

“No Fats, Femmes, or Asians”

Abstract: A frequent caveat in online dating profiles – “No fats, femmes, or Asians” – caused an LGBT activist to complain about the bias against Asians in the American gay community, which he called “racial looksism”. In response, he was asked that, if he himself would not date a fat person, why he should find others not dating Asians so upsetting. This response embodies a popular attitude that personal preferences or tastes are simply personal matters – they are not subject to moral evaluation. In this paper, I argue, against this popular attitude, that a personal preference like racial looksism is indeed wrong. A preference like racial looksism is wrong because it is an overgeneralization that disrespects individuality by treating people as exchangeable tokens of one type, and such disrespect denies its objects appreciation that their dignity entitles them to. As it turns out, there is on my account a relevant moral difference between racial looksism and simple looksism.

1. Introduction

In a recent article on a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community website, LGBT activist Jimmy Nguyen complained about a frequent caveat in online dating profiles – “No Fats, Femmes, or Asians.” (2011) Mr. Nguyen was frustrated at the bias against Asians in the American gay community. Although avoiding the accusation of racism, he channeled his frustration by calling it *racial looksism*.¹ The article sparked interesting response. One commentator asked, “Mr. Nguyen, would you date a fat man?” The point is elegantly made: if *simple looksism* is acceptable, what’s wrong with racial looksism?

This exchange highlights something perplexing about our attitudes toward

¹ He wrote: “Gay men are not necessarily racist; instead, we are ‘look[s]ist’, perhaps even more so than our straight counterparts. And the idealized vision of gay Adonis in the United States is white Asians seem relegated to the bottom of the attractiveness spectrum This is racial look[s]ism.”

discrimination. We object to certain forms of discrimination, yet at the same time take for granted some other forms. What might ground our discriminative treatment of discrimination? Is there any relevant difference between racial looksism and simple looksism?

These are interesting philosophical questions. However, the primary goal of this paper is not to differentiate between forms of discrimination. What's presumed in the commentator's response is a popular attitude: personal preferences or tastes are not objects of moral assessment – they are simply personal affairs. As the idiom says, "There is no accounting for taste." Thus, personal preferences, such as whom to date, whose birthday party to attend, whom to invite to a bar or restaurant, or whom to greet warmly in one's neighborhood, are usually not considered moral issues. The primary goal of this paper is to argue against this popular attitude. I argue that some personal preferences are moral issues and a preference like racial looksism is morally wrong. It is wrong because it is an overgeneralization that disrespects individuality by treating people as exchangeable tokens of one type, and such disrespect denies some of its objects appreciation that their dignity entitles them to. As it turns out, there is indeed, on my account, a relevant moral difference between racial looksism and simple looksism.

Defining complex social phenomena is often very difficult; yet, some clarification of the key concepts is necessary. I understand simple looksism as a preference that finds certain people aesthetically unappealing and thus sexually unattractive due to

their having certain physical appearance.² Racial looksism, as stated in the caveat “No Fats, Femmes, or Asians”, is a preference that finds certain people aesthetically unappealing and thus sexually unattractive due to their belonging to a certain race. However, despite the appearance that racial looksism picks on racial identity *per se*, what actually motivates this race-qua-race racial looksism is a weaker, race-qua-looks racial looksism, which discriminates against a certain race on the basis of some physical appearance typically associated with that race, such as dark skin color or epicanthic fold. In reality, a racial looksist views a certain racial group as unattractive often not by virtue of their racial identity *per se*, but by virtue of the looks that are believed to be characteristic of their race.

It is also worth pointing out that racial looksism can be understood as a preference or a personal policy. A safer thesis would treat racial looksism as a personal policy – something clearly subject to our voluntary control. However, for reasons that will become clear later, I will argue for a bolder thesis – racial looksism is wrong, even as a personal preference. But I do want to make one note about a preference like this. A preference like racial looksism is an *exclusionary* preference – that is, a preference that excludes some people from a certain qualification (e.g. being aesthetically and sexually attractive), or a preference that ranks these people so low in that regard that they are virtually unqualified. It is exclusionary preference that I find

² Sexual appeal can be affected by things other than appearance. For simplicity and because of the context in which the issue of racial looksism is raised, this paper focuses on appearance-based reason for sexual appeal.

objectionable, not just any kind of preference.³

2. A Preliminary Argument

Before arguing for why a personal preference like racial looksism is morally wrong, I should address a preliminary issue first. It may be argued that even if preferences like racial looksism are wrong, we cannot help whom we are attracted to, and since preferences, unlike decisions or choices, are not under our control, the possession of them is not subject to moral appraisal.

This argument makes two problematic assumptions. First, it assumes that we are subject to moral appraisal only for things over which we have control. But this assumption has been called to question by many philosophers.⁴ Second, and more importantly, it assumes that all preferences are beyond our control. It is well established that some preferences or biases⁵ can be changed by various conditioning, including social conditioning (Blair et al. 2001; Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001; Rudman et al. 2001). For example, people came to like a social group that they

³ One can further ask whether non-exclusionary preferences can also be questioned. I will consider two such cases (the last two objections) in Section 5.

⁴ A number of philosophers have argued that we can be morally responsible for behaviors over which we lack voluntary control. See, for example, Adams (1985), McKenna (2004), Sher (2006), and Smith (2008).

