The Race Against Oneself
Opening Up to Overachievement Using A Sociological Imagination

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Abstract: This article focuses on the inner struggles that the author dealt with growing up as an overachiever. Drawing from readings in the textbook, *Inside Social Life*, co-edited by Spencer Cahill and Kent Sandstrom, and James W. Pennebaker's *Opening Up,* she highlights past experiences to provide clarity on these struggles. She describes how and when the overachieving mindset was manifested, and explores the ethno racial and self-esteem issues she faced in her personal growth and social development.

As a child, I was a firm believer that it is better to go beyond expectations than to fall short of them. I have ever since carried this concept with me until today. I became morbidly afraid of failing, and found new ways to push myself to accomplish anything that was expected of me. A mixture of negative experiences, expectations, and outside pressures led me to believe that nothing is impossible if you try hard enough. I stretched myself thinner and thinner until the day finally came that I failed to accomplish a series of goals that I had set for myself. It was my second to last year of high school when I began to realize that my goals were unrealistic and that, sometimes, we become subject to things that are beyond our control. Though I am no longer as hard on myself now, I still very much deal with the relentless, over-achieving attitude that I carried with me throughout my childhood and teenage years.

When I was a child, school was the first place that the overachieving mindset was manifested. Looking back, I can see that it had a lot to do with my older brother. We were born a little over a year apart. I remember being three years old and being praised continuously for having been potty-trained before my brother. I also learned to speak before him, and I watched him struggle with his words when he was four years old. My older brother was also very clumsy and curious. He would fall down flights of stairs countless times and even once, urinated on an electrical socket, which caused a fire. My parents were harder on him, and praised me for being well-mannered and behaved. Entering preschool, I remember putting great effort into being recognized as the most well-

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behaved child in my class. The reward for good behavior in preschool and kindergarten is praise and special privileges**.** I became **sociologically mindful**—alert and aware of the world around me—taking into consideration of others. I became mindful of my peers, of the rules and regulations, social expectations, and what was expected of me, so that I could be rewarded for being 'good.' These simple observations, however, opened up my eyes to a reality that I could not yet understand. In the article "Sociological Mindfulness*,"* Michael Schwalbe warns, "The kind of awareness that sociological mindfulness produces can be unsettling because it sometimes forces us to see things we would prefer not to" (2005: 4).

I lived in a neighborhood and went to a school that was predominantly Latino. There were Hispanics everywhere, and I was mortified by the stereotypes that were given to them—stereotypes that many of the Hispanics around me often supported and projected. Many of the kids in my elementary school did poorly on their schoolwork and tests, did not put much effort into their work, were very rude and disrespectful, and bullied me for not being like 'them.' Prudence L. Carter interviewed 68 students and demonstrates in her article, titled "Straddling Racial Boundaries at School," how African American and Latino youth understood themselves and others to be of a certain race or ethnicity. In the article, she mentions names that are used "to express disapproval of members who appear to have rejected an affiliation with their respective racial or ethnic communities" (2011: 377). I could not speak Spanish and so I was *labeled* as a 'gringa,' which is a disparaging slang for 'white woman.'

Carter also found that the participants she interviewed "explicitly discuss[ed] the idea of … acting white in terms of linguistic and dress styles" (2011: 376). Many Hispanic kids are expected to dress in the same urban attire that everyone else wears,

but if they do not, they face the fear of being made fun of for "wanting to be like someone else." The problem, however, is that some kids, like me, simply do not like wearing the urban style of clothing. Being Hispanic and expected to speak Spanish is another struggle altogether because every Latin American country has its own dialect. Not only does a Mexican American child have to fear speaking fluent Spanish to a group of friends, he or she might face ridicule for speaking "Mexican Spanish" to a group of, say, Columbians. In my case, it was even more difficult because my parents are from two different countries with two very different dialects. When around family, I was never sure whether or not to speak English. It seemed half of us (kids) were expected to speak English just to prove that we were American, and the other half were expected to speak Spanish. Whenever I did actually speak Spanish, however, I would speak in the wrong dialect. In "The Overdose of Shame: A Sociological and Historical Self-Exploration," the former UMass Boston student Charles Chear shares a similar sentiment when he states, "…one must either preserve practices specific to each community or completely abandon one. If abandonment is chosen, shame may occur in the community whose value was abandoned" (2005: 51)

