'm left thinking about the racial future of the United States, and the way ethnic groups align and re-align themselves. When privileged Asian-Americans argue alongside whites that reverse discrimination is taking place, they allow themselves to be used as a wedge group, to divide people of color and position them against each other and, indeed, against less privileged Asian-Americans. Polls have found that more than half of Asian Americans support affirmative action. Asian-American groups such as 18millionrising.org and Asian Americans Advancing Justice are staunchly resisting the wedge dynamic. The latter has gone so far as to file to become participants in the Harvard lawsuit in defense of affirmative action, on behalf of Asian Harvard students and applicants, as well as some black, Latino, and Native American students.

Sally Chen, who will be a senior at Harvard this fall and has joined the Asian Americans Advancing Justice effort, told me, "I think it's sad to be involved in a reverse kind of gatekeeping," she says. "It feels like we're all scrambling for a limited set of spots set aside for non-white people. Comparatively, Harvard is still 49 percent white. What does that say?"

I've always been proud of my Taiwanese roots, but lately, I've started to question how much of my culture I've voluntarily released in the effort to belong in a country dominated by white people. American society is built around what white people like and don't like. They decide which foreign foods are "in" (bubble tea, burritos) and what's "gross" or "exotic" (menudo, say, or marinated pig ears). American standards for acceptable behavior—the way people talk, the language they use, the food they eat in a mainstream company—are carefully tailored to the tastes of white people. It makes sense. White people run the country and the vast majority of its institutions. They hold most of the wealth. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that some Asian-Americans are aligning themselves with white people when it comes to university admissions. Appealing to white taste, after all, is a baseline requirement for advancement. But at what price?

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

Related Video

MARK THE NEWS AS READ

Get a roundup of the most important and intriguing stories from around the world, delivered to your inbox every weekday.

THE VALUE OF GOOD JOURNALISM

Subscribe and support our coverage of the ideas that matter – with up to 78% savings.

SUBSCRIBE >

