# 'Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?': A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity Study Guide

## 'Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?': A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity by Beverly Daniel Tatum

# Contents

# Plot Summary

Beverly Tatum, a psychologist who studies racial identity, presents here a book about the development of racial identity and its connection to the racism prevalent in American society at the turn of the 20th century. The book focuses primarily on Black-White relations in childhood and adolescence. Tatum begins the book with an examination of the terms in which racism is understood. She first offers her admittedly controversial understanding of racism as a system of advantage based on race. That is, racism does not necessarily require any one person to harbor explicit racist attitudes. Instead, it is simply a social state in which race assigns some groups greater social and material goods than others. Due to her definition, Tatum accepts the admittedly unusual idea that Blacks cannot be racist, since their racial prejudices do not sustain or rest on a system of advantage. Racial identity, Tatum argues, is developing a sense of self in terms of one's racial classification. She maintains, in contrast to many, that the development of racial identity is healthy and natural and that it can be done despite the negative stereotypes placed on minorities in particular. These matters are discussed in Part I of the book.

Part II focuses on understanding the idea of Black identity in the United States, particularly the identity of that group of Americans descended in part from African slaves. Tatum describes the process by which young children become aware of race and the risks associated with growing up in a racial society of Black children internalizing negative stereotypes. In adolescence, focus on racial identity becomes more complex and explicit, and Tatum encourages the development of a positive, affirming racial identity for Black people. Finally Tatum focuses on racial identity in adulthood, about how to develop and maintain it. Part III focuses on Whiteness and explains why being White is a complicated social state, since Whites see their activities and characteristics as normal and racially neutral. Tatum addresses the role of affirmative action in combating White privilege and she vigorously defends it. Affirmative action should be goal-based to undermine the system of advantage that extends privileges to White people.

Part IV recognizes that racial identity is far from confined to Whites and Blacks, but extends to many Americans that Tatum classifies into three groups: Latino, American Indian and Asian Pacific. She tries to extend her concept of racial identity to these groups as well and to the challenges presented by multiracial families. In Part V, Tatum encourages explicit dialogue about race, as she does throughout the book, and offers advice for how to ensure that such dialogue is constructive and validating. In general, Tatum is a vigorous defender of multiculturalism, group identity based on race and open dialogue.

# Part I, A Definition of Terms, Chapter 1, Defining Racism,

## Part I, A Definition of Terms, Chapter 1, Defining Racism, Summary and Analysis

Author Beverly Tatum opens Chapter One by pointing out that despite the perceptions of a few, racism still exists. It can be seen on television, through housing discrimination, in newspapers and lending practices. The social impact of racism begins early in life, even in preschool. The experience of children is limited to people very much like them and they can internalize false assumptions about other groups without challenge. For instance, nearly all children will draw a figure with a feather and a tomahawk when asked to sketch a Native American. In one course Tatum taught, a child denied that Cleopatra could be black because she was "beautiful."

Prejudice, in Tatum's view, is a preconceived judgment based on limited information. Prejudices are practically inescapable. Revealing prejudice requires learning omitted social information and reflecting on one's preconceived notions of differences between racial and ethnic groups. Tatum argues that racism is simply a form of prejudice. Racism is a system of advantage based on race which restricts access to power and privilege. Racism, then, goes above and beyond simple prejudice. The system of racism is often internalized by oppressed groups, who accept the tacit assumptions of the dominant group. Even though Tatum acknowledges that many whites feel powerless, they still benefit from white privilege. They have not asked for their superior privileges and often receive them without realizing it. But pointing out that it exists elicits pain, anger and guilt on the part of whites, which often hinders discussion. It directly challenges white Americans' belief that they live in a meritocracy.

Tatum is careful to define her terms. While people of color can be prejudiced against whites, they are not racist in the technical sense of the term because they do not benefit from racism. While there are exceptions, people of color are systematically disadvantaged. This may upset white people, even if much active, explicit racism has disappeared. They can still benefit from passive racism, an ongoing cycle of domination that carries itself forward by the inertia of doing nothing. Tatum admits that whites do not benefit equally from racism and that blacks do not suffer equally from racism either.