⁵ A quick clarification on terminology. I treat bias as a certain kind of preference, preference that ultimately lacks an appropriate justification. I further understand prejudice as a biased judgment.

previously disliked, after lengthy exposure to positive things about that group (Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001). People came to accept homosexuals by allowing homosexuals into their personal lives. Recent psychological research has shown that even the degree of one's sexual arousal can be altered by conditioning (Laan and Janssen 2007; Pfaus 2007). For example, some studies in social psychology show that repeated exposure to pornography can significantly reduce viewers' satisfaction with their intimate partners' affection, physical appearance, and so on (Zillmann and Bryant 1988). By choosing to indulge in pornography-viewing, these viewers put themselves in a position to form preferences that find their intimate partners less appealing. Such examples show that our preferences are not necessarily beyond our control and we often have a choice either to endorse and cultivate them or to resist and fight them.

The reason why we find members of a certain racial group unattractive is often a combination of lack of positive portraits of them in society and our own failure to allow them into our personal lives as equals. In such cases, we have a choice either to continue endorsing, or even cultivating, our preferences against that group, or to make an effort to invite them into our personal lives and put ourselves in a position to discover their attractive traits. If one chooses to keep excluding that group from one's personal life, such as proudly endorsing an exclusionary preference against them in one's public profiles, then his possession of the relevant preference is not beyond his control and thus can be subject to moral appraisal.⁶

⁶ Holroyd (2012) makes a similar point. Holroyd argues that individuals who are not

Now that I have explained why the possession of preferences like racial looksism can be subject to moral appraisal, it is time to return to our main question: Are such preferences morally wrong?

3. Racial Looksism as Overgeneralization

The main problem with racial looksism is that it is an overgeneralization. An overgeneralization involves viewing, based on the fact that some people who share a common trait P have X , any individual with P as having X , while (1) in this process whether that individual actually has X is disregarded, and (2) an individual's having P is actually not directly contributive to his or her having X .

It is true that there is some statistical association between race and type of physical appearance; but it is also true that there is a great degree of variance within each race in terms of individual physical appearance. Take skin color as an example. Skin color is sometimes thought to be strictly correlated with race, but this race-to-skin-color identity has been seriously challenged by scientists, as well as by recent social development. For example, according to anthropologist Alan H. Goodman and his colleagues, "all skin colors, whether dark or light, are due not to the static concept of race but to continual shifting adaptation of life under sun." (Goodman et al. 2012, 103) Individuals in the same racial group can vary significantly

responsible for being influenced by implicit bias can nevertheless meet sufficient conditions for responsibility, when they have "long range control" for taking actions to mitigate implicit biases or when their "reflective level beliefs and attitudes manifest implicit biases".

in terms of skin color. East Africans and West Africans can have quite different skin colors; the same is true for Northern and Southern Europeans, Northern and Southern Chinese, and so on. Genetic mixture through marriage has also rapidly outdated the idea of race-to-skin-color identity. Nowadays, many self-identified black Americans have a skin color lighter than a Caucasian American. The very fact that they identify themselves as blacks shows that race is not just a synonym for skin color, but used in a way that reflects various other factors – for example, cultural inheritance. Thus, to identify race with a specific skin color is both scientifically and sociologically ungrounded – it ignores a significant degree of variance.

Furthermore, two individuals of distinct races can even share great similarities in their physical appearance: similar facial configuration, similar body-shape, etc. For example, epicanthic fold, which is usually thought to be a characteristic trait of people from central and eastern Asia, can also be found in Native Americans and some Europeans (e.g. Scandinavians and Poles). It is not rare for people who frequently travel around the world to find similar faces in different races.

Thus, using race as the ground for judging individual physical appearance is an overgeneralization – it disregards how one individual actually looks, and one's racial identity is not directly contributive to one's having a particular physical appearance because of the variance within a race. Some people may find certain physical appearance, such as dark skin or epicanthic fold, aesthetic unappealing; let's grant that they are entitled to such personal opinions or attitudes. But their exclusion of every member of a racial group from being considered as aesthetically attractive by virtue of

some alleged physical racial characteristics that they consider aesthetically unappealing is unwarranted. Race *as such* does not tell how an individual member of that race looks.

Many racist, sexist and other discriminatory attitudes are based on precisely such overgeneralization. Social psychologist Claude M. Steele described a frustrating experience of a young African-American student at the University of Chicago in his recent best-selling book – *Whistling Vivaldi*. When this young man walked down the streets of Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood, he had to constantly suffer the humiliation of being looked at with fear and being avoided in the street, because of his skin color (2011, 6). Recently, instances of uncivilized behaviors of some mainland Chinese tourists agitated some Hong Kong residents and caused them to initiate anti-mainland protests and to label all tourists from mainland China derogatively as “locusts” (Mullany 2014). Such reaction only accelerated the tension between Hong Kong and mainland China, as many mainland Chinese felt unfairly criticized and demeaned.⁷

Such overgeneralization, especially when involving disadvantageous treatment, can be offensive. It is offensive first because it treats people as exchangeable tokens of a type and thus disregards their individuality. Everybody deserves to be treated

⁷ Sexism as an overgeneralization is also recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court. In the 1996 *U.S. vs Virginia* case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the male-only admission policy of Virginia Military Institute on the basis that such a policy is an “overbroad generalization” and that a public policy “must not rely on overbroad generalizations about the different talents, capacities, or preferences of males and females”.

based on what kind of person he or she is, not based on what kind of person other people are. It is offensive also because it unfairly denies these people respect that their individual qualities make appropriate.

