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Book Review: *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race*

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Abstract

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race is a 2017 revised and updated edition to Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's original book written in 1997. The book explores decades of research on the psychology of racism, with an emphasis on the psychology of racial identity in Black, White, and other ethnic and cultural identities. The author helps readers gain a better understanding of historic and modern racism and the implications it has on individuals today. The book also contains important messages for people who work with diverse groups of adults and particularly of youth.

Key words: antiracism, diversity, equity, inclusion, multiculturalism, prejudice, psychology, race, racial identity, racism, social justice

Although *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race* (Tatum, 2017) was first published more than 25 years ago, its contents are just as relevant today. Tatum weaves current political and social issues into modern narratives of race relations in the United States and she presents an honest and easily readable history of Black and White relations in America. Using stories and historical facts, she expertly explains the



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complex terms of *racism*, *racial identity*, and *Whiteness*. Through personal stories and national headlines, Tatum helps readers better understand systems of oppression and discrimination that continue to exist in the United States. She argues that if we want to heal from the wounds of our past, we must have honest conversations about our history, our polarization as a country, and the oppressive policies and systems that still exist.

The content is relatable and easy to follow, no matter where the reader is on their racial awareness journey. For this reason, this book was selected for a year-long, internal professional development opportunity offered to Ohio State University Extension educators and staff members in 2021. Table 1 presents an overview of the key content from the book's chapters.

Table 1. Chapter Titles and Key Content

| Chapter titles | Key content |
|---|---|
| Prologue: "Why Are All the Black Kids <i>Still</i> Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations About Race in the Twenty-First Century | Reflects on the 20 years between the first and second editions of the book. Provides a thorough and eye-opening review of social, legal, and political events that occurred between 1997 and 2017, including the historic presidential elections of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump. |
| Introduction: A Psychologist's Perspective | |
| Part I: A definition of terms | |
| Chapter 1: Defining Racism "Can we talk?" | Provides definitions of prejudice, internalized oppression, White privilege, and systemic racism. Documents the impact and the cost of racism, and who benefits from dismantling it. Explores what it means to be antiracist. |
| Chapter 2: The Complexity of Identity "Who am I?" | Examines the dynamic that exists between members of dominant and subordinate groups and the impact it has on identity. Introduces seven categories of "otherness" commonly experienced in the United States. |

Table 1. (continued)

| Part II: Understanding Blackness in a White context | |
|--|--|
| <p>Chapter 3: The Early Years</p> <p>“Is my skin brown because I drink chocolate milk?”</p> | <p>Cites research that shows kids as young as 3 notice differences in skin color, hair texture, and facial features. Shares tips for talking about differences with children and the importance of “raising resisters.”</p> |
| <p>Chapter 4: Identity Development in Adolescence</p> <p>“Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?”</p> | <p>Highlights racial–ethnic–cultural (REC) identity models. Reports adolescents of color are more likely to explore their racial or ethnic identity than White adolescents. Introduces the idea of “stereotype threat” that can impact academic and/or work performance.</p> |
| <p>Chapter 5: Racial Identity in Adulthood</p> <p>“Still a work in progress . . .”</p> | <p>Explores racial identity development as a circular, not linear, process throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to cope with stress experienced at school and work. Introduces the phrase “identity recycling.”</p> |
| Part III: Understanding Whiteness in a White context | |
| <p>Chapter 6: The Development of White Identity</p> <p>“I’m not ethnic, I’m just normal.”</p> | <p>Suggests that being White is often not explored because it seems “normal.” Reviews the need for Whites to develop an identity based in reality, not assumed superiority, and the importance of learning about historic and contemporary White allies.</p> |
| <p>Chapter 7: White Identity, Affirmative Action, and Color-Blind Racial Ideology</p> <p>“Affirmative action was nice. It had its time. Its time is over.”</p> | <p>Dispels myths about and explains affirmative action including why it is still needed. Discusses discrimination, bias, stereotypes, White privilege, and the problems with a “color-blind” approach to racial diversity.</p> |

Table 1. (continued)

| Part IV: Beyond Black and White | |
|--|---|
| Chapter 8: Critical Issues in Latinx, Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern/North African Identity Development "There's more than just Black and White, you know." | Reminds readers of the vast diversity of the United States. Includes statistics, terminology, and unique issues related to racial and ethnic identity development of multiple ethnic and cultural groups. |
| Chapter 9: Identity Development in Multiracial Families "But don't the children suffer?" | Reviews racial classifications throughout history and recent statistics regarding multiracial individuals. Discusses the challenges faced by multiracial individuals and families, including transracial adoptive families. |
| Part V: Breaking the silence | |
| Chapter 10: Embracing a Cross-Racial Dialogue "We were struggling for the words." | Explores the challenges related to the silence that White culture often embraces regarding racism and encourages readers to consider their sphere of influence. |
| Epilogue: Signs of Hope, Sites of Progress | Describes 2017 as "the winter" of the social-political climate in our nation and the author's belief that it will "give way to spring." Tatum strongly encourages readers to take action and work toward social justice. |

Strengths of the Book

Dr. Tatum's writing style is one of the strongest aspects of this book. She uses easy-to-understand language to explain basic concepts and relies on decades of research related to racial issues and racial identity formation. She also explains her reasons for choosing the language she uses and provides readers guidance for talking about race—a topic that is difficult for many to broach in a productive and respectful manner. Dr. Tatum challenges readers to reflect, learn, and perhaps even more importantly, unlearn.

As mentioned, this book was used for a year-long book club offered to Extension and college staff members for professional development. Because the book consists of 12 sections (10 chapters plus the prologue and epilogue), it was a perfect fit for a year-long program. In addition, a *Book Group Discussion Guide* (Tatum, 2020) is available which further served the book club's goals.

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Together, the book and discussion guide are written and organized in a way that allows the reader to reflect on their past, as well as their present-day experiences related to racial, political, religious, cultural, and social events and patterns throughout history.

Several analogies made by Dr. Tatum stay with readers long after they finish the book. Here is one of the impactful analogies from the book and the reflection question from the discussion guide:

Polluted Air: Prejudice is one of the inescapable consequences of living in a racist society . . . the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. (Tatum, 2017, p. 86)

Reflection: None of us would introduce ourselves as "smog breathers" (and most of us don't want to be described as prejudiced) but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air? (Tatum, 2020, p. 3)

Another strength of using the book and discussion guide together is the brief synopsis of each chapter in the discussion guide. This allowed book club members to participate actively in the monthly discussions even if they had not read the assigned chapter.

Finally, this book supports and encourages conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion, a stated commitment of the *Journal of Youth Development* (Walker, 2021). This book and discussion guide are powerful tools to reach and inform those who work in the field of youth development.

Limitations of the Book

While the 20th anniversary edition of the book is still relevant today, 5 years have passed since its publication and the political climate in the United States has changed dramatically. It would be interesting to see how Tatum would rewrite the Prologue and Epilogue in response to the past 5 years.

Further Reading Recommendations

- McGhee, H. (2022). *The sum of us: What racism costs everyone and how we can prosper together*. One World.

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- Wilkerson, I. (2011). *The warmth of other suns: The epic story of America's great migration*. Random House.
- Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House.

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Tatum, B. D. (2020). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? and other conversations about race* [Book group discussion guide].

<https://www.beverlydanielatum.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Beverly-Daniel-Tatum-Book-Group-Discussion-Guide.pdf>

Walker, K. C. (2021). Journal of Youth Development's stance on diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. *Journal of Youth Development*, 16(5), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2021.1190>