There is still a question about why whites should care about racism. What is the cost to whites, after all? Tatum argues that while economic productivity may be hurt by racism, the real cost to whites is psychological. They suffer from fears about colored people, from their feeling of social incompetence in racially mixed scenarios, their feelings of alienation from black citizens and white family members who marry into black families. Ending racism is in the best interests of all.

Tatum ends the chapter by defending her use of the term "people of color" to refer to all racial groups other than whites. She refers to African-Americans as "blacks." All such terms have their advantages and disadvantages. Language is imperfect when it comes to social constructs but at least the terms she uses can open the door for a conversation. Racial identity development is the focus of the book, so conversation as a means towards identity development is important.

# Part I, A Definition of Terms, Chapter 2, The Complexity of Identity

## Part I, A Definition of Terms, Chapter 2, The Complexity of Identity Summary and Analysis

Personal identity is a complicated matter and is composed of many factors. Some of these factors are social because we understand ourselves largely in terms of the views others have of ourselves. Tatum highlights racial identity as an example but recognizes that racial identity is mediated by other dimensions, such as gender, sexual orientation and religion. Identity is often understood in terms of one's cohort group, the common features one shares with those she socializes with most. Erik Erikson, the psychologist who coined the term "identity crisis" understood personal identity as located in a communal culture but as the result of both biological and cognitive changes in development. Identity is constructed out of two co-evolving processes of personal reflection and observation of the behavior of others. Many people have multiple identities that they struggle to make cohesive over their entire lives.

Tatum will sometimes run an experiment in classes with young students to write down as many responses to an "I am ____." question as they can in sixty seconds. She consistently finds that members of dominant groups rarely list their dominant traits while those in subordinate groups usually list their subordinating traits. White children do not mention that they are white, but black children mention that they are black. Girls mention being female, but boys do not mention being male. The dominant group experiences no subordination and so there is no cognitive dissonance between her high regard for herself and being regarded as lowly by others. Our attention is naturally drawn to those parts of ourselves that others notice. So we are partly defined by what dominant groups see. There are many categories of otherness, so the experience can be ubiquitous for individuals along different dimensions.

Tatum distinguishes between dominant and subordinate groups. Dominant groups benefit from systems of racism (and other isms) whereas subordinate groups suffer because of them. The experience of domination and subordination differ substantially. Dominant groups often unknowingly set the parameters for permissible behavior and appearance. Their traits are seen as normal, the subordinate's traits as defective or substandard. For example, smart black children are often seen as anomalies, whereas smart white children are not. Further, the dominant groups need rationalizations for their positions of power and are upset when the power relation is pointed out. They do not understand the experience of subordinates but have a greater need to recognize it. The subordinated group is already aware of it but they cannot focus too much on it since they must struggle to survive. They often do not respond directly to oppression and instead develop passive methods of resistance. They often engage in "not-learning" but not engaging directly with dominant educators.

Tatum believes that people can move beyond their conceptual limitations but that it is difficult. Relations of domination are pervasive, but all persons can be free of them by building alliances with one another. She is not proposing to collapse multiple dimensions of identity but instead to focus on one dimension often neglected in discussions of race and power.

# Part II, Understanding Blackness in a White Context, Chapter 3, The Early Years

## Part II, Understanding Blackness in a White Context, Chapter 3, The Early Years Summary and Analysis

Tatum often opens race seminars with adults by asking them about their first race-related memory. Rather than asking people to share the memories (which often makes them uncomfortable), she asks them to describe their emotional reactions. The answers range from curiosity to fear. These memories lead us to ask how kids make sense of these experiences when they occur. Black children typically have many such race-related memories, many associated with their skin tone, perhaps even its variation among blacks. We know that children can notice race as young as three years old. Tatum's own son David commented when he was three that a white mother and her black child "didn't match" and Tatum told him that they didn't have to match. Preschoolers often ask questions about race and Tatum encourages parents to simply affirm the differences and emphasize that they are not of moral importance. When pressed by their children, parents can explain that the differences are based on the presence of melanin. Often white children confuse being black with being dirty, so parents must emphasize the distinction.

In her courses on the psychology of race, Tatum often finds that parents like to brag about the colorblindness of their children, but racism is still internalized by their children. Often they simply don't discuss it. And the phenomenon continues into adulthood when even self-proclaimed antiracist whites use the word "Black" in hushed tones. Tatum points out that it is not an insult.

