

Running head: WHY DO THEY ALL SIT TOGETHER

Why Do They All Sit Together?:
A Student Affairs Perspective
Erin Lind
Azusa Pacific University

“Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” is just one of the multitude of questions that has been posed to Beverly Daniel Tatum, PH. D. in her many years of service as a clinical psychologist and professor. These valid inquiries and concerns, brought to Tatum by parents and educators alike, about racism and racial identity development, prompted her to write a book to address the questions for a wider audience. Tatum (1999) herself states that it was not her “intention to write for an academic audience” but instead to write a book that would in effect “talk to the many parents, educators, and community leaders” (p. xviii) who were the type of individuals that would attend her seminars. So the question is how does a book written for this audience transcend into the realm of student affairs and become a tool to be used in practice? The answer lies in the present state of college campuses across America. “The number of racially and ethnically diverse students on our college campuses has profoundly increased” (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003, p. iii) while there is a “lack of diversity among student affairs practitioners” (Taub & McEwen, 2006, p. 207). Student affairs professionals need to be aware of issues of racism, ethnic identity development and ways in which to teach, model and program this knowledge through collaboration and the co-curriculum in institutions of higher education.

“Oh, there is still racism?” (Tatum, 1999, p. 3), this question was posed to Tatum many years ago by a White student who was quite surprised that Tatum would be teaching a course on racism. This one student’s doubt about the continued existence of racism is echoed in “almost every audience” Tatum (p. 3) addresses. According to Hogan and Mallot (2005) “it is widely recognized among contemporary social scientist that racial prejudice is expressed more covertly in American society today than it was before

the civil rights movement of the 1960's" (p. 115). Tatum entitles this covert racism as "passive racism" and defines it as "more subtle" when compared to "active racism," which she defines as "blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination" (p. 11). Tatum clings to the idea that racism is a systematic advantage determined by race. In present day America, the advantage is held by the White race and is often referred to as "White privilege" (Tatum, p. 8). This system of racism encompasses "cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals" (Tatum, p. 7).

Student affairs professionals need to be aware that racism, prejudice and privilege based on race exists. Though the statement sounds basic and obvious, Tatum makes it clear that there are misconceptions about the existence of racism and what racism looks like in American society today. Like it or not, all individuals hold some sort of prejudice, defined as a "preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information" (Tatum, 1999, p. 5) and are at an advantage or disadvantage in society based on their race. According to Tatum, this is one of the "consequences of living in a racist society" (p. 6). As noted previously, the majority of student affairs professionals are White and therefore are advantaged due to their race. It is necessary for this portion of student services personnel to recognize their advantage, recognize and admit their prejudices and be willing to look beyond those preconceived ideas of other races (and groups) so they can serve the student population in a fair and equitable manner. This is not to say that student affairs professionals who are not of a privileged race or group do not need to examine their prejudices, they too need to be sure they are examining their personal beliefs about other races or groups of people.

“Is my skin brown because I drink chocolate milk?” (Tatum, 1999, p. 31) was a question asked of Tatum by her own preschool aged son. He and another preschooler had had a discussion about why Tatum’s son’s skin was brown. The question raised by Tatum’s son was a glimpse into his racial identity development in action. Racial identity can be defined as “a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1993, p. 181). Though Tatum’s young son did not, most likely, have a sense that he shares a common background with other Black individuals he was becoming aware that his skin color is different than others. Though children are not colorblind, as many people tend to believe, the arduous aspect of racial identity development begins to take place during adolescence. Adolescents of all racial backgrounds begin to examine what it means to be of a particular skin color during this time in their life, but not all will progress in the same manner through the phases of the different models of racial or ethnic identity development.

Tatum discusses three models of racial and/or ethnic identity development throughout the text to help the reader grasp a better understanding of the process individuals encounter as they develop their identity in regards to race or ethnicity. In regards to Black individuals she uses “Cross’s model, referred to as the psychology of nigrescence, or the psychology of becoming Black” (Tatum, 1999, pp. 54-55). According to Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) this process is one “in which the healthy individual’s identity is transformed from one of non-Afrocentrism to Afrocentrism to multiculturalism” (pp. 73-74). Cross’ model has five stages, “pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment” (Tatum, p. 55).