Despite the fact that I was not like those that bullied me, I knew that being Hispanic made me a part of the **minority**. Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin note in their article, "Young Children's Racial and Ethnic Definitions of Self," that children learn at a young age that "generally speaking, whiteness is privileged and darkness is not—and thus their choices are usually not surprising" (2011: 163).

I knew, even at a young age, that I would have to work harder and push myself farther to break free from the stereotypes that, I believed, others would subject me to because of the color of my skin. This

idea of a ***first impression*** is discussed in the article "The Presentation of Self," by Erving Goffman, who discusses how people can learn about others by observing their interactions in everyday life. When meeting an individual for the first time, according to Goffman, one can "glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him. They can also assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting" (2011:192). In today's society, first impressions are lasting impressions. What a person observes when first meeting someone is most likely going to determine whether or not they will give them a chance. The observations made are usually appearance, smell, and speech. My concern, however, was that people would make their first impression of me based solely on my skin color.

I recently reopened a box my mother had put away of all of my artwork as a child. Many of them were self-portraits or portraits of the family. The ones that I drew when I was in kindergarten and first grade were messy and terrible, but I always used the color brown for my body. The pictures I drew in third grade and up, however, were drawn with light tan and sometimes even white. "Asian and Latino American children, like their parents, may often find themselves placed by whites on the continuum without their active involvement, and thus they may struggle for a better placement, and definition, of themselves on that white-originated continuum," Ausdale and Feagin wrote in "Young Children's Racial and Ethnic Definitions of Self" (2011:163). When a child realizes what it means to be a part of the minority, they also realize that it will be a struggle to swim over the waves of **stereotypes.**

Though many of the kids around me did seem to project the typical stereotypes given to Hispanics, I knew that the stereotype did not apply to every Hispanic in the world, but it seemed impossible to escape the label. One year, when I was in fifth grade, my family moved to a part of the city that was considered 'upscale,' and most of our neighbors were Caucasian. Only months had passed before we started receiving accusations for petty crimes that would occur throughout the neighborhood. Broken windows, missing street signs, a scratched fence—our door was usually the first to be knocked on. To be blamed for something one did not do because of stereotypes is not new for any member of the minority.

Robert Duran wrote the article "Legitimated Oppression" about observations he made after studying police interaction between Mexican American youth and the police in Denver, Colorado and Ogden, Utah. Duran's research and observations showed that even youth that were not members of gangs were harassed and verbally abused by police officers that suspected them of criminal activity because they had friends that were involved in a gang. In an interview Duran conducted, a police observer said, "It seems that being a Chicano youth for the Denver Gang Unity is reasonable suspicion of criminal activity" (2009: 302). The suggestion here is that the police in Denver were guilty of ***racial profiling,*** a terrible but all too common offense. Henry Mubiru, another UMass Boston student, also experienced the like, simply because of the color of his skin. In his article, "The Snail's Pace of Racial Progress in America," he writes, "I can't recall the number of times I underwent **racial profiling** by the police because I looked foreign and my immigration status was highly questionable" (2008: 106).