When addressing racism with children it is important to keep in mind their developmental stage. At very young ages, they are often confused by the color language due to their encounters with crayons. Blacks are not really "black" and whites are not really "white." Often black children are embarrassed when such questions come up in class and white teachers are uncomfortable talking about it. The tension is heightened considerably when slavery and its legacy are raised. Tatum describes how she explained slavery's legacy to her own children, about how its history was long ago and how unfair it was. She tries to paint blacks as not always passive but often resisting and that whites are not all bad, that many recognized that slavery was unfair. She encourages parents to resist the victim-victimizer language. On Tatum's view, something is wrong with the standard victim approach. Children must be empowered to use racial language in a positive way. This can be encouraged with dual representations, showing children that whites can be bad and good, and the same with blacks.

These early questions concern the development of racial identity and race "constancy" or a child's conception of the boundaries of her race with respect to other races. Often black children express self-rejection and internalized skin prejudice. Tatum, not surprisingly, recommends that it be quickly corrected. She notes the many contexts in which race can arise in children, such as staying in the sun, hair texture, and so on. Tatum notes that she wears her black hair naturally curly and that there is some cause for concern that black women who straighten their hair contribute to a "straight is better" self-conception.

Tatum argues that teaching children about race does not burden them. Instead this "critical consciousness" can be a gift. Parents help to rear "resisters." She then discusses some further examples, such as white depictions of Biblical characters and the racial subtext of children's films. Stereotypes can creep quickly into children's minds, such as when one of her own children saw a black boy running quickly past their car. Her son wondered whether he wasn't running because he stole something. Even though he did not mention black people explicitly, he still had an implicit stereotype of blacks as thieves. It is important for children to be taught to actively question such unfairness. Talking to kids about racism can help end cycles of oppression.

# Part II, Understanding Blackness in a White Context, Chapter 4, Identity Development in Adolescence

## Part II, Understanding Blackness in a White Context, Chapter 4, Identity Development in Adolescence Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of why black children seem to regularly sit together at lunch. They don't start school self-segregating. The main source of self-segregation seems to arise during puberty as children are developing their own identities. They discover lots of new divisions among types of persons and explore them and they can react in different ways (Tatum explores the strategies of diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement). Black children inevitably explore their racial identity more, because they have no control over whether they are black and will be treated as such.

Tatum finds some analysis by psychologist William Cross helpful. He describes the process of "nigrescence" or the process of racial identity formation. It contains five stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization and internalization-commitment. Tatum focuses on the first two stages for adolescents. They first absorb White ideas of superiority and sometimes internalize them before they are aware of them. Their transition to encounter arises from events that force them to feel the impact of racism. This leads to new attention to race and their sense of being assigned racially rather than to their innate abilities via, say, separate classes. Black women experience being devalued sexually and are often ignored since there are few black boys in her classes. She must also fight against the stereotype of the teenage welfare mother and drug addict. Similarly, the black boy must fight against the stereotype of the violent black man. These struggles often produce discouragement and some teachers do not help.

This process leads to the formation of an oppositional identity that produces self-segregation. Black kids feel affronted due to their experiences with racism. Their emotions are often invalidated by White children who do not understand their experience enough to be supportive. Race becomes salient as a source of action particularly as their awareness of exclusion grows along with their anger. They start to highly value their distinctive styles of speech, music, etc. that are truly Black. "White" behaviors are looked down upon and Blacks who deviate are criticized. Racially mixed grouping therefore is part of a developmental process in response to racism. And, unfortunately, cultural stereotypes of blacks do not include academic achievement so that blacks who were academically successful as children become less so as they mature. The blacks who remain academically successful need a strategy to be accepted

by Whites so they act raceless and play down their Black identity. Oppositional identities interfere with achievement, tempting educators to blame Black kids for their decline. Tatum believes that self-segregation and declining academic achievement are the result of a post-desegregation phenomenon, since this decline in achievement was not seen in segregated black schools.