Racial looksism is an overgeneralization – it differentiates on the basis of a certain physical trait said to be characteristic of one’s race, regardless of whether it is true of a given individual. In contrast, when someone finds people of certain physical appearance (such as excessive obesity) aesthetically unappealing, this preference or opinion takes into account their relevant individual quality. Therefore, there is a relevant difference between racial lookism and simple looksism. And Mr. Nguyen has a valid point in raising concerns about racial looksism – such an exclusionary preference disregards people’s individuality and, in doing so, it denies them appreciation that their individual qualities make appropriate.

However, being offensive and disrespectful does not necessarily make one thing morally wrong. One important gap that needs to be bridged is the often-noted dichotomy between the public realm and the private realm. Preferences such as how attractive I find another person and whom I like to invite to a bar are usually considered personal affairs. Unlike discrimination in employment or admission, such preferences do not seem to infringe anybody’s rights or deprive anybody of access to important public resources. It may be offensive and hurtful to others that I do not find them attractive, but such preferences or opinions are totally within my own rights to hold. Whether or not I find others aesthetically appealing is, like whether or not I like a certain type of music, simply a matter of personal taste, not an issue of moral

concern. So one may argue.

Intuitive as it sounds, this argument should be rejected. To see why, it is helpful to first borrow some terminology from the philosophical discussion on dignity and respect.⁸ The dignity of a person, as Kant tells us, is that “by which” one “exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings” and because of which one “can ... value himself on a footing of equality with them.” (1996, 6:435, original emphasis) Dignity grants every person a fundamental equal moral status. To treat anyone as being fundamentally inferior to others is to disrespect that person’s dignity and thus to violate the duty of equal respect.

Stephen Darwall (1977) further distinguishes between two kinds of respect: *recognition respect* and *appraisal respect*. Recognition respect, Darwall tells us, is the kind of respect that “consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object in deliberating about what to do” (1977, 38). An important subset of recognition respect is *moral recognition respect* – to respect something in this way is to “regard it as requiring restrictions on the moral acceptability of actions connected with it.” (40) Since people are fundamentally equal, they are entitled to equal moral recognition respect – that is, there is a moral requirement that others’ fundamental equal moral status be taken seriously and weighed appropriately in our deliberation about our action.

⁸ Some theorists believe that discrimination like racism and sexism in employment or admission is wrong because it fails to give people equal respect. For respect-based theories, see, for example, Ely (1980), Dworkin (1985), Hellman (2008), and Shin (2009).

In contrast, appraisal respect is the kind of respect that “consists in an attitude of positive appraisal” of someone for his or her excellence either “as a person” (e.g. being honest) or “as engaged in some particular pursuit” (e.g. being a skilled basketball player) (38). This kind of respect is not universally owed. Rather, it is given on the basis of a person’s having certain relevant excellence, and, according to Darwall, the relevant excellence must ultimately arise from one’s moral character (38-39).

Because Darwall limits appraisal respect to only the kind of respect that ultimately arises from appraisal of one’s moral character, I think we can add a third category – *appreciation respect*. This third type of respect arises from appreciation for non-moral-character-based excellence, such as natural beauty, sheer intelligence, and athletic gift. In many ways, appreciation respect resembles appraisal respect: it consists in a positive attitude toward someone (in this case, appreciation), it is not owed to everybody, and it should be given according to the object’s relevant excellence.⁹

Based on our moral duty to give equal moral recognition respect to every person, one may be tempted to make the following argument against a preference like racial looksism: it denies some people appreciation that their individual qualities make appropriate, and thus violates the duty of equal respect. The problem with this

⁹ They differ in that, while appraisal respect responds to excellence typically resulting from one’s moral characters, appreciation respect responds to excellence that is usually not a result of one’s moral characters.

inference is that, unlike moral recognition respect, appraisal and appreciation respects are not owed to everyone and not supposed to be morally constraining. For example, Darwall makes it clear that appraisal respect “does not essentially involve any conception of how one’s behavior toward that person is appropriately restricted.” (1977, 41) This remark echoes the aforementioned argument: how I appreciate or value other people seems to be my personal affair; I do not violate a moral duty if I fail to give someone appraisal or appreciation appropriate to his or her relevant individual quality.

I think accepting the moral constraints arising from equal moral recognition respect does entail accepting certain moral constraints on appraisal and appreciation respects. Here is my argument.

4. From Recognition Respect to Appraisal and Appreciation Respects

My argument starts with the premise that, without a reasonable justification, it is wrong to discriminate on the basis of race or sex in employment and admission. Some minimum form of equality of opportunity to work and to become educated needs to be honored and protected – even if that means restricting people’s freedom to handle their own resources (e.g. a private business owner’s freedom to decide whom to hire or a private school’s freedom to decide whom to admit). If one does not accept this starting point, the rest of the argument will not be relevant.

Second, the reason why we put such emphasis on equality of opportunity in employment and admission could be due to either a deontological or a

consequentialist consideration (Arneson 2002; Sect. 6). To disadvantage, without any good reason, people of a certain race or sex in their pursuit of work or education is wrong either because it violates the deontological requirement of equal treatment, or because it injures their basic wellbeing by limiting these important opportunities. Theorists still debate over which account best explains the wrongfulness of discrimination (Altman 2011). I believe these accounts are two sides of the same coin. At bottom is the idea that work and education are essential to wellbeing: most people need to work to satisfy their basic material needs and to receive education to satisfy their basic spiritual needs; and every person's pursuit of a life of basic wellbeing needs to be properly honored. We emphasize equality of opportunity in employment and admission ultimately because we ought to treat people as equally deserving of a life of basic wellbeing.

