

Are Racial Preferences in Dating Morally Defensible?

Mohammad Harith Aslam Khawaja
Amherst College

“I only date white girls.” “I don’t think black women are hot.” “I have a fetish for Asian-Americans.” Each of these statements expresses a racial preference for dating partners. Moreover, these preferences aren’t merely inclusionary. They are also exclusionary in the sense that people acting upon them will both include and preclude others as potential spouses *because of their race*. Racial dating preferences have been slowly diversifying: statistics show over fifteen percent of newly-wed couples in the US are interracial, a three-fold increase to the number 50 years ago.¹ Nonetheless, interracial couples comprise only a tenth of all American couples, and white people continue to remain the least likely to marry people of color, demonstrating stronger intra-race mating than all other races.²

The morality of race-based dating preferences is thus a sensitive, but important issue, partly because it exposes our internalized racially colored desires and partly because it is charged with correcting them. In this paper, I inspect what makes certain preferences racist, and others less morally problematic, but still indefensible. I build on a valuable framework of race-based favoritism proposed by J.L. Garcia, and extend it to racial dating practices, finding that it fails to capture what is morally problematic in a suspicious case of racial preference. I then build on Garcia’s baseline framework to create a new structure of moral requirements. My modified framework proposes that exclusionary racial preferences in dating are not morally defensible because they deny people of other races a ‘fair chance’ to be potential partners. Consequently, I consider objections to and the implications of my theory, concluding with a discussion of the societal shaping of our sexual, among other, desires.

In *The Heart of Racism*, Jorge Garcia proposes what he calls a “volitional conception of racism.”³ According to him, atti-

tudes and comportments, rather than beliefs or cognitive theories, make people racist. But what constitutes a racist attitude? Garcia thinks “one is a racist when one either does not care at all or does not care enough (i.e., as much as morality requires) or does not care in the right ways about people assigned to a certain racial group, where this disregard is based on racial classification.”⁴ The volitional account of racism is then fundamentally concerned with what we morally owe others because of their humanity. Violating, or falling short of these minimal moral duties because of someone’s race is what constitutes racism: “Racism, thus, will often offend against justice...because one sort of injury to another is withholding from her the respect she is owed.”⁵

Garcia applies this framework to show how race-based favoritism may be justified. He argues that “*Preferential* treatment, while race-based, is not normally based on any racial disregard” toward people of other races.⁶ We may “licitly choose to bestow favors instead on those to whom we feel more warmly...I may give A more than A has a claim to get from me and more than I give B, while nevertheless giving B everything to which she is entitled (and even more).”⁷ Thus, “...discriminating *in favor of* R1s [Race 1s] need not entail discriminating *against* R2s [Race 2s].”⁸ So, according to Garcia, race-based preference are morally acceptable as long as they do not deny what must be accorded to those of other races. Here is a reconstruction of the argument:

Premise 1: We have a duty to give to people of all races *at least* what they are morally owed. This is the baseline moral requirement.

Premise 2: Falling short of this threshold constitutes moral shortcoming and is reprehensible.

Premise 3: Giving people more than they are morally owed because of their race is morally acceptable.

Conclusion: We can give certain people more than they are morally owed because of their race, provided that in doing so, we do not fall short of our minimum moral duties towards people of other races.

Racial preferences in dating, being a kind of favoritism, lie within the domain of Garcia’s argument. By dating, I mean established relationships. I am not concerned with short-term sex-

ual relations, one-night stands, hook-ups or the like. Instead, for the purposes of my argument, I will consider sentimental, long-term partnerships, even if some of my claims hold for other sexual arrangements. Extending Garcia's framework for race-based favoritism to racial dating permits us to extrapolate the conditions under which race-based dating preferences would be morally acceptable: it is defensible to only date people of a certain race provided one does not violate moral duties toward people of other races. Since no one is owed sex or relationships, nor does one owe others sex or relationships, no moral duties are violated in a dating scheme that filters potential partners by race. To proceed, I will pose two common and intuitively problematic cases of racial dating. Each will subsequently be charitably analyzed per Garcia's framework, and the results of the analysis will provide insight into the correctness of the system. The purpose of this project is to test the sturdiness of Garcia's framework; a false negative in either case will indicate a flaw somewhere in the system.