As a young child, I also associated being Hispanic with being poor. One of the themes in the film, *Billy Elliot* (2000), is not

allowing yourself to be held back by limitations relating to social labels. Billy Elliot is a young boy who tries to pursue his passion for dance while his family falls apart during the 1984 coal-mine strike in the UK. Despite his father's lack of support and their family's social status, Billy pursues dancing with such vigor that, by the end, his family finally supports him. Like Billy, I did not want my parents' social status to hinder me like it had done so for many of the families I'd grown up around. In the article "Accepting Myself," former UMass Boston student Sheerin Hosseini writes, "Perhaps the most important thing we have to be aware of in our lives is that our society does influence us at all levels even when we do not realize it" (2006: 42). I understood, even as a child, that I would be affected by my environment, influenced by the race and culture I was brought up in. However, I did not see it as a good thing, and I felt the need to set very high standards for myself so that I could break from the social and ethnic constraints that I felt would be the biggest obstacles in my life.

It was when I entered elementary school that I saw the first glimpse of success, and it was in the form of a letter grade. Immediately, grades represented something bigger than they actually were; they became **symbols.** Kent Sandstrom discusses symbols in the article, "Symbols and the Creation of Reality," and asks the reader to think of abstract concepts such as justice and love. He then states that these concepts "do not actually exist 'in nature' or have a material reality. But most of us tend to respond to them as if they are representatives of essential truths about the world that should guide our actions" (Sandstrom 2011: 18). That is exactly what I did. I began to see them as representatives. A person with an 'A' was smart, intelligent, beautiful even, and would, with no doubt, succeed in life. 'B's indicated that a person was on their way to being smart, intelligent, beautiful, and successful. I was terri-

fied of 'C's. In my eyes, a person with a 'C' was mediocre, average, and I would cry when I received them. D's and F's were simply failures, and failing was not an option for me.

I pushed myself to do well in school, to guarantee A's in every class. When I succeeded in receiving all honors in every class, I pushed myself to go above and beyond my goal. If an assignment entailed writing two book reports, I would write three or four. Instead of writing a four-page essay, I would write a five or six page essay. Teachers recommended putting me in one or two honors classes; I begged to be entered in all honors classes. I pushed teachers to challenge me, even when it would do nothing for my grade.

Entering middle school, I was at the top of my class. I was more mature and focused than many of the kids my age. I could see the world more clearly. I knew that it was a competitive world, and I wanted nothing more than to prove that I could keep up. It was like standing at the center of Times Square and watching the thousands of people rush about, always busy but never seeming to have anything to do. I wanted to be like them—always doing something, constantly in motion. I adopted the idea that faster is better; in order to be ahead I would have to not only excel, but excel quickly. Steven Gottschalk referred to this idea as **"speed logic"** in the article, "Speed Culture" (2011:30), devoted to the exploration of how the culture we live in glorifies and expects speed in processing everything.

I found myself volunteering more, participating in extra curricular activities, attending more dance classes, and following a strict exercise regime. My parents were proud of me because of my achievements, but they also warned me to enjoy life because you only get to live once. I took that the wrong way. Instead, I lived as if I were in a race and no matter how many achievements I had, I always felt like I was

losing. Thus, the idea of being ahead and on top was no longer a mindset; it became my way of life. Gottschalk, however, highlights the problem with speed logic. "When pure speed becomes an essential virtue, a necessity, and a resource we increasingly feel entitled to, the normal pace of everyday interaction soon becomes frustratingly slow and intolerable" (1999:36). That is an issue that plagues society as a whole; speed logic is not necessary or realistic, but once we've adopted it, the things that are realistic and necessary suddenly become insignificant.

When I look back at my childhood, school is the very first thing that I remember. The next things that I remember are the hobbies that I took up in order to better discipline myself, like reading and exercising. I even tried to skip grades, but my parents were worried that the bullying situation would get worse if I were in a grade with older kids. Finally, they placed me into a private school with teachers who promised to challenge me. They were right; the work was more difficult. I worked faster and harder than ever, punishing myself by locking myself in a room to read and study whenever I received anything lower than a B.