Admittedly, to treat people as equally deserving of a life of basic wellbeing does not mean to have absolute equality of opportunity when it comes to work and education. But it should mean at least that our society be structured in such a way that it will prevent blatant disrespect of people's fundamental equality. In the case of employment and education, it means, in part, to morally prohibit discrimination on the basis of race or sex – even if this prohibition would limit some people's freedom to use their personal resources.

If this is right, then a similar moral prohibition should also exist for personal relationships. Our wellbeing does not just mean satisfaction of basic material and spiritual needs, it also means satisfaction of basic *relational needs*, such as the need

for love, friendship, and social esteem. Flourishing personal relationships – loving relationship, meaningful friendship, proper social esteem, and so on – are also important components of wellbeing. To many of us, these personal relationships may be even more important than work or education.

Thus, our pursuit of a life of basic wellbeing must include, among other things, the pursuit of these flourishing personal relationships. But these relationships require, as a pre-condition, certain attitudes of positive appraisal or appreciation, such as trust, gratitude, approval, and admiration. For example, romantic love requires, in the first place, an attitude of positive appraisal and appreciation of the beloved person for his or her moral and non-moral excellence. Therefore, to have flourishing personal relationships requires, in the first place, to be properly considered for these appraisal and appreciation respects.

Consequently, if respecting people as equally deserving of a life of basic wellbeing requires that we honor and protect some minimum form of equality of opportunity to work and to become educated, it should also require that we honor and protect some minimum form of proper consideration for appraisal and appreciation respects. The alleged gap between the public and the private realm may give us reason for lowering the bar of the minimum-level honoring and protection when we move from the public realm to the private realm, but I find it quite implausible that this gap should justify a complete annihilation of any need for proper honoring and protection when it comes to opportunity to satisfy basic relational needs.

What then should this minimum form of proper consideration for appraisal and

appreciation respects consist of? Should it include a requirement that every person be given the same consideration, just like in employment and admission? But when employers consider whom to hire or admission officers consider whom to admit, they need only to consider those who have applied. When we consider potential candidates for appraisal or appreciation respect, there isn't exactly a pool of "applicants"; rather, the potential candidates include anyone whom we have encountered one way or another in our lives. It would be too demanding to ask us to give every such person the same consideration.

I shall not attempt a full account of duty to proper consideration for appraisal and appreciation respects in this paper. All I want to emphasize is that there are ways to honor and protect proper consideration for appraisal and appreciation respects without imposing unreasonable demands. In particular, the following two constraints strike me as quite reasonable.

First, when we are already considering someone for a certain personal relationship or some related appraisal or appreciation respect, it seems reasonable to require that we give that person a consideration that is fair. Second, it also seems reasonable to require that, among those whom we have encountered multiple times in our lives, we do not constantly deny some of them such consideration. For example, occasionally forgetting to invite people of a certain race to one's party need not indicate denial of equal respect. But if one constantly excludes people of that race from being considered as potential guests, he treats them as if they are less deserving of his friendship.

Therefore, if we accept the duty of equal moral recognition respect and believe that our basic wellbeing includes flourishing personal relationships, we should accept, at least, the following moral constraints on “what to do” when it comes to appraisal and appreciation respects: *we ought not to intentionally deny a fair consideration to anyone whom we are already considering for appraisal or appreciation respect, and we ought not to constantly deny such consideration to someone whom we have encountered multiple times in our lives.*

By fair consideration for appraisal or appreciation respect, I mean, first, a consideration based on a criterion that is equally applied to everyone. It is unfair to subject some people to a more demanding criterion while others are evaluated against a less demanding one.

Second, a fair consideration must be based on a criterion that has an appropriate justification. An appropriately justified criterion for appraisal or appreciation respect is one based on the object’s relevant excellence.¹⁰ Which excellence is relevant in a given context is usually determined by what kind of qualities is in fact directly contributive to the type of relationship at issue. For example, in the case of friendship, qualities such as honesty and compassion are directly contributive to good friendship. Thus, it is appropriate to value and trust an honest and compassionate friend more

¹⁰ Some theorists hold similar views. For instance, Alan Goldman (1979) and Sidney Hook (1995) argue that hiring decisions based on race, sex, religion and other social categories are wrong because such decisions should be based on who is best qualified for the post. Although Hook and Goldman focus on decisions in employment, such decisions inevitably involve assessment of appraisal and appreciation respects.

than a dishonest and indifferent friend. By contrast, it is usually unjustified to use height as the differentiating criterion in the case of friendship, for height is usually not directly contributive to good friendship.¹¹

In addition, I think we should add that the justification of the criterion must not itself imply denial of equal moral recognition respect. It may seem reasonable, for instance, not to make friends with people of a certain race if doing so would incur social shame upon oneself – there is a real contributing relation between not incurring social shame and suitability for friendship in this context. But accepting this justification would imply acquiescence to an existing practice that already denies people equal moral recognition respect – it is equivalent to admitting that it is indeed

¹¹ These contributing relations, such as character traits to suitability for friendship and basketball skills to value of a basketball player, are not something that we can simply ignore or alter at will; rather, they are what any rational person needs to take into account in the planning for and the pursuit of a good life. Thus, these contributing relations constitute the normative fabric of our interpersonal relationships. A rational person would not subscribe to a differentiating criterion in interpersonal relationship that is not grounded on real contributing relations, and would not use it as the basis for his or her expectations of and plans for a good life. This is why differential treatment based on such a criterion is unfair.

shameful to make friends with them.¹²

To sum up, if the duty of equal moral recognition respect requires that we honor and protect some minimum form of equality of opportunity to work and to become educated since satisfaction of one's basic material and spiritual needs is essential to a life of basic wellbeing, it should also require that we honor and protect some minimum form of proper consideration for appraisal and appreciation respects that are important to basic relational wellbeing. We fail to give a person that minimum form of proper consideration if we intentionally or constantly deny that person a fair consideration, a consideration based on a criterion which is applied to everyone and which picks out qualities that are directly contributive to the type of relationship at issue.