Tatum argues that new images for Black children are needed. They must learn about Black intellectual achievements. They often feel affirmed by this knew knowledge. The idea is to move beyond the need to sit at the Black table, though some are not developmentally ready for that. Adults have the potential to help Black children develop their identities and to provide them with ongoing opportunities to connect with their black peers. Tatum believes that their experience of themselves as Black should be encouraged and that such development can help them share their experiences of racism with others. Black children can be brought together to talk about social issues and homework problems and racist encounters. In some schools, having small groups where such matters are discussed have had a big impact on academic achievement. Students are particularly impressed when they observe the decline in academic achievement among Black students and realize it can be changed. This is not a miracle but it helps. Black parents want their children to have a sense of personal security to respond effectively to racism. This requires constant re-education.

# Part II, Understanding Blackness in a White Context, Chapter 5, Racial Identity in Adulthood

## Part II, Understanding Blackness in a White Context, Chapter 5, Racial Identity in Adulthood Summary and Analysis

Tatum reports that she did not sit at the Black table in her cafeteria because there were too few Black students with which to do so. She did well in school and chose to go to Wesleyan University, a black school that had recently gone co-ed, so the ratio of black men to black women was seven to one. Tatum flourished socially and academically, but she could not remember the names of any white classmate. She had what Cross describes as an immersion experience, which involves a desire to surround one's self with symbols of racial identity. In this state, Blacks see Whites as irrelevant. It is a time of self-discovery and Blacks are energized by the new information they discover, such as Black history. Further stages involve reaching out to others secure in one's group identity.

Tatum conceives of herself as both perceiving and transcending race, but she admits that she is a work in progress. She then describes learning this skill as learning a second language. You are secure in your first language and branch out to learn the language of other groups.

This analogy helps to understand why black life on white campuses is often difficult and stressful. The dominant White culture's effects are often surprising to whites, because they often permit affronts to black racial identities. Tatum discusses some examples meant to illustrate how the desire by blacks to retreat into their racial group is understandable. They sense hostility and experience alienation and a lack of social integration. Universities should help blacks be more comfortable.

Tatum notes that not all Black persons go through these developmental stages. Some get stuck, and this is true regardless of educational level. Much of the attraction of the Nation of Islam to black men is that it offers a conception of Blackness that is constructive and empowering. Black women can also find similar ways of expressing their racial identity positively, especially in their identities in Black churches which despite some concerns have been a site for resisting oppression and affirming all Blacks.

The stages are also not experienced in a linear way. The development is instead circular, since the same situations occur but are experienced in different ways. Tatum explains that much of the pattern of stability and transition in midlife creates pressures

on racial identities for Blacks in the workplace. They are often pressured to act in a raceless way in order to succeed and as a result are emotionally unprepared to handle racist experiences. This makes such experiences intense, particularly in light of low expectations for Blacks. In response, some Blacks immerse themselves in the Black community outside of work. They focus on developing the racial consciousness for their children. As a result, their racial identity can gradually unfold.

# Part III, Understanding Whiteness in a White Context, Chapter 6, The Development of White Identity

## Part III, Understanding Whiteness in a White Context, Chapter 6, The Development of White Identity Summary and Analysis

Tatum argues that White identity is as important to Whites as Black identity is to Blacks. Many Whites' only sense of Whiteness is that it is "normal" but true, positive white identity should be based in reality, not in a tacitly assumed superiority. Whites need not be the Klan but accurate. Tatum does not want Whites to feel badly about being White. Instead, she wants them to recognize institutional and cultural racism. There are generally five stages that Whites pass through in dealing with race: contact, disintegration, pseudo-independent, immersion and autonomy.

Contact is the first step. Whites are initially unaware how the internalization and socialization of racism has affected them. This leads to a feeling of disintegration, a loss of self, tied to Whiteness that results from guilt. They learn about racism through encounters with Blacks, say through close friendships or romantic relationships with a person of color. They see racist incidents and the silence is broken that makes racism visible. Most Whites are not ready. Even antiracist parents are unprepared for addressing it. Whites see social inequities that contradict American ideals. The best turn their discomfort into action and resist racial experiences. They feel a pervasive responsibility, however, and this burdens them. Tatum then illustrates with some examples.