An interesting fact brought up in the PBS documentary, *Running Out of Time* (1994), is that though the Japanese work longer and harder than Americans, American productivity (in goods) is higher than Japanese productivity. The same began to occur in my life. No matter how hard I worked, I always felt like I fell short. Exactly *what* I fell short of, I still do not know. In "Dissolution of the Self," Kenneth J. Gergen, writes, "There is also the seeping of self-doubt into every day consciousness, a subtle feeling of inadequacy that smothers one's activities with an uneasy sense of impending emptiness" (1991: 186). Every overachiever has the frequent, familiar insecurity and that is that no matter what they do, it is never enough. Former UMass

Boston student Nicole Jones described the feeling in her article, titled "*4.0: Self-Doubt, the Fear of Failure, and the Power of Symbols*": "Much like the subjective overachiever, I began to push myself, spending extra time trying to prove that I was worth something" (147). I was never satisfied, never fulfilled, no matter how many A's there were on my report card, or how many times my parents rewarded me. I always found something to criticize, something to obsess over.

I was very careful, however, not to show how I felt. When I was in my first year of high school, one of my younger brothers began to see a therapist regularly for anger issues. They offered their services to me, as they did for all of us, but I adamantly refused. At that point, I was very careful not to tell anyone about how I felt. I knew that my parents would only tell me to stop putting so much pressure on myself, but that is easier said than done. It was even more difficult in high school, because I did not always see A's on my report cards. I grew increasingly frustrated with myself. Nonetheless, I wore the biggest smile that I could and presented myself as an overall happy, carefree person. I pretended to look and act happy in the hopes that it would change how I actually felt inside. However, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't hide from it; I felt **ashamed**.

According to Daniel Martin, as stated in his article, "The Organizational Management of Shame," women are "more susceptible to body shame, [while] for men the emotion is associated with failure to live up to culturally prescribed norms of masculinity" (2011: 79). While women struggle with body image and men with being masculine, I struggled with maintaining the image of an easy going, relaxed, 'naturally and effortlessly intelligent' person. I never attributed my academic success to studying or paying attention in class. I never wanted anyone to know that it was not

easy for me.

I tried not to focus on how hard I was on myself because the more I thought about it, the harder on myself I became. However, it became increasingly difficult not to. As James W. Pennebaker wrote in *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, "Unwanted thoughts can dominate our lives" (1990: 69). When I realized that it would be impossible, I tried to manage my shame by setting lower standards and tricking myself into thinking that I was doing better. For example, I pulled out of some honors classes and took more electives instead. I saw more A's, which temporarily helped me feel better about myself.

Halfway into my high school career, however, my shame began to physically manifest itself. I suddenly became very ill and was in and out of the hospital for months at a time due to internal bleeding. The doctors ran tests and I underwent four colonoscopies and many different treatments, but they could not explain what was wrong or why I was bleeding. I spent most of my junior and senior years of high school outside of school. Though missing so many months of school made it difficult to keep my grades up, I found comfort in it. I preferred to be looked upon as weak because of an unknown illness than incompetent. When I graduated from high school, I took a year off of school and the symptoms of the mysterious illness almost instantly disappeared.

An interesting realization that I recently made was that my parents divorced when I was fifteen years old. They claim their problems began when I was entering sixth grade. I do not, however, recall a single argument between them or any sign that something was amiss. Yet I have friends who've claimed that when we were in elementary school, I used to make random comments about my parents' strange behavior toward each other. There is a gap, then, between when I entered sixth grade and when they divorced. These years were when I pushed myself hardest, in and outside of school. My greatest accomplishments were completed within those years. Though I was unbelievably stressed and always feeling "stretched thin" during those years, I took comfort in the ritual of overwork. I can see now that it really kept me focused despite the family struggle. To this day, doctors do not know what caused the bleeding but looking back now, I can see how it was related to the internal conflict I was struggling with. In the second chapter of *Opening Up*, Pennebaker remarks, "Not talking with friends or family members about major life stressors has been linked to recurrent unwanted thoughts, higher levels of anxiety and depression, insomnia, and a variety of health problems" (1991: 25). By refusing to open up about the internal struggle I was dealing with, I was only making it worse.