Therefore, accepting the moral constraints arising from equal moral recognition respect does entail accepting certain moral constraints on "what to do" when it comes to appraisal and appreciation respects. Consequently, the alleged gap between the

¹² There might be cases in which one decides not to make friends with members of another group not because he thinks it is shameful to make friends with them, but simply because he does not want to lose friends in his own group. How should I respond to such cases? One possible response is to insist that such an act does imply denial of equal moral recognition respect – acquiescence to one's fellow members' denial of equal respect is a form of denying equal respect. Another is to say that such an act does not imply denial of equal moral recognition respect and thus is not intrinsically wrong; but it can still be wrong because it injures members of the other group. I am not sure which response is better. However, offering a completely satisfactory answer to such cases is not essential to my main task. Thus, I will leave it as an unsettled issue in my account.

public and the private realm is not as big as it first appears. The same reason that moves us to oppose racial and sexual discrimination in the public realm should also move us to oppose a personal preference like racial looksism.

Racial looksism, as an overgeneralization, is based on a criterion¹³ that is not directly contributive to the having of a particular physical appearance and thus irrelevant to assessing one's aesthetic appeal. Such a preference, thus, constantly denies some people a fair consideration for appreciation respect and violates the duty of equal respect. This is why racial looksism is not just offensive and disrespectful, but also morally wrong.

By contrast, simple looksism usually does not involve employment of a proxy like race; it is based directly on individual physical appearance. It thus does not deny the objects a consideration for appreciation respect that is fair in the given context. Of course, people may have different opinions regarding the aesthetic attractiveness of a particular physical trait – some may find fat people sexually attractive for example. But when a person finds fat people unattractive because, in his personal view, excessive weight is an aesthetic turnoff, he has a prima facie justification – it seems reasonable to believe that body shape and proportionality are directly contributive to aesthetic appeal.

Hence, there is a relevant difference between racial looksism and simple looksism: racial looksism is based on something not directly contributive to aesthetic appeal and

¹³ The criterion need not be consciously or explicitly employed. A preference may differentiate at a subconscious level.

thus denies people a fair consideration; whereas simple looksism is based on something directly contributive to aesthetic appeal and thus does not deny people a fair consideration. On this very score, we have reason to morally object to the former, but not the latter.

One may object: “What if some people indeed find a certain race an aesthetic turnoff for them, would that give them a prima facie justification?” But the problem is that such race-qua-race racial looksism would imply already denial of fundamental equality. Such a preference treats a whole racial group as simply aesthetically inferior, regardless of how each individual actually looks. It manifests a demeaning attitude that denies people of that race their fundamental equality.¹⁴

Of course, our current aesthetic preference against certain physical appearance might turn out involving denial of equality as well, or it might ultimately be proven unjustified. For example, some people may find fat people unattractive because they, mistakenly, take excessive weight as a sign of laziness. If one can show that an aesthetic preference indeed involves denial of fundamental equality or a false contributing relation, then such a preference will also be objectionable.¹⁵ But until a

¹⁴ For the same reason, it would be wrong for one to prefer country music to rap music for the sole reason that rap music is a type of music that black people like. Disliking a type of music for purely race-related reasons is equivalent to saying that one race is simply aesthetically inferior and any music they like is thus inferior. Such a musical taste manifests a demeaning attitude toward people of that race, one that denies them their fundamental equality. Musical taste is not always “just a personal matter”; it can be a moral issue.

¹⁵ It is also possible to have a case in which, even if some types of obesity appear

sound argument to this effect is provided, simple looksism has at least a prima facie justification.

Finally, I should note that, even though I think some forms of simple looksism, as mere preferences, are morally acceptable, actually excluding people from relationships simply by virtue of their looks is usually not. To deny people friendship, for instance, simply because they are fat or thin is to ignore the traits relevant to friendship (such as moral characters) and thus to fail to give them a fair consideration.

5. Response to Objections

Let's consider some objections. First, one may find my focus on preferences objectionable. What seems to really matter for our wellbeing is how our interpersonal relationships actually turn out, not how our attractiveness is appreciated. One who does not find a certain group of people attractive can nevertheless develop a relationship with them. Therefore, our focus should not be preferences like racial looksism, but biases and prejudices in the actual dealing of relationship.

I have four responses. First, appreciation respect is an important part of our

aesthetically unattractive to an individual, not all types of obesity do. And if that individual excludes all fat people from being considered as attractive, he would also deny some of them a fair consideration. I agree that, in such cases, simple looksism is also wrong. However, in cases in which being fat is indeed an aesthetic turnoff to someone, that person does have an appropriate justification for this preference. This is in direct contrast with a race-qua-race racial looksism, which simply takes a whole race as unattractive and thus denies people of that race their fundamental equality and demeans them.

wellbeing. Imagine a female scholar who works in a male-dominated environment. Because of her sex, her intelligence is constantly underrated by her male colleagues. Even though she still enjoys her academic endeavor, it is easy to see how her sense of fulfillment can be greatly diminished by the lack of due appreciation from her peers.