The first case is as follows. John, a resident of an all-white fraternity in Kentucky, cracks open a can of beer and exclaims to his friends about a girl who asked him out last week: "I won't date her *because* she's black." John's proclamation affirms there is something about blackness that is unworthy, i.e. there is some improper, even disparaging characteristic tied to being black that makes his potential partner unsuitable in his eyes. Per Garcia's framework, John is a racist. Why? Because he denigrates his admirer on account of her race, violating the minimum duty of respect owed to black women, on the grounds that she is black. I agree with Garcia; I think most people would consider John a racist and Garcia's account accurately explains why he is intuitively and normatively so. Garcia's framework thus passes the first test.

The second, and more interesting case is the following: Jack, a white male North-East college athlete gestures at a black classmate in the cafeteria, leans across the table and quietly discloses to his white friends who are engaged in a discussion about women: "I'm not a racist, but I wouldn't date her because I'm just *not* attracted to black women. I wouldn't consider dating a black woman because I just don't find them pretty. It's just like Aziz, who only dates white girls. I don't like dark skin, or braids or broad lips, just like he doesn't find yellow skin attractive. I don't

think there's anything wrong with black women though."

There is a reason this case makes us feel uncomfortable. Most people would agree there is something intuitively problematic about it, but what makes this latter case problematic is not as obvious as in the former. While John is quite obviously insulting a black woman because of her race, the same cannot be said of Jack, who is making a more nuanced statement of his sexual preferences. No person or race has a right to sex or partnerships, so the fact that Jack does not engage in relationships with black women could seem justified. Indeed, Garcia's framework does conclude that Jack's remark is morally defensible: not dating black women *because of their race* would not violate any duties owed to them; since no one is owed a relationship, rejecting people on the basis of their race – like Jack's rejection of the black woman – is morally defensible. This is a surprising conclusion and does not accord with the intuitions of many. Excluding people on the basis of their race as potential partners seems morally problematic, even when seemingly nuanced explanations like Jack's are offered. Moreover, even if Garcia's framework is to be conceived of as not just a descriptive but a prescriptive account of race-based preferences, the second case seems morally suspicious in a way Garcia's framework cannot capture. Excluding people as potential partners because of their race violates some kind of moral requisite that Garcia's framework does not encompass. Jack, our second white male, is thus a false negative.

Despite its false negative, I think there is a way to repair Garcia's framework. The repair work consists in building upon it, and my subsequent modified moral structure diagnoses and explains Jack's moral shortcoming. In my analysis, the defect in Garcia's argument lies at Premise 1. To remind readers, Premise 1 states: "We have a duty to give to people of all races *at least* what they are morally owed. This is the baseline moral requirement." I contend we should give to others more than what our minimum moral duties toward them entail. In dating, this is especially important. Here is how I rectify the framework: I keep Garcia's conception of a moral baseline because it is helpful in capturing what is racist in John's case. Moreover, it explains the canonical case of racist dating today, in the US and across the world. Then, I add a supplementary moral stipulation to Garcia's

framework. By supplementary stipulation, I mean a moral requisite that is less stringent than an overriding duty, in the sense that falling short of this supplementary moral stipulation implies a lesser opprobrium than falling short of Garcia's original baseline moral duties. The nature of the additional requirement is to give people of all races what I call a 'fair chance' to be a potential partner. To give others a fair chance to be a potential partner means to not simply discard their possibility as a future partner because of their race but to allow them the opportunity to appeal to oneself, even if one doesn't end up dating them. Practically, a fair chance would look like interacting with people of all races and getting to know them at deeper levels, engaging with them and being willing to learn their perspectives, putting oneself in the physical and mental spaces where they could appeal to oneself, and going out to drinks, coffee and even first dates with them. Truly giving others a fair chance does not instrumentalize them; it treats them as potential partners, with the genuine possibility of a future relationship – as ends in themselves and not as means to some other end.

