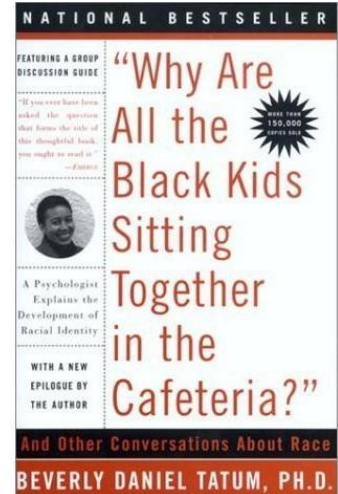


# ***Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? ..... a Study Guide***

**Spring Read 2017 –**



## **Group Guidelines**

We are committed to respectful dialogue within and beyond ourselves and our own opinions/thoughts.

We recognize that no one person can presume to speak for an entire race, culture, or segment of society. We recognize that we are hearing one person's insights about that which she or he holds as important.

We will give each other a respectful hearing, asking questions for clarification, when appropriate.

We admit that all language struggles to articulate the deepest and truest things, that there is always an element of mystery when articulating using a human-created language.

We recognize that people of good conscience may differ in their perceptions of reality and in their conclusions, upon the basis of those perceptions.

We will seek to come to a genuine encounter with the understanding of others.

We recognize that as we come to respectfully appreciate the thoughts and opinions of our neighbors, we will come to better appreciate our own.

# Overview / General Ideas

## Perspective

The perspective of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* is unambiguous. Tatum defends several clear theses about the nature of racism, race, racial identity and the remedies for racism. Racism, Tatum argues, is a system of advantage based on race. In doing so, Tatum opts for an institutional rather than a more psychological or individualist concept of racism. A consequence of Tatum's definition is that racism is thoroughly social, i.e., irreducible to personal mental attitudes. Further, only dominant classes in a racist society can be racist.

Tatum is also relatively noteworthy for defending the development of racial identity as positive and constructive rather than dangerous and divisive. She outlines a theory of the development of racial identity that suggests that such development is a positive part of a good human life. While race is a socially constructed category, it should be retained, especially by minority groups. Race concepts should be reconstructed to present affirming images of various races rather than negative images.

The remedies for racism are almost always confrontation and discussion. Racism will not go away if people ignore it, because racism has a kind of natural, self-reinforcing equilibrium and it must be deliberately and discursively interrupted. Thus, Tatum recommends dialogue even in situations where it will make different racial groups uncomfortable. Uncomfortable feelings often are the result of false assumptions that can be fixed with discussion.

## Tone

*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* has three basic tones, two of which lie in seemingly stark contrast to one another: confident, confrontational and constructive. The text brims with Tatum's confidence in her own views and recommendations. While Tatum occasionally admits some doubt and errors in the past, in general she exudes the sense of herself as complete, self-actualized, open to change but still quite developed psychologically and possessing a fully integrated individual and racial identity.

The tone of the book is also very critical at different places. She is clear, especially through the presentation of her experiences teaching others, that Whites are mistaken about the nature of racism, racial identity and programs meant to fix racism, like Affirmative Action. She recommends that others be courageous enough to confront others about false racial assumptions. So, the tone of the book becomes confrontational when Tatum is at her most critical and focused.

However, while Tatum is often confrontational, she usually oscillates between a confrontational and constructive tone. She is constructive when she prescribes remedies for the phenomena

and attitudes which she criticizes. When she advises the reader and characters she encounters in the book how to handle racism, she always claims that there is reason to hope that racial dialogue will help to resolve important tensions. She is especially encouraging of parents in talking about race to their children.

## **Structure**

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria has ten chapters divided into five parts. In Part I, "A Definition of Terms," Tatum explains her understanding of race and racial identity. The first chapter, "Defining Racism," opens the book with her controversial definition of racism as a system of advantage based on race. In the second chapter, "The Complexity of Identity," Tatum tries to complicate the picture of race and racism that she discusses in Chapter One. Part II, "Understanding Blackness in a White Context," focuses specifically on race, racial identity and the experiences of Black Americans as Black children develop into adults. Chapter Three focuses on childhood and Chapter Four focuses on identity development in adolescence. Finally, Chapter Five focuses on racial identity in adulthood.