Second, how we view others in their intellectual and aesthetic value is connected to how we value them as persons at a deeper level. A person who, for purely prudential reasons, discriminates against people of another race in relationship may nevertheless view them as fundamentally equal to him; but if a person views a whole race simply as aesthetically or intellectually inferior, chances are this person has a more fundamental disbelief in equality.

Third, the discrimination that one faces in actual relationships may be rooted in just those biases at the appreciation level. The reason why an employer discriminates against an Asian candidate of equal qualification may be precisely that he views Asians as less enjoyable people to invite to a bar or to a movie. Thus, unless biases at the appreciation level are properly addressed, discrimination in actual relationships is likely to persist. Focusing merely on discrimination in actual relationships is like treating the symptom without treating the disease.

Lastly, the reason why we are biased against a certain social group is often that we have failed to allow them into our personal lives. So, one recipe for treating such biases is to make an effort to invite members of that group into our personal lives, to interact with them, and to recognize the attractive traits in them.¹⁶ Since preferences

¹⁶ In a review of 203 studies from 25 countries, involving 90,000 participants, Thomas

like racial looksism are precisely the kind of things that would prevent us from making such an effort, this is why it is especially important to address them. These are the reasons why I think it is important to bring to light a preference like racial looksism and to articulate unequivocally why it is morally objectionable.

Another objection may be directed at my focus on overgeneralization. It is well recognized that statistical discrimination, discrimination based on statistical evidence that a certain social group differ from other groups in some particular aspect, are not per se wrong (Alexander 1992; Lippert-Rasmussen 2007). For example, Lippert-Rasmussen (2007) points out that certain kinds of racial profiling, such as giving a closer scrutiny at the airport security checkpoint to people from regions where terrorism-risk is statistically much higher, can be justified. One may argue that this kind of racial profiling is also an overgeneralization: it is certainly not the case that every person from those regions is a terrorist, and thus being a resident of those regions is not directly contributive to being a terrorist. If racial looksism is morally wrong because it is an overgeneralization that denies its objects some important form of respect, wouldn't this be true for other kinds of statistical discrimination as well?

One important difference is that racial looksism is exclusionary. Statistical discrimination such as closer security scrutiny at the airport does not completely exclude people coming from high-risk regions from being considered for admission; rather, it takes into account relevant individual background in the consideration for

Pettigrew and Linda Tropp (2000) discovered that, 94% of the time, biases and prejudices diminished as intergroup contact increased.

admission. A total exclusion is much harder to justify than merely giving closer scrutiny to a certain group. Imagine that the airport security staff decides, based on the statistical fact that terrorism-risk in certain regions is high, to automatically deny entrance to every passenger coming from those regions, regardless of that person's actual background. No reasonable person would find such a decision acceptable. It is unacceptable precisely because it denies people from those regions a fair consideration.

Another type of statistical discrimination that is justified does involve total exclusion. Universities often, in their admission process, automatically turn down applicants whose test scores are below a certain threshold. The underlying rationale is usually that, statistically, students who score below a certain threshold are less likely to thrive academically. But, of course, not every student thus excluded would be doomed to fail in the university. Thus, if racial looksism is wrong, won't such practice be wrong too?

An important difference between the two is that the skills assessed by those academic tests are directly contributive to academic performance (or so we tend to believe), and thus using an applicant's individual scores as the differentiating criterion does offer the applicant a consideration based on his or her relevant individual qualities. By contrast, racial looksism disregards the relevant individual qualities. This is why statistical discrimination based on individual test scores is justified, but racial looksism is not. Admittedly, the academic tests currently relied on by university admission offices do not necessarily accurately measure every relevant aspect of

academic potential. But this just means that we need to improve these tests and make them as fair and accurate as possible, for the very reason I am stressing.

Here is another case worth considering. Lippert-Rasmussen mentioned that it is often “permissible to not hire an alcoholic as a pilot given statistical information that most alcoholics from time to time fail to keep sober on the job” (2007, 395). One may argue that not all alcoholics have problems keeping sober on the job, and thus, if my reasoning is right, excluding them from being considered for a pilot job merely on the basis of the statistical fact that most alcoholics have such problems will also be wrong.

My response is that if the underlying rationale for such a hiring policy is based on what most alcoholics are like, regardless of whether a given individual is able to remain sober on the job, then this policy is indeed questionable. However, the rationale need not be based on some crude group statistic – i.e. statistic that looks superficially at how most individuals in a given group behave without attending to individual differences; it can be based on the fact that, for any individual alcoholic, it is more likely that he or she will turn up inebriated to work. In other words, addiction to alcohol can be something directly contributive to higher risk of intoxication at the individual level, and higher risk of intoxication is a relevant individual quality in the evaluation of whether a candidate is suitable for a pilot job. Exclusionary treatment based on crude group statistics often risks denial of a fair consideration to some members of that group; exclusionary treatment based on the relevant individual

tendency, on the other hand, is usually free of such risk.¹⁷

In reality, however, there is often no way to determine individual tendency in the absence of group statistic. It is unrealistic, for instance, to follow each applicant to find out how many times he or she turns up inebriated to work. Often, we have to rely on group statistic. This is certainly true. My point here is not to discredit all group statistics. Rather, my point is to call our attention to two different kinds of group statistic from which we may draw conclusion about individual tendency. One type of group statistic is grounded on some common feature that is directly contributive to one's having certain individual tendency relevant in the given consideration. For example, one may find out that all alcoholics share a type of physical mechanism that is similarly vulnerable to alcohol-caused impairment to self-control. Consequently, statistical information on how most alcoholics are affected by this addiction can provide useful information on how a given individual will be affected, which is relevant in the consideration for hiring a pilot. The other type, crude group statistic, is grounded on some common feature that is not directly contributive to one's having certain individual tendency relevant in the given consideration. For example, being a male black living in Chicago's Hyde Park area is not directly contributive to being violent and crime-prone, even if the criminal rate of black people in that area is high; and being a tourist from mainland China is not directly contributive to being a