According to the supplemented framework, our second white male, Jack, is morally reprehensible because he rejects black women without giving them a fair chance. He is unprepared to go on dates, chat, interact, get to know them on deeper levels, unwilling to learn their perspectives or even allow them the space and the occasion to appeal to him and be a potential partner. The violation of the 'fair chance' principle, then, is what makes his case morally problematic. As Jack's case shows, the fair chance stipulation does both descriptive and normative work; it explains why the case is intuitively wrong and proposes how we should act instead. Garcia's basic framework enhanced with the 'fair chance' stipulation hence tests correctly against edge cases of race-based dating preferences.

An attentive reader may object. She may ask why the 'fair chance' stipulation isn't simply part of Garcia's original baseline duties, but some additional requirement built on top of the framework. In other words, why is giving a fair chance to people of all races not a moral duty we owe them but some not-as-important stipulation? This objection is best answered in light of our afore-detailed cases. Had we included the 'fair chance' principle as a

minimum moral duty, we would be inclined to conclude Jack, our second white male is racist, a conclusion that I think is inaccurate. Falling short of the moral baseline because of someone's race makes the offender a racist, as exemplified by John, our first white male. Falling short of the supplementary 'fair chance' stipulation, provided one has respected all basic moral duties, makes one morally reprehensible, but not a racist. It is this latter kind of moral violation, and not the former, for which our second white male, Jack, must be indicted. Labelling Jack a racist misses the subtle difference between the two cases; Jack commits a *racial* infringement, but not a *racist* one; he is being disrespectful of black people, but in a different, and less morally harmful way than racist John is. It would thus be a mistake to attach the same level of moral opprobrium to him by assigning a duty, and not just an additional stipulation of a 'fair chance.'

The distinction between a racial infringement and a racist one has been explored by Lawrence Blum.⁹ According to Blum, one can commit a racial infringement without meriting the label of 'racist.' Consider the case of an individual who, unbeknownst to the implications, makes an offensive joke just to go along with a group of friends. As long as the said individual does not truly believe in inferiorizing and loathing the targeted racial group – in other words, as long as her intentions are not genuinely antipathic – it would be wrong to associate the morally loaded term, 'racist,' to such a person. The indicting term, 'racist,' should only be reserved for those who quite explicitly feel a certain way (recall John, the individual in the first case), whereas those who commit racial infringements as Jack's deserve some other appellation; racially insensitive, perhaps.

Our now piqued objector points out another difficulty. She remarks that giving people of all races a fair chance won't necessarily change our deep-seated race-based dating preferences. It will only create an artificial, forced display of racial inclusivity, while our original exclusionary racial preferences remain intact and unchanged, albeit less conspicuous than before. Moreover, not only may giving others a fair chance leave our preferences unchanged, but white males like Jack may also act like they are giving a fair chance to black people by going out on dates with them, yet continue harboring anti-black dating preferences clan-

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destinely; they may drink coffee or *chai* tea with them, but they are never actually going to date them. What to make of these cases?

To begin, we would say that white males who give a fair chance only for show and are unprepared to honestly accept the possibility of an inter-racial relationship aren't really giving a fair chance. Giving a fair chance means genuinely entertaining the possibility of a future relationship with whomsoever one goes on a date with regardless of her race, even if one doesn't end up dating her. Putting this in context, truly giving a fair chance would entail interacting with and thinking about people of all races identically to members of the favored race for a race-based preferential dater. Epistemic difficulties notwithstanding, Jack may not end up with the black woman, but insofar as he treats her sincerely like a potential partner, he gives her a fair chance. It may also help to clarify that I am not advocating a requirement to date people of multiple races. I am only advocating a stipulation to consider everyone equally, leaving aside their race. If, for some other reason like socio-economic differences, clashing political sensibilities or geographical distances, Jack later decides to not date the black woman, he would not be violating the 'fair chance' principle.