Part III, "Understanding Whiteness in a White Context," contains two chapters which analyze the nature of White racial identity and its relationship to affirmative action. Chapter Six explains some contradictions in the ordinary concept of Whiteness, whereas Chapter Seven is a rousing defense of affirmative action as compatible and not threatening to a positive White identity.

Part IV, "Beyond Black and White," has two chapters as well, focusing on non-Black minority groups. Chapter Eight discusses the unique challenges of being Latino, American Indian and Asian Pacific American citizens and Chapter Nine explains identity development in multiracial families. Finally, Part V, "Breaking the Silence," discusses Tatum's preferred remedies for racism, which is cross-racial and intra-racial dialogue.

# Definitions

**Racism** For Tatum, racism is a system of advantage based on race, and can persist despite a lack of explicit racial attitudes.

**Racial Identity** Racial identity is a form of personal identification with a broader racial group. Often condemned as immoral, racial identity is defended by Tatum as part of developing a fulfilling conception of self.

**Racial Identity Development** Tatum's concept of racial identity development derives from psychologist William Cross. Positive racial development has five stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization and internalization-commitment

**White Privilege** White privilege connotes the systematic benefits in terms of goods, services and social status enjoyed by Whites, a privilege that they often resist recognizing.

**Affirmative Action** Affirmative Action is a government program that aims to undo racial privileges enjoyed by dominant racial groups in the United States since 1965.

**Goal-Based Affirmative Action** Goal-Based Affirmative Action explicitly sets the goal of increasing racial diversity and undermining racial prejudice at the universities or schools that employ it as a policy.

**Racial Dialogue** Tatum is a big proponent of racial dialogue as a path towards reducing and eliminating racial tensions.

**Fear and Isolation** Fear and isolation are the costs of failing to engage in constructive racial dialogue and allowing racial tensions to persist unaddressed.

**Whiteness** Whiteness is a confusing but important racial category for those who enjoy dominant social status in the United States.

# Themes

## **The Goodness of Racial Identity**

Many Americans and Western Europeans may be inclined to think that racial identity is a bad idea. After all, races are socially constructed categories and racial identity has been linked to some seriously bad behavior over the last two-hundred years. An ideal of individualism seems like a necessary corrective to the racial and non-racial collectivism of the 20th century. But Tatum begs to differ. In her view, racial identity can have nasty downsides only when used to impose unequal systems of advantage on others. However, racial identities can be constructed for other reasons as well.

First, racial identity can help oppressed groups resist their oppressors. Tatum repeatedly stresses that in many cases affirming one's racial identity as a minority group is not really optional, as it is necessary to organize in order to fight off, in particular, American Whites. Black racial identity was crucial for liberation movement after liberation movement. Similarly, Tatum encourages racial identity formation for any number of minority groups who she broadly links together as "People of Color."

Second, racial identity can simply be another source of life-affirming forms of personal and group identity. She often points out how coming to identify as Black helps people of African descent find self-worth and link themselves to a community. Strikingly, Tatum argues that Whites should develop their racial identity as well, but primarily through consistent struggle to undo negative White stereotypes and fight White privilege.

## **The Nature of Racism and Its Social Costs**

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* is Tatum's concept of racism. Typically one understands racism as some set of explicit attitudes on the part of one concerning the superiority of her racial group to another or, at least, to denigrate others on the basis of race. That is, racism is seen primarily as a mental attitude. However, Tatum argues that racism is any "system of advantage" based on race, such that an entire society could remain unaware of racist attitudes and yet have racism persist. Tatum's definition also means that in the United States Blacks cannot be racist because they are not part of the system of advantage based on race - only Whites are. So the nature of racism in the United States is to promote the power of Whites at the expense of all others.

Racism has substantial social costs, however, for both the dominant and subordinate racial groups. Subordinate racial groups suffer in obvious ways, in terms of deprived opportunities and social alienation. However, Tatum emphasizes that Whites suffer from racism as well. First, they are often guilt-stricken when made aware of White privilege and feel a terrifying inability

to speak on racial matters for fear of reprimand. Racism in general keeps the dominant group from being able to be honest with themselves about the society in which they live.