¹⁷ One may object that individual tendency also does not guarantee that one will behave in the same way on every occasion, and thus also risks overgeneralization. But, in the case of pilot assessment, what's relevant is precisely the chances of intoxication on duty. This is why exclusionary treatment based on individual tendency in this case is not an overgeneralization.

walking disgrace in the streets of Hong Kong, even though a significant portion of those tourists do behave in an unpleasant way.

So, even though racial looksism and the hiring policy concerning alcoholics are both based on group statistics, the former ignores the relevant individual qualities but the latter need not. As we can see, not all statistical discriminations are wrong. A statistical discrimination is wrong only when the statistic fact about a group is used to deny a member of that group a consideration based on his or her relevant individual qualities.

Let's consider a third objection. Even if I refuse to develop a personal relationship with people of a certain race, they may still have plenty of opportunities to develop personal relationships with other people or with people of their own race. Thus, my refusal to be associated with them does not necessarily deprive them of their opportunity to have flourishing personal relationships.

But by the same reasoning, employers could also defend their discriminatory actions by arguing that "I have no personal obligation to treat you equally since your equal opportunity is already suitably protected by the society" or that "there are other employers out there and you still have plenty of opportunities to find a job in their places or in your own racial community." Injury to other people's wellbeing can be a reason why discrimination is wrong¹⁸; but there is also something intrinsically wrong

¹⁸ One popular view on why racism or sexism is wrong is the *injury-based view*, according to which, racial or sexual discrimination in employment or admission is wrong because it undermines the victims' equal opportunity to access various social resources or because it injures the victims' deliberative freedoms. For accounts of this kind, see Fiss (1976), Gardner

about a preference like racial looksism – it disregards the victims’ individuality and, by doing so, denies them a fair consideration.

The fourth objection is this: homosexuals are attracted only to people of the same sex and heterosexuals only to people of the opposite sex, but there are beautiful people in either sex, much like there are beautiful people in every race. If racial looksism is wrong because it is an overgeneralization, won’t sexual preference also be wrong for the same reason?

The difference between sexual preference and racial looksism is that sex as such is directly contributive to sexual appeal whereas race as such is not. It matters to sexual appeal how good looking one is, to which sex is indeed irrelevant; but what also matters to sexual appeal is, as a biological fact, one’s sexual characteristics. One’s sexual characteristics are directly contributive to one’s sexual appeal to a given person.¹⁹ Thus, there is an appropriate justification for discriminating on the basis of sex in the context of assessing sexual appeal. Unlike racial looksism, sexual preference usually does not deny people a consideration that is fair in the given

(1998), Pose (2000), Lippert-Rasmussen (2006), Moreau (2010), and Segall (2012).

¹⁹ For some people, such as bisexuals, sexual characteristics are less relevant to sexual appeal. If they, without any appropriate justification, exclude a certain sex from being considered as sexually attractive, I think there is also something objectionable. Likewise, if someone only likes men not because he is biologically attracted only to people with male sexual characteristics, but because he views femininity as inferior to masculinity, and female bodily traits inferior to male bodily traits, I think there is something wrong about such a sexual preference.

context.

Here is another objection. According to my account, racial looksism is wrong because race is an irrelevant factor in the given context and thus such a preference denies people a fair consideration. If this account is right, then there should be no difference between using an irrelevant factor like race as the differentiating criterion and using an irrelevant factor like, say, handedness as the differentiating criterion. But usually we don't find the latter as offensive.

I think the fundamental moral structure is identical in these two cases. Two factors make differential treatment based on race more offensive. First, certain races are historically associated with various negative stereotypes, most of which depict a certain race as servants, subordinates, or even animals. Thus, differential treatment motivated by such negative stereotyping often manifests a more grave disrespect of dignity. Second, as we mentioned earlier, the injury to its victims is also a reason why discrimination is wrong. Owing to those existing negative stereotypes, a race-based differential treatment is likely to invite the victims to think about those negative portraits of them and thus result in a much greater insult. By contrast, differential treatment based on handedness does not have such an unpleasant history and is not associated with many salient negative stereotypes. Consequently, differential treatment based on handedness often incurs less outrage and scrutiny.

The sixth objection goes like this. We often give louder applause to our family members, friends, and classmates for their achievement, even if their achievement is not greater than the achievement of a stranger. Does my theory also say that

preferences of this kind are morally wrong?

As I clarified earlier, what I find objectionable is exclusionary preferences like racial looksism, not all preferences in personal relationships. There are certainly legitimate moral grounds for differential treatment in personal relationships. For example, being a family member usually means deeper attachment to other family members' wellbeing, and thus it is natural for us to feel more excited and appreciative if they succeed. Therefore, as long as we give people a fair consideration and show them appraisal or appreciation respect appropriate to their relevant qualities, we can be justified, on grounds other than equal respect, in giving additional appreciation to certain people.