But what about the counterargument that giving a fair chance to everyone doesn't necessarily decolorize our dating preferences? I contend that our desires, and our dating preferences, are shaped by the kinds of people we choose to interact with and the kinds of spaces we inhabit. Exposure to different perspectives, interactions with individuals of different races and participating in situations where one is likely to learn about different cultural and racial backgrounds are certain to affect our racial predilections in dating. That the choices we make affect our future preferences is an accepted psychological fact; thus, giving a fair chance is very likely to dismantle deep-seated racial preferences in dating, contributing to a diverse outlook in the dating world.¹⁰

This brings us to an important juncture in our discussion. In today's society, many of our deep-rooted racial preferences for partners are ingrained and reinforced by the ubiquitous manifestations of patriarchal ideology "in advertising, articles in the media,

in so-called success stories, [and] in Miss America pageants.”^{11 12} Our systems of mass communication are dominated by messages demanding women to conform to a narrow image based around the slim, “hot blond” in order to be attractive.¹³ The slim hot-blond, one of only a few feminine “beauty imperative[s]”, “sets a new norm: those who refuse to submit to it will become stigmatised.”¹⁴ While men are allowed more flexible standards for an attractive body – the ‘dad’ bod, old men, geeks, nerds and effete men –, racial beauty standards amongst males, too, have emerged with white males at the top of the hierarchy. Such standards fashion the sexual desires of citizens of the modern society force-fed with these beauty paradigms; people of all genders internalize and then act upon warped beauty preferences to make dating decisions. This is what Amia Srinivasan calls the “political shaping of our desires.”¹⁵ Online dating studies have showed that Asian males and black females are the most racially excluded of all participants.¹⁶ These exclusions are indicative of assimilated racial beauty standards that inform dating preferences. Since many of our race-based dating preferences stem from unjust standards, it is a responsibility to undertake an active reshaping of our desires to create a more inclusive society. This is why giving a fair chance to people of all races is a moral stipulation – interacting deeply with diverse communities helps reform our desires and combat unfair racial prioritization to create a truly racially integrated society. Given a society historically fractured along racial fault lines and the pivotal role social discourse plays in shaping our preferences, offering people of all races a fair chance to become a potential partner is essential to redress racial inequity.¹⁷

One implication of my framework is that a fair chance must be offered by peoples of *all* races to peoples of all races. In other words, the ‘fair chance’ principle does not take into account historical race relations or power dynamics, racial oppression or stigmatization, prescribing instead an equal moral requirement to all races. This may be objectionable because some same-race dating preferences are a show of solidarity within races that have been and continue to be discriminated against, like black people in America. Some would even say that moral obligations are asymmetric, and the onus should be on the dominating race, i.e. white people, to rectify the unjust beauty standards they have al-

most single-handedly created. The ‘fair chance’ principle thus misses something important when it prescribes the same moral stipulation for everyone.

I respectfully disagree. I believe people of all races, and not just white people, have a moral responsibility to question, reconsider and re-cultivate their desires. Unjust racial beauty standards are internalized by everyone, so it is logical that everyone partake in rectifying their nefarious effects, something effected by giving everyone a ‘fair chance’ as a dating partner. Moreover, giving a fair chance to everyone demonstrates a commitment to a truly racially integrated society. Black-black intra-race dating may be a display of solidarity, but to achieve a society socially unified along racial lines, one absolved of racial separation and stigmatization, we should entertain the possibility and even the reality of interracial relationships. Solidarity may, of course, still be shown alternatively by participating in black rights movements, campaigning for increased black political membership and demonstrating against prejudiced laws that have persisted to this day, for example. That *everyone* and not simply people who have historically been in power are required to give a fair chance is then an implication I am willing to accept.

To recapitulate, offering people of all races a ‘fair chance’ to become a potential partner is a moral stipulation we violate when we exclude certain peoples as potential dating partners because of their race. In doing so, though not racist, we are still morally blameworthy. Fulfilling the ‘fair chance’ requisite is necessary to overcome internalized racially prejudiced dating preferences, and to create a racially integrated and inclusive society. Acting upon it is thus essential to create a more equitable world.

Notes

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