## **The Power of Open Discussion**

While some of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* is critical, most of it is actually quite positive. Tatum's consistent emphasis is on opening up racial dialogue. Silence is deadly, for Tatum, since unexposed racial tensions are ones that continue to fester and harm both dominant and subordinate groups. Only by drawing attention to White privilege and the system of advantage that creates it can racism really be eliminated and a new unity between all races be achieved.

But Tatum sees dialogue as having power in a number of distinct contexts. It is particularly important cross-rationally. Whites must be made to see that they are privileged and Blacks, among others, must have the opportunity to vent their frustrations. However, intraracial dialogue is also important. In particular, Whites should have racial dialogue to openly vent their fears, alienation and guilt and Blacks should have dialogue in order to build an empowering sense of community.

However, a key form of dialogue is that between parents and children of all sorts. In order to break the cycle of racism, parents have to be clear about racial differences and what they amount to and their moral significance. Without open discussion, Black and White children will absorb the "smog" of racism that pervades American society. Blacks will internalize negative Black stereotypes and Whites will as well. In this way, intergenerational dialogue is a crucial component of the sort of discursive healing that Tatum defends.

# Quotes

1. “The impact of racism begins early. Even in our preschool years, we are exposed to misinformation about people different from ourselves.” Chap. 1
2. “Another related definition of racism, commonly used by antiracist educators and consultants, is 'prejudice plus power.' Radical prejudice when combined with social power—access to social, cultural, and economic resources and decision-making—leads to the institutionalization of racist policies and practices.” Chap. 1
3. “In the absence of dissonance, this dimension of identity escapes conscious attention.” Chap. 2
4. “The dominant group is seen as the norm for humanity.” Chap. 2
5. “Our ongoing examination of who we are in our full humanity, embracing all of our identities, creates the possibility of building alliances that may ultimately free us all.” Chap. 2
6. “While some may think it is a burden to children to encourage this critical consciousness, I consider it a gift.” Chap. 3
7. “We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism.” Chap. 4
8. “[The Million Man March] was an affirming and definition-expanding event for Black men. And despite the White commentators that continuously offered their opinions about the march on television, it seemed to me that, for the participants, White people were that day irrelevant.” Chap. 5
9. “Though it can also be 'complicated and lonely,' it is also liberating, opening doors to new communities, creating possibilities for more authentic connections with people of color, and in the process, strengthening the coalitions necessary for genuine social change.” Chap. 6
10. “Several years ago, one young White woman wrote the following sentence in her essay: 'I am in favor of affirmative action except when it comes to my jobs.' I wrote in response, 'Which jobs have your name on them?’” Chap. 7
11. “That is the trick. Remaining anchored in a positive sense of one's cultural identity in the face of racism is an antidote to alienation and despair.” Chap. 8
12. “The creation of well-adjusted multiracial families, whether through adoption or through the union of parents of different racial backgrounds, is clearly possible, but not automatic. Considerable examination of one's own racial identity is required.” Chap. 9
13. “Some people say there is too much talk about race and racism in the United States. I say that there is not enough.” Chap. 10
14. “We must begin to speak, knowing that words alone are insufficient. But I have seen that meaningful dialogue can lead to effective action. Change is possible. I remain hopeful.” Chap. 10

## Topics for Discussion

- A. What do you think of Tatum's definition of racism as a system of advantage based on race? What would be a better definition of race?
- B. Explain Tatum's stage-based concept of racial identity development. Do you find it helpful and illuminating? If not, why not?
- C. Tatum is a vigorous defender of developing racial identity. What might a critic claim about her defense? What might she say in response?
- D. Tatum is a vigorous defender of goal-based affirmative action. How is this form of affirmative action distinctive from other types of affirmative action? What are the advantages of goal-based affirmative action and why does Tatum think it justified?
- E. Do you think that Tatum's criticisms of the ideas of Whiteness prevalent in American society are fair? Explain what they are and assess them.
- F. What do you think of Tatum's discussion of other racial groupings other than American Blacks and Whites? Do you think that her general classification of all non-White groups as "people of color" is useful? Helpful? Fair?
- G. Explain Tatum's concept of constructive racial dialogue and its advantages and disadvantages. Offer your own alternative or defend Tatum's view against alternatives.