Whites, in resisting racism, often find a social pressure not to notice present with them. It becomes hard to stop noticing. Many Whites want to simply retreat into their individuality. This is compatible with the dominant American ideology of rugged individualism and meritocracy. But this ideal applies mostly to White men who have the force of the "normal" behind them. Whites come to struggle with Whiteness as a meaningful category and are troubled. To respond positively, Whites start to identify and interrupt cycles of racism. Despite the stereotype of the guilty White liberal, many become only pseudo-independent (the next developmental stage) because they identify racism but do not understand how to respond to it. They may reach out to Blacks and be rebuffed by those who are uncomfortable.

In response, Tatum recommends that Whites find most positive redefinition by allying with other White resistors of racism. Most Whites won't be martyred but do not want to feel marginalized for caring about race. They want to be agents of change, to avoid depression. Some will be suspicious of Tatum's recommendation of all-White

discussions but often it is only other Whites who can properly appreciate their mutual struggles. Their stories evoke sympathy, not anger as might be expected from Blacks. These discussions and self-reflection lead to independence and then autonomy showing a concept of Whiteness in personal identity. This autonomy will energize their efforts to oppose oppression and lead to racial self-actualization. Of course, the process is life-long and all of us are works in progress. Autonomous Whites can now benefit from multiracial interactions and develop a deep understanding of race and equality. This is often frightening, but Tatum encourages Whites to explore her suggestions.

# Part III, Understanding Whiteness in a White Context, Chapter 7, White Identity and Affirmative Action

## Part III, Understanding Whiteness in a White Context, Chapter 7, White Identity and Affirmative Action Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7 is Tatum's explanation, analysis and defense of affirmation action in the workplace. Even if Whites don't encounter racism in their private lives, they often must face racial identity in the workplace due to affirmation action-based hiring practices. Many whites feel victimized and become "hysterical" about White disadvantages. When Whites raise the reverse discrimination charge at her seminars, Tatum usually defers discussion until she can convey a basic understanding of racism as a system of advantage. Only when Whites understand White privilege can they understand the rationale for affirmative action and undermine their sense of entitlement often reflected in their classroom essays. They rarely assess affirmative action in light of the qualifications of people of color.

So what is affirmative action? One thing it is not is quotas, or numerical allocations of positions based on race. That is discriminatory and illegal. Instead, affirmative action prescribes a set of voluntary goals that are legal. They were introduced by President Johnson in 1965 through Executive order 11246. Federal contractors were required to take into account the effects of past discrimination in their hiring practices and make a good faith effort to adjust for them. These vague guidelines have led to a wide range of affirmative action programs.

Tatum distinguishes between two conceptions of affirmative action, process-oriented and goal-oriented. Process-oriented processes try to formulate an ideally fair application process that is racially blind. The idea is that if the process is fair the outcome will be fair. Many Whites support this form of affirmative action and it is certainly an improvement over the good old boy network of days past. In contrast, goal-oriented affirmative action is an open process with a general goal of righting an injustice as an end-result. This latter form raises the charge of reverse discrimination. Nonetheless, process-oriented affirmative action is often ineffective due to two factors: (i) it is hard to determine what a fair process involves and (ii) it leaves open too many opportunities for bias, say in initial recruitment, screening and so on. Bias is a smog that can creep into the process.

Tatum then explains why there is so much resistance to goal-oriented affirmative action. It usually arises from Whites assimilating an egalitarian value system with natural prejudices. In ordinary, morally unambiguous cases these Whites will avoid racist

behavior. But in cases of moral ambiguity, their racial preferences will come out. This can be brought out in a number of studies where, say, Whites are asked to rate Black and White job applications vis-à-vis one another. The bias appears clearly and is worst when Blacks are most qualified.

One advantage of affirmative action in helping Blacks avoid racism is that they do not need to notice their condition and petition for better treatment. This is good for the psychology of Blacks. To avoid accusations about reverse discrimination for goal-oriented affirmative action it is imperative to establish in advance clear and meaningful selections criteria that involve not letting the scales tip in favor of a White candidate simply because her application goes above and beyond the needs of the relevant organization. Thus Tatum comes down clearly in favor of goal-oriented affirmative action but believes that dispelling the charge of reverse racism requires appealing to a multiplicity of approaches to reducing racism and an open dialogue about affirmative action.

