

Racial Imposter Syndrome

Personal Experience and Interview Piece

By TaMyra Johnson

Being exposed to research and stories about racial imposter syndrome made me recognize how much I mistakenly valued other people's opinions on my own racial identity. Growing up as a Black and white biracial woman, I would code switch in order to appeal to both sides of my racial identity. I did not want to be viewed as too Black to my white family and peers or too white to my Black family and peers. I had trouble finding a perfect balance growing up and eventually I found myself living a double life—one where I was fluctuating between racial groups and feeling internal and external pressures to choose a side.

My race was questioned by peers, teachers, and society. I often heard that I was too white to be mixed, or I did not act like I was mixed, or I did not act black. When I was younger, I never was sure what race to pick when it came to simple things like school forms. My teachers always told me to pick the one I felt that described me most or to just choose Black. Being told to figure out what race I was more connected to, or which one described me as a person, at such a young age, was very confusing and harmful when I tried to find my racial identity. I did not know how I was supposed to “act my race” or show that I was connected to both cultures. Once I recognized how

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much emphasis I placed on others' opinions, it finally allowed me to let go of my double life and embrace my racial identity.

Once quarantine hit, I had a lot of time to self-reflect and make up my own opinions on events that were going on, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. I realized that I could not please everyone, not with my opinions, not with my racial identity, and not with anything. I let go of this double life by understanding that only my opinion affected my life and only I could decide who I am. I realized that when I code switched, I was not doing it to feel comfortable. I was doing it so others could feel comfortable. Learning that my race is a part of me, but that it does not define me, is one of the biggest lessons I have learned growing up.

In order to take my power back and live this life that I deserved, I knew I could not keep trying to please people with my race or my actions. I could no longer fear the backlash of other's opinions about my life and my values. In this time of searching for my racial identity I've attended protests, published articles on diversity issues, advocated on social media, talked to people, taken photos of the George Floyd memorial, educated myself and gave speeches about diversity. My life's experiences on this issue are many and varied, enabling me to build my self-worth and bolster my confidence. These experiences helped me make sense of my racial identity and the power my voice has because of it.

I decided to seek out and see if other biracial people felt this way. Throughout my interviews and research, I found out that I was not alone. Racial imposter syndrome is something that runs deeply in the biracial community. I first decided to interview a few of my biracial peers. I came to the conclusion that not many people know what racial imposter syndrome is yet but when explained, they heavily identified with it. Student

1, who is Korean mixed with African American, often felt an external pressure to claim her black side because others often questioned or never validated her Korean culture. She was familiar with code switching and actively participated in it in order to prevent disconnection within certain racial groups. In school, she felt like her racial identity went unrecognized since most people just identified her as black. When asked if she ever questioned her identity she quoted “Yes, the first thing people usually say is, oh, I never would have guessed it. You don’t look like it or speak it”. Years of this led her to believe that it was easier to just go ahead and identify as African American to avoid confusion and questioning of her background. Student 2, who is African American mixed with White, felt like it was hard to identify with both races, so he identified with neither. He felt disconnected from both racial groups. He stated “I don’t code switch but the fact that I don’t code switch is what I feel disconnects me from both races. I feel like if you really want to fit in, you have to code switch; however, I try to do it as little as possible. It’s a personal preference”. Student 2 felt as if there was a lot of external pressure to conform, however; pride in staying true to himself was more important to him than fitting in. Overall, neither student had any biracial mentors or teachers in their life so there was no one that ever looked like them to be able to share experiences. This left them often confused with their racial identity, which sometimes left them questioning themselves.

I then decided to seek out a biracial teacher, in Kentucky only 44 teachers identify as two or more races out of the 43,445 full time teachers. According to the Kentucky School report card out of 6,223 teachers there are 0 who identify as two or more races in my district, which is Jefferson County. These statistics were more disappointing than surprising as I came to

the realization that I have never had a mentor that looked like me or that could identify with the same struggles as me. As you can see, I had quite a difficult time finding a biracial teacher to interview about their experience. I finally found Noraa Ransey from Calloway County. Noraa is a mother to 5 biracial children and is biracial herself. She has been teaching for 18 years and has experience in this topic as a mother, a student, and a teacher. In the past she was the only person of color teaching in her district and believed her district had never had over 5 teachers of color. In her free time, she advocated for people of color in the education system and for overall support for families of color in her area. Growing up her grandmother was her main constant in her life and was ingrained in her Hispanic culture from birth; however, she said "Hispanic culture is what was normal and natural to me but when I went to school, I did not have one other friend who identified as Hispanic." As a mom of biracial children, she's seen it more in her children who happen to be black and Hispanic. She said, "when you're two different races... if you look at my children, we all look very different. We're all the shades of brown". She felt internally connected to her culture, but it's not perceived by others due to her complexion. She also did not have a mentor or teacher or even custodian that looked like her growing up. When asked about whether or not she felt as if it was important to have one, she said, "I think so. I think that it's important for all students to, because they need to see real world examples in everything that they do. And if you have a teacher that looks different from them, they are going to learn from that person, and they are going to grow with that person." Being an adult, and with the world evolving, she feels like things have got better but still have a long way to go. She still lives in a predominately white county, so she is actively educating her students on the

importance of diversity inside and outside of the classroom. She brings in diverse books, host events, and mentors' students of color through college. In her experience being vulnerable is what really has helped her connect with her peers and made her feel like she fit in in Calloway County.

My race makes me who I am on the surface and on a deeper level. I am no longer scared to advocate for myself and for what I believe in. If I have an opposing opinion on a racial issue, then I am not scared to speak up. Using my voice on racial issues that affect me or that sit with me is an important value I hold. I no longer have fear or confusion on how to embrace myself as an individual rather than having multiple personalities. I am proud to be a biracial woman and I am proud that it is a part of my identity.