Following **routines** is a defense mechanism well-known to society. In the article "Protecting the Routine from Chaos," Daniel Chambliss highlights the methods nurses use to protect their 'world' from chaos. One of those methods is following 'routinization rituals.' One may use routines, Chambriss states, "more and more compulsively, falling back on the old forms to reconvince oneself that order is still present" (2011: 290). School work, homework, dance rehearsal, church activities—I took comfort in the routine that had become my daily life. Looking back, I can see how I had been able to block off any notion of divorce by pushing myself harder in and out of school, but it could only have been subconsciously because their divorce really caught me off guard.

I've heard of this strange phenomenon in psychology classes that I've taken, but I've never believed it to be so true. It is amazing how far one can go to avoid an idea or a fear. Denial is a common theme in today's society, however, especially

common in overachievers. It is the case for Will Hunting, actually an underachiever, in the film *Good Will Hunting* (1997). He could not confront the pain and guilt that was pent up inside of him for so long, and because of it, he could not maintain a steady job or relationship, or be intimate. It was not until he confronted the truth that he was finally able to deal with it and be a better man. He had been able to do so with the help from the therapist that he had been ordered to see.

The film, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1999) shares a similar theme. Mitch Albom had to confront the challenges he was facing in his own life, but was unable to do so until he witnessed Morrie Schwartz, his dying mentor, overcome the greatest challenge of all: accepting that he was going to die. In both films, the main characters undergo processes that include opening up before they are able to realize just what kind of life they were living. In essence, opening up saved them. Unfortunately, hitting a brick wall was what 'saved' me. Though becoming an overachiever was not something I consciously became, as a child, I knew that there was something wrong with me. Even as a young adult, I still am hesitant to open up about the struggles that I go through, especially when I need the help.

In *Opening Up*, Pennebaker states, "In society's eyes, inhibition is a socially desirable trait… The problem is that overly inhibited individuals thrive on predictability in an often unpredictable world" (1990: 144). Being inhibited, like I was, can be a problem when one's inhibition only works in a predictable world. In other words, it is much easier to remain quiet about issues you're facing when there is nothing pressuring you to open up. However, opening up is the best thing a person can do for their physical and mental health. Some people may not agree that being inhibited is such a bad thing, and it isn't always. Pennebaker does say, however, "inhibition is primarily a problem if people have to

exert energy to keep their minds, emotions, and behaviors under control" (1990: 149).

The truth is that it takes more energy to keep everything inside than it does to let it all out. Opening up about your struggles and conflicts is liberating; unfortunately, I had to learn that the hard way. Part of my fear of opening up was the fear of showing weakness. Showing weakness or helplessness is a struggle for everyone. Nobody wants to feel incompetent. Instead, we continue marching toward our goals, pushing ourselves to continue regardless of whatever situations we are going through. Chambliss, in "Protecting the Routine from Chaos," observed how the nurses in the hospital would press on with their work, blocking out interferences and distractions, in order to maintain their roles when routine fails them and everything falls apart (2011: 292). That is the way of humanity, constantly pushing forward, but it is important to remember that the wounded soldier cannot get very far if the wounds aren't treated.

After a year's break from school, I enrolled at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Transitioning has been very difficult. Though I still am very hard on myself about doing well in school, I've learned from my mistakes. I no longer set impossible goals, nor do I take on too many responsibilities at once. I am not as harsh on myself when I make mistakes, and I set priorities so that I can work at a good pace. I have learned to embrace who I am—a bright, young adult who is Hispanic, and I have learned not to be afraid of being labeled. Herbert Blumer, in his essay, "Society in Action" (2011) argues that our society's structure is not predetermined. Nothing is set in stone. I have often looked at my problems as if they were unchangeable, but it wasn't until I realized that it is up to me to change it, that I finally could.

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