# Part IV, Beyond Black and White, Chapter 8, Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development

## Part IV, Beyond Black and White, Chapter 8, Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development Summary and Analysis

Part IV turns the reader's attention away from the traditional Black-White tensions to the struggles of other racial minority groups. Tatum addresses three general categories: Latinos, American Indians and Asian Pacific Americans. Oppression is part of their experience as well and they may be able to be united under a Third World consciousness. Tatum wants to apply her model of Black identity development to other racial groups via the work of Jean Phinney who identifies three stages of racial consciousness in minority groups - unexamined, searching and achievement. All groups sometimes start unaware of their disadvantages and stereotypes but they can then go on a search and achieve racial integration.

Tatum first discusses Latinos/Hispanics. They are the second largest community of color and are growing the fastest. A number of Hispanics were forced to become Americans due to the Mexican-American War in 1848, but most are immigrants. They come from many areas other than Mexico, however, such as Puerto Ricans, the most impoverished group of Hispanics. Cuban Americans escaped oppression but are often very affluent. The term 'Hispanic' is an ethnic label but not a group. There are huge variations in color but what seems to unite them all is (a) speaking Spanish and (b) the affirmation of "familism" which holds the extended family as a reference group for social support. So ingrained is familism that many Hispanics conceptualize economic success in terms of being able to support their families not, like many Whites, succeeding in order to be independent from their families. Tatum argues that attempts to integrate the ideal of familism into Hispanic school curriculum have helped to motivate Hispanics to achieve academically. The idea is to help reconcile the subculture with American culture.

Attempts to relate one's subculture to a broader culture can produce four reactions: assimilation, withdrawal, biculturalism and marginalization. Tatum illustrates with the pressure not to speak Spanish on Hispanic communities. They often see themselves as losing their language and thereby losing their culture. Children feel pressure to speak English, which can separate them from their parents. Many Hispanics pursue the

"raceless" economic and social success strategy pursued by many Blacks. This does not always guarantee broader acceptance. And yet there is discrimination based on language use. It is important to be proficient in English but this is often aided, not hindered, by bilingual education. Tatum emphasizes the importance of not suppressing native language speaking.

Native Americans constitute around two million American groups. They have a myriad of cultures, communities, economies, religions and histories. Self-identifying is complicated due to their great diversity, though they share some values, such as valuing extended family and putting group needs ahead of the individual. They also tend to emphasize the connection between all living things. American Indians often endure the cultural losses imposed upon them by white settlers with individualistic and capitalistic values. Cultural disruption of this sort is important to block and American Indians should draw on their legacy of resistance to become more self-determining and anchored in their cultural identity. Educators should resist forced assimilation as well by adding cultural studies to school curricula for American Indians.

Finally, Tatum turns to Asians, which include Pacific Islanders, East Asians, Southeast Asians and South Asians. These groups number seven million and are comprised of forty-three ethnic groups with a vast array of religious beliefs, and some without religion at all. The Chinese came first and then the Japanese, Koreans and Filipino. There are refugees from Vietnam and many Arab countries. Tatum recognizes that many have a "model minority" stereotype of many Asians, especially East Asians. They are seen as high achievers, members of honor cultures, and generally quiet. This stereotype has positive aspects but it can pit Asians against Blacks and Latinos. Often people will have the attitude of "Asians succeeded. Why can't you?" But if you look closely, Asians aren't a monolithic, generally successful group. It is important for these Asians, who in fact are often quiet, to find a political voice so as to avoid obscuring racism practiced against them.

Tatum concludes that all American racial minorities share with Blacks the need for a cultural lifeline. Assimilationist policies are bad. Distinct cultures should retain their heritage. They must resist the internalization of bad stereotypes and create their own racial identities. It is vital to interrupt all forms of racism.

# Part IV, Beyond Black and White, Chapter 9, Identity Development in Multiracial Families

## Part IV, Beyond Black and White, Chapter 9, Identity Development in Multiracial Families Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9 turns to matters of biracial development, which raises many questions. The construction of personal identity is much harder and there is no agreed model of analysis or development of such cases. Typically with White-Black mixing the "one-drop" rule is critical. Anyone with a bit of Black heritage is Black. This rule has a complex legacy that results from a desire for White purity. It is hard, however, to imagine a better model. Physical appearance, for one, won't help. Black-White biracial children have a harder time gaining acceptance in White communities.