Let's consider one last objection. Suppose someone posts the following conditional caveat: "No Asians, unless having such and such physical features." This partially exclusionary preference does take into consideration relevant factors – i.e. certain physical features, and thus is not an overgeneralization. But we may feel that even this conditional caveat is wrong. So, one may object that my overgeneralization account of why racial looksism is wrong does not quite capture its wrongfulness.

My first response is that overgeneralization is one reason why an exclusionary preference like racial lookism is wrong; but I do not claim that it is the only ground for thinking it is wrong. For example, one can also argue that an expression like "No Asians, unless having such and such physical features" tends to change the power dynamics concerning races in the society and thus suppress certain racial groups.²⁰

²⁰ I would like to thank Ruth E. Groenhout for raising this point.

This could be another reason why such an expression is wrong. (Of course, on this ground, there will be no morally relevant difference between racial looksism and simple looksism.)

Does this show my account, which focuses on overgeneralization and equal respect and leaves out other moral considerations, is at least inadequate for explaining why racial looksism is wrong? Let us reflect more carefully on the intuition that a conditional caveat like “No Asians, unless having such and such physical features” is wrong. Is this intuition well-grounded? Depending on how we interpret it.

On one interpretation, the caveat can be taken as saying “Asians, by default, are unlikable, but my preference for certain physical appearance could still trump my general dislike for Asians.” The caveat so understood implies a demeaning, race-qua-race racial looksism – viewing a whole race as simply aesthetically inferior (at least by default). I have explained earlier, by appealing to the duty of equal respect, why this strong form of racial looksism is wrong. So, if this is why we find the conditional caveat wrong, my account can perfectly accommodate our intuition.

On another interpretation, the caveat can be taken as saying “Asians with such and such physical appearance are likable; Asians with such and such physical appearance are unlikable.” The caveat so understood will imply a straightforward simple looksism – it differentiates simply by means of physical appearance and the word “Asians” becomes less relevant and could be replaced by any other racial identity. Is there good reason for thinking that this simple looksism is definitely wrong? Given the discriminative nature of appraisal and appreciation respects, it is

hard to see why it is. If a preference for certain physical strength in sports, say, is morally acceptable, why isn't a taste for certain physical appearance in dating? Appearance is as relevant to sexual appeal as athleticism to sport competition.

Of course, one may appeal to the alteration of the power dynamics concerning looks in society or maybe the harm resulting from some existing negative stereotypes to explain why that simple looksism is wrong. But even if the conditional caveat is wrong on these grounds, it will be wrong only contingently. We cannot provide, on these grounds, a more general account for why cases that share the same discriminative structure with this conditional caveat are wrong. For example, we would have great difficulty explaining why people would also frown at a caveat like "No right-handed or Caucasian".

This is why I chose to focus on overgeneralization and equal respect, which I believe provide a more general ground for explaining the intrinsic wrongfulness of discrimination.

6. Concluding Remarks

Dignity entitles every person to some equal respect at the fundamental level. Everyone's pursuit of a life of basic wellbeing, such as opportunities to work and to become educated, deserves to be equally respected. While this entitlement to equal respect does not mean absolute equal share of respect in every aspect of life, it does require us, when it comes differential treatment in appraisal and appreciation respects that are important to wellbeing, not to intentionally or constantly deny people who we

have encountered in life a fair consideration – a consideration based on their relevant individual qualities. Appreciation respects, especially those involved in romantic relationship and friendship, are important for relational wellbeing, and thus a fair consideration for them should not be intentionally or constantly denied to any person that we have encountered in life. An overgeneralization like racial lookism treats a person not by his or her relevant individual quality, and thus constantly denies some people a fair consideration for some important form of appreciation. This is why racial lookism is morally wrong.

The tendency to generalize on the basis of some common feature may be something embedded in our genetics – it is easy to see the evolutionary advantage of having such a tendency. For example, a person who tends to learn to avoid snakes after being attacked by one is more likely to survive than a person who does not. But this does not mean such tendency is always morally justifiable when operating in other contexts. In cases of appraisal and appreciation respects that are important for basic wellbeing, for instance, treating a person merely on the basis of that person's social identity is often morally objectionable, as it tends to deny that person a fair consideration based on his or her relevant individual quality. In such contexts, the tendency to generalize is often something that we should try to constrain.

The value of equality and individuality has been the driving force behind many of our recent social and political changes. In this paper, I tried to argue that, to truly achieve the moral ideal in which everyone's individuality is properly respected and everyone genuinely enjoys an equality of opportunity to a life of basic wellbeing,

change needs to be brought a step further – from the social and political level to the more personal level. While this argument may upset the received view on personal freedom – as people tend to think that whom to date or invite to a bar is a personal matter, I hope that my argument has at least succeeded in showing that, if we truly care about equality and individuality, there is some good reason to endure a “personal” upset.

Changing a personal preference such as racial looksism is difficult. But there are things we can do: we can put ourselves in a position that would lead us to change such a preference. For example, we can invite people of a different race into our personal lives and expose ourselves to their attractive traits. These are small steps that we can take to enable a big leap in the direction of greater equality. I hope that, by raising an issue like racial looksism, this paper will call attention to the biases and prejudices hidden in the corners of our private lives, which have, by and large, escaped the academic limelight.

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