

If you have been inside a high school, you surely would have noticed the phenomenon of the lump of black kids sitting together at the same lunch table. You must have asked yourself, or, if you had been brave or tactless enough, you would've asked out loud, "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" Beverly Daniel Tatum explains this phenomenon in her book with that question as the title. The question in question requires an entire book to answer. Because it and the ensuing question of what conditions engender the seemingly voluntary self-segregation of different races are difficult questions. Tatum's answer involves complex issues of the development of multi-colored identities.

People first become aware of their racial identity during their adolescent years, a large portion of which is spent in the classroom. In order for teachers to be competent guides in their students' lives, personal or academic, they should have a great understanding of the process of racial identity development. However, currently many if not most educators are themselves unaware of this significant aspect of their students' identity development, let alone being able to aid the students in an intelligent and sensitive way. The lack of understanding leads to a code of unnatural silence around the subject of race, not just within schools, but outside as well. People do not know how to go about discussing it, for fear that an inappropriate or misconstrued comment will get them labeled

“racist.” This self-imposed tacit code of silence stagnates understanding as it forbids communication. It kills any hope or action for change, thus ensuring the vicious status quo cycle of distrust and racism. Dr. Tatum realizes the importance of open discussion about race. Her book provides the crucial questions and intrepid answers.

The goal of the book is to promote understanding and communication, and through it, raise consciousness and effect social change. (193) She believes real change can only be achieved through honest open dialogue about race, despite the fear-driven unwillingness of the people. This unwillingness can only be stamped out by educating the people, exchanging different points of view.

Tatum offers her the perspective as a psychologist, a teacher, a black woman, and a mother of black children. She boasts an impressive background of a B.A. in psychology from Wesleyan University, M.A. and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan. She puts complicated erudite concepts such as the stages of social and cognitive development in straightforward language. As a veteran professor, she shares with readers the thoughts, experiences, voices of students from all perspectives, across lines of race, age, and social background. Tatum also relates experiences from her perspective as a black woman and mother that are simultaneously personal and universal.

Basing on a combination of all of her perspectives, Tatum formed her view on race and racial identity. Her theory is that if everybody develop positive racial identity, there would be a peaceful world. People of color who are able to do so will be secure within themselves. They will be concerned with the welfare both for their own communities and the common good transcending racial lines. White people who become aware of the institutionalized and internalized racism will be compelled to work toward eradicating it. There will be peace when there is no more injustice (127)

Tatum begins to introduce her theory by clarifying the meaning of the word racism as used in the book. In Chapter I, she defines “racism” as a system of advantage based on race that benefits whites and hurts everybody else. It goes beyond the scope of prejudices of individuals to include cultural messages and institutional policies and practices. (7) This definition is at once revolutionary and discomforting. It prohibits people from being complacent in their neutral indifference. It forces them into action. Under this definition, white people can no longer think that as long as they do not hate non-whites or commit hate crimes, that they are free from any responsibility. Because every day they passively reap the benefits of being white, at the expense of people of color. To use Tatum’s own example, the house that a person of color should have gotten but was denied on the base of race would be available for a white person when it would

not have been otherwise. (9) This definition of racism forces people to confront and challenge injustice.

After “racism,” Tatum explains “identity.” The eternal question of “who am I?” is embedded in the social and historical context. The racial identity that is the focus of this book is inevitably connected to and shaped by the sexual, religious, socio-economic identity. Whenever an individual’s identity is in the dominant group, such as heterosexuality, or whiteness, it is usually taken for granted by the person. People identify themselves by the qualities that set them apart in the perceptions of others, for better or for worse. Tatum converts this idea into a call for compassion. People who are in racially subordinate group can reflect on circumstances in which they are the dominant group. For example, blacks who are male, young, and heterosexual should reflect on the privileges that they have taken for granted as parts of dominant groups. On the other hand, people of the racially dominant group can relate to the subordinate by drawing on their own experiences as the subordinate in other aspects. This idea is essential to the theme of the book because it points to the interconnectedness of all of humanity. Every single person is a complex heterogeneous mixture of different characteristics. Nobody is simply a powerless victim, dependent on others for change. No one person or group of people holds all the power and the resultant burden of responsibility either. Everyone shares the duty and obligation to work

for progress in social justice.

In part II of the book, "Understanding Blackness in a White Context," Tatum deals with the experience of the subordinate in the dominant culture. Here she answers the question posed in the title of the book. As children enter adolescence, they become increasingly aware of how others view them. Black adolescents think of themselves in terms of race because it is how everybody else identifies them. Black adolescents' stages of racial identity development are as follows: 'Pre-encounter' is the naivety of children. 'Encounter' is when the world forces them to become aware of their Blackness. After encounters of racism, black children are likely to bond with others who can relate to those experiences. According to development theorist Erik Erikson, the approval of and identification with peers take on great significance during adolescence. (Noguera "How Racial Identity Affects School Performance") Together, black youths develop their sense of racial identity.

After they first become aware of their racial identity, they want the world to know it too. They go out of their way to embrace not just everything stereotypically black, but also everything opposite of the stereotypically white. Out of this arises the self-segregation of black youth, and the cafeteria phenomenon that gave the book its title.