Tatum thinks it important to clear away one misconception up-front, however. This is the idea that biracial children suffer in a particular way during childhood. This is often a rationale for rejecting biracial reproduction. But there is no empirical data that proves that they endure particular suffering. There is no necessary distress in the studies, though some of the studies are incomplete. Psychological adjustment is possible.

Tatum thinks it important for biracial children to develop a race consciousness nonetheless, even if it is a hybrid. She then reviews the biracial experience throughout development. Biracial children will become aware of their uniqueness in preschool and their parents will teach them the relevant labels, which is often counterproductive. In many cases, children will express a preference to identify with one parent over the other. In middle childhood, racial identity is made more concrete as racial categories become clearly exclusive. Parents must help children make these choices or resist them. Adolescence basically forces race choice on biracial children and biracial boys face less pressure. Biracial girls tend to stay in Black environments. Some children are strong enough to resist force. As biracial individuals reach adulthood, their more secure identity will help them to reject peer pressure. Tatum again recommends including biracial discussion in school curriculum. She ends the chapter by discussing the unique challenges raised by multiracial adoption. Such parents do well to help their children connect with other members of their race.

# Part V, Breaking the Silence, Chapter 10, Embracing a Cross-Racial Dialogue

## Part V, Breaking the Silence, Chapter 10, Embracing a Cross-Racial Dialogue Summary and Analysis

Despite those who think Americans talk too much about race, Tatum thinks that we do not talk about it enough. Racism surrounds us in the form of riots, anti-immigrant sentiment and elsewhere. It is always necessary to break the silence and to do so in ways that generate meaningful and productive dialogue. Our fear immobilizes us and we fear isolation and the hatred of others. Whites are particularly frightened. As a result, Whites often have a racial code to talk about Blacks without mentioning them by name. It often takes the form of an "us-them" relationship. Whites are most guilty of a culture of silence, since most people of color are more fluent. People of color need to break the silence in order to survive oppression. This means that all parties should be able to vent our frustrations.

Silence has great psychological costs, particularly because it maintains institutional racism and alienates us from others and ourselves. We can invalidate one another, hurting each other's feelings. We also lose the opportunity for insight. Productive conversations produce growth and a new zest for interactions with others. Those who successfully dialogue feel empowered and find new knowledge and a renewed sense of self-worth. There is a desire for more connection as well. Now it takes a lot of energy to break the silence and it requires courage. How can we find it? First, we should look to the lives of others. As a person of faith, Tatum looks to the Bible. In general, we must all learn more and try not to feel overwhelmed. Mistakes are okay and we must determine how to progress in our own way. Tatum ends by pointing towards an appendix with literature and other resources for learning how to engage in dialogue.

# Characters

## Beverly Tatum

Beverly Tatum, presently the president of Spelman College, is the author of Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? Given that the book is an extended argument in favor of her concept of racism, racial identity, its causes and remedies, she counts as the most important person in the book. Further, she reveals much about her own personality and history, so in some ways she features as a character, particularly in those aspects of the book where she describes her interactions with children, her students, her own children and adults in racial dialogue.

Tatum's opinions are made clear and explicit throughout the book. She understands racism as any system of advantage based on racism, which to many will seem both under and over inclusive. In her view, subordinated classes based on race cannot be racist (seeming under inclusive) and a society can be racist so long as the system of advantage exists even if no one is explicitly racist (seeming over inclusive). She is also a supporter of developing a distinctive racial identity, a more collectivist or anti-individualist approach to personal identity. She even argues that developing a group identity based on race can be positive and healthy, even for Whites. Tatum is also distinctive for her grouping of almost all American racial minorities as "people of color" over and against the dominant White majority. Finally, she vigorously defends goal-based affirmative action.

Tatum throughout the book reveals a mature, fearless and open concept of herself as having an autonomously formed concept of her own racial identity and confident enough in who she is to share with others.

## Blacks

Tatum is explicit about her identification as Black, a group definition meant to include almost all persons of African descent in the United States, be they mixed-race (though this is complicated) or recent immigrant groups from, say, the Caribbean Islands. Blacks are a historically oppressed group, more than any other in American society save that of American Indians. The legacy of slavery and racism continues to harm and harbor their ability to advance their goals and aims. Whites rarely recognize the system of privilege based on race that gives them better life prospects and welfare relative to Blacks.

