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Stephanie R. Logan
University of Northern Iowa

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A Review by Logan of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*, by Beverly Daniel Tatum

Part of the journal section “Reviews and Responses”

Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations about Race*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

Reviewed by Stephanie R. Logan

Beverly Daniel Tatum’s most popular work outlines racial identity development and the challenges with having meaningful conversations on race. In order to engage the reader in self-reflection to have such conversations, Tatum uses practical examples from her experience as a parent and a college professor. She highlights conversations she has had with her own children about race and racism, as well as teaching activities she has used and discussions she has facilitated to engage her college students in recognizing, understanding, and embracing their racial identity.

In the first section of the text, Tatum draws attention to the term racism. She distinguishes between prejudice and racism, by describing prejudice as preconceived judgments or opinions made with limited information. Prejudice is considered a consequence of cultural racism, where images and messages affirm assumed White superiority and assumed inferiority of non-Whites, also referred to as People of Color. Racism is then considered to be a system, where some receive advantage based on race (see *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman). While somewhat late in the discussion of racism, Tatum does acknowledge the social construction of race and how the complexity of defining race presents a challenge when defining one’s multiple identities and their intersections.

The next sections of the text outline the racial identity development of Blacks (those in the U.S. as a result of slavery) and Whites (those of European ancestry). Drawing on the work of Cross (1991) and Helms (1990), Tatum answers the question, “Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” Simply, in late adolescence and early adulthood, young African-Americans recognize the personal impact of racism and develop an identity which opposes anything White. This oppositional social identity is designed to protect young Blacks from the psychological assaults of racism and to keep the dominant group (Whites) away (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Followed by this is a stage, an intense immersion/emersion into one’s own history

and culture takes place. This immersion/emersion is supported by same-race peers, hence why all of the Blacks are sitting together.

While many young African- Americans are transitioning through these two of five stages where they are considering what it means to be Black, young Whites (and some not so young) are not considered what it means to be White. In the contact stage of White development, many would describe themselves as “just normal”. They have no recognition or understanding of the systemic advantages afforded to them because of their race and view racism as only individual acts committed by a few extremists. University settings can provide an opportunity for some Whites to transition into the stage where there is acknowledgement of systemic racism and White privilege. This is a difficult stage for many Whites, seeing both injustice and privilege, and many move to “blaming the victim” versus moving on to unlearning one’s racism. Lumped in with White racial identity development is a conversation on affirmative action. Tatum presents many of the fears and misunderstandings many Whites have about the Executive Order issued by Lyndon B. Johnson to remedy the history of discrimination against men and women of color, White women, and later those with disabilities and veterans.

Though it is a very small section Tatum acknowledges that racial/ethnic identity development is more than Black and White. For Native, Latino, and Asian Americans ethnic identity development is complex, given the wide range of experiences and diversity within these groups. Given the projected population increases for both Latino and Asian populations, it may prove beneficial for social science researchers and development theorist to spend more time looking beyond Black and White. Along these lines the increase in biracial identity births and multiracial families warrants additional conversation as well. Tatum points out the need to challenge the notion forcing biracial children to choose a monocultural identity. Instead, caring individuals should promote self-acceptance of a multiracial heritage. This is also essential for multiracial families, by way of adoption, where White parents must be willing to experience their Whiteness and address the racism that their family will experience. Again more time could be spend looking at the complexities of multiracial families in relation to monocultural ones.

To end, Tatum focuses on how to embrace and continue cross-racial dialogue. To find the courage to have cross-racial conversations and promote social change begins with educating ourselves. Next we should recognize we cannot fix everything, so concentrate on your sphere of influence. Additionally, the interruption of racism will be a long-term commitment, so honest conversations with White children in particular must be had to engage with their curiosity about race. Remaining silent will not protect them or lead to colorblindness (see the work of Phyllis Katz). Adults must not shy away from the questions children have about physical differences because children are forming biases whether we think they are or not. By dismissing their questions, because of our uneasiness, we are teaching that conversations on race are to be avoided. This inaction by adults only helps to fuel the segregated cafeterias seen in middle and high schools and even on college campuses.

Racial biases are formed early. However by breaking the silence (and using children’s literature) we can help to adjust the views of children.

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