However, the oppositional identity that discourages academic

achievement is symptomatic of an institutionalized racism. The most influential scholars in the field, Ogbu and Fordham, argue that the “oppositional identities” black youths develop lead them to view schooling as forced assimilation. Black youth think of excelling in school as an exclusively white thing because there are almost no positive mentions of successful black role models in the curriculum. In slightly different language but leading to the same conclusion, black scholars Steele and McWhorter argue that black youth suffer from “victimology.”

(Noguera 44) Victimology is the false belief that blacks will always be helpless victims unless and until all racism is completely eradicated in every form everywhere. This leads to separatism, the idea that blacks play by, or rather, are subjected to, different rules. It, in turn, leads to anti-intellectualism, the endlessly damaging misconception that academic excellence is a “white” thing. Learning for learning’s sake comes to be seen as conflicting with being “culturally authentically black.” (Young and Lynch.)

After “encounter” is the “immersion/emersion” stage, during which black children discovers the positive black role models. During this stage they realize the foolishness of the black stereotype that they had previously modeled themselves after. After that, they enter the “internalization” stage, in which they become secure in their knowledge of who they are. Then they are ready to enter the last stage, “internalization/commitment,” to “perceive and transcend race.”

(76)

This theory of the stages illustrates clearly how the institutionalized racism harms people of color. It obliges society, both in terms of school curriculum and the media, to present positive portraits of blacks that children can look up to and aspire to be. Without the positive role models, black youth may never reach the internalization/commitment stage of looking beyond race. This part of the book is also crucial in explaining the mystery of the black table in cafeterias. People have always feared what they do not understand, and are consequently silent and distrustful. Tatum's explanation is invaluable in educating the masses and promoting dialogue.

Part III is Understanding Whiteness in a White Context. The stages of white identity development parallels black identity development in their progression from innocence to awareness to action. The first stage of white racial development is the "contact" stage, in which they are completely unaware of racism on both institutional and individual levels. The second stage, "disintegration," means a growing awareness. Racism becomes more and more obvious and easy to spot once they become aware of it. Out of the disillusionment in the ideal meritocratic society, they can turn to "reintegration," or to blame the victimized blacks for their own fate. After that is the pseudo-independence stage of "awareness but confusion." This is followed by

“immersion/emersion” stage of finding positive white identity, including white role models who fought against slavery or racism. “Autonomy,” the last stage, is an open-minded awareness of self and others. They are equipped to fight for change.

Here Tatum encourages the daunting process of self-reflection. People cannot get out of prison if they do not recognize that they are in it. Only through examining racial identity and becoming aware of the system of racism, can there be hope and possibility for real and lasting social change.

The next chapter deals with the more pragmatic reform, specifically affirmative action. The usefulness of this section alone is worth the price of the book. First, Tatum clears up general misconceptions about what affirmative action is. It is a method to ensure equal employment for disadvantaged groups by taking into account the very qualities that identifies the disadvantaged groups. Tatum advocates affirmative action as an effective way of leveling the plain field.

This chapter is significant because it provides valuable information on a controversial issue that much of the public has fundamental misunderstandings or is ignorant about. It offers a cogent argument for affirmative action. Because people’s hidden and often subconscious prejudices, hiring decisions almost always favor the whites. (120) In a good affirmative action program, there is a

set of established criteria. Selections are then made from a pool of qualified candidates based on the aforementioned goal of diversifying and inclusion of the historically disadvantaged. Charges of reverse discrimination because a candidate with extra qualifications is overlooked are stupid. If the hirers cared about the extras they would have been part of the initial criteria. The complaints mostly come from “angry white men” who blame affirmative action for robbing them of employment or promotions that they believe they are entitled to or deserve. (Froomkin.) Those people have a tendency to overestimate their own abilities, and underestimate the abilities of the candidates of color. (127)

Furthermore, the plain field is far from even yet, let alone tilted in favor of the historically disadvantaged by affirmative action. Overall, women and minorities still work for much less money than white men and face discrimination in many places. (Froomkin) Therefore, affirmative action is both good and necessary.

Part IV, *Beyond Black and White*, expands the topic of discussion of race and identity to include the Latino, the American Indian, the Asian Pacific, and the multiracial, each with its own history of discrimination and/or persecution at the hand of the dominant white. Tatum draws attention to these groups who also struggle with discrimination and racial identity problems, but are routinely ignored when race is discussed as a strictly Black and White issue.

The last part of the book is a call to action. Part V, titled “Breaking the

Silence,” it impels readers to get over their fears (of isolation, discomfort, rejection, etc.) and put an end to their fear-induced silences and inactions. This last chapter is the most empowering and effective in mobilizing the audience. Tatum writes that each individual has his or her own sphere of influence in which he or she can effect social change. America might be a great country, but it will never be a good country until all members of society are treated fairly and equally. There is no excuse for inaction because every single person has the power, and therefore the obligation to make it good. There is even a useful list of resources in the appendix for more information for better understanding.

“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” is a brave book. It dared to break the “code of silence” that it condemns as propagating the status quo of racism and injustice. This book explains, in simple words and straightforward stories, race and racial identity. It challenges everybody, the black, the white, the Latino, the Asian, the bi-racial, to break from the status quo. It calls on all of them to be responsible for recognizing and confronting racism in all its forms. Most important of all, it offers a message of optimism, of hope in the ability of humans to reflect on wrongs and to change, of faith in the innate goodness and longing for justice inside every person.

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