Tatum is especially keen to defend the idea that Blacks should identify as Black people and members of the Black community. It is important to identify as Black for several reasons. First, it is important to survive oppression and fight against racist institutions. Given that Blacks are a disempowered minority, such organization is of paramount importance. Second, Blacks can derive a much improved sense of self from identifying with their race. There is an enormous amount of Black cultural achievement that can

help Blacks come to understand themselves and each other better. In general, Blacks should resist the system of racial privilege that exists in the United States and come to affirm themselves as Black individuals and as a group. Tatum goes to great lengths to explain what this identity should be and how it is best developed.

## Whites

Tatum contrasts Whiteness to Blackness as being based largely in implicit assumptions by Whites that lead them not to identify as a racial group at all. Tatum argues in favor of making these assumptions explicit and fostering a positive White identity.

## Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson is the famous psychologist who developed the idea of an identity crisis. Erikson extensively employs Erikson-based concepts of identity development as applied to race.

## Jean Baker Miller

A noted feminist and psychoanalyst, Jean Baker Miller's concept of feminist therapy influences the value-based discursive methods that Tatum recommends for resolving racial tensions.

## William Cross

William Cross is a social psychologist whose theory of "nigrescence" or Black identification heavily influences Tatum.

## American Indians

American Indians is a generic racial category for all present descendants of Native Americans. Tatum identifies them as a distinct group based on a number of common factors, not only ancestry but also common beliefs, appearance and interests and disadvantages.

## Latinos/Hispanics

Latinos are an extremely broad racial category employed by Tatum. While Latinos are of considerable regional and color variation, they are united by a common language (Spanish) and a heavy emphasis on the maintenance of large extended families.

## Asians

Tatum employs the extremely broad category of Asians to include all Arabs, Indians, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Polynesian, Laotian and Cambodian persons (with a few additional groups). These groups, she argues, do not fit the "model minority" category that many assign them.

## People of Color

People of color is a term of art that groups all Asians, Latinos, American Indians and Blacks into a single group with common interests in resisting racial prejudice from American Whites.

## Biracial Persons

Tatum focuses particularly on biracial children and the unique challenges they face growing up.

## Children

Most of Tatum's discussions about race focus on the rearing of children.

# Objects/Places

## 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.

## The United States

Almost all of Tatum's attention is focused on the United States.

## 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 collectivisms 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-racially. 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.

# Style

## Perspective

The perspective of Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria is unambiguous. Tatum defends a number of 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 in order 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. As a result, 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 in particular 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.

# Quotes

"The impact of racism begins early. Even in our preschool years, we are exposed to misinformation about people different from ourselves."
Chapter 1, pg. 3

"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."
Chapter 1, pgs. 8-9

"In the absence of dissonance, this dimension of identity escapes conscious attention."
Chapter 2, pg. 21

"The dominant group is seen as the norm for humanity."
Chapter 2, pg. 24

"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."
Chapter 2, pg. 28

"While some may think it is a burden to children to encourage this critical consciousness, I consider it a gift."
Chapter 3, pg. 47

"We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism."
Chapter 4, pg. 62

"[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."
Chapter 5, pg. 82

"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."
Chapter 6, pg. 113

"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?'"
Chapter 7, pg. 115

"That is the truck. Remaining anchored in a positive sense of one's cultural identity in the face of racism is an antidote to alienation and despair."
Chapter 8, pg. 149

"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."
Chapter 9, pg. 190

"Some people say there is too much talk about race and racism in the United States. I say that there is not enough."
Chapter 10, pg. 193

"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."
Chapter 10, pg. 206

# Topics for Discussion

What do you think of Tatum's definition of racism as a system of advantage based on race? Explain her view and its intuitive and counter intuitive aspects. What would be a better definition of race?

Explain Tatum's stage-based concept of racial identity development. Do you find it helpful and illuminating? If not, why not?

Tatum is a vigorous defender of developing racial identity. What might a critic claim about her defense? What might she say in response?

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?

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.

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?

Explain Tatum's concept of constructive racial dialogue and its advantages and disadvantages. Offer your own alternative or defend Tatum's view against alternatives.