Tatum invests a whole chapter to the encounter stage of Cross' model. She states that students can enter into the encounter stage as early as junior high and the transition into this stage is "typically precipitated by an event or series of events that force the young person to acknowledge the personal impact of racism" (Tatum, p. 55). This grappling "with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism" (Tatum, p. 55) is the reasoning behind the phenomenon of the Black students sitting together in the lunch room. Because they share similar experiences and are more likely to understand each other, high school students (especially of color) tend to group themselves into mono-racial groups. Most adolescents are ready to move on to the third stage of "Cross's model, immersion/emersion" which "is characterized by a strong desire to surround oneself with symbols of one's racial identity, and actively seek[ing] out opportunities to learn about one's own history and culture with the support of same-race peers" (Tatum, p. 76) by the time they reach college. Young adults who find themselves in this phase are "redefining a positive sense of self, based on an affirmation of one's racial group identity (Tatum, p. 76). The last two phases of Cross' model are very similar and can be described as being "anchored in a positive sense of racial identity" and "prepared to perceive and transcend race" (Tatum, p. 76).

To discuss White identity development, Tatum uses Helms' model which has two developmental phases, "abandonment of individual racism and the recognition of and opposition to institutional and cultural racism" and six stages "contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independent, immersion/emersion, and autonomy" (Tatum, 1999, pp. 94-95) that occur within the two phases. The contact stage "occurs when the individual encounters the idea or actuality of black people" (Evans, et. al, 1998, p. 77).

The second stage, disintegration “involves the conscious, though conflicted, acknowledgement of one’s whiteness while recognizing the moral dilemmas associated with being white” (Evans, et. al, p. 78) and is the stage in which Tatum describes many of her students. The students in this stage are uncomfortable with the ideas and facts about racism that are being presented to them and they are not too sure of what they are to do or feel about the information they are receiving. Tatum also describes some of her students as being in the reintegration stage, where “feelings of guilt or denial may be transformed into fear and anger directed toward people of color” (Tatum, p. 101). Some of Tatum’s students, who are described as being even farther along in their White identity development, are headed into the second phase of “defining a nonracist White identity” (Evans, et. al, p. 78).

In her discussion of Latino, American Indian and Asian Pacific American identity development Tatum refers to “Phinney’s model of adolescent ethnic identity development” (1999, p. 132). Though models of racial identity development do apply to individuals of other races than the one they tend to describe, the above groups tend to be better defined as ethnic groups as opposed to racial groups. Phinney’s model has three stages: “diffusion-foreclosure,” “moratorium” and “identity achievement” (Evans, et. al, 1998, pp 80-81). Tatum does not go into great depth of identity development within these three groups, but she does discuss some of the issues that these groups of students face due to their ethnicity. One example would be the myth that Asian Pacific Americans are the “model minority.” Kawaguchi’s (2003) publication on the college experience of Asian Pacific American students echoed Tatum’s point that though “the stereotype might

initially seem to be a positive and beneficial one...it has had some negative effects” (p. 160).

Student affairs professionals should be knowledgeable in student development theory, including racial and ethnic identity development. It is imperative for those in the field to be able to assess where students are in their development so their current needs can be met and also so their development can be guided onward. Knowledge of racial and ethnic identity development can assist student affairs professionals in various aspects of their profession. Two examples would be being aware of the research and theory supports the developmental need for multi-cultural centers on college campuses (Patton, 2006) or the recognition “that Asian Pacific American students live their own unique minority experience” (Kawaguchi, 2003, p. 24) and “campus-wide programs, including cultural celebrations, discussions on the Asian model minority myth, ethnic identity, and race relations” need to be designed and implemented to “promote a better understanding of Asian Pacific American cultures and...students’ experiences” (p. 26).

Tatum uses the last chapter of the book to urge her readers to “continually break the silence about racism whenever we can” (1999, p. 193). She acknowledges that there is a fear that comes with speaking out against racism. A fear of “isolation from friends and family, ostracism for speaking of things that generate discomfort, rejection by those who may be offended by what we have to say” (Tatum, p. 194) and the list goes on. But, Tatum holds to the idea that if individuals succumb to fear, society pays the price. All parties involved lose the ability to fully develop their racial identity, because there is a lack of freedom to share their experiences.

Student affairs professionals can not succumb to the fear of speaking out about and against racism. The foundations of the profession hold to the ideal of the development of the whole student and racial and ethnic identity are definitely part of who students are and therefore, student affairs professionals need to model fearlessness in regards to racism. It is a large task to undertake, but it is essential so that students can have a stable and healthy environment to learn and develop.

As Torres, et al. (2003) discusses it is important to review and expand on current theories of racial identity development so “the appropriate application for students who attend higher education institutions” (p. iv) can be made. Tatum’s (1999) book does just that by delving into questions about race to provide “an understanding of racial identity, the meaning each of us has constructed or is constructing about what it means to be a White person or a person of color in a race-conscious society” (p. xviii). Student affairs professionals can use this book as a tool to better understand themselves and their students in regards to racial and ethnic identity so that developmentally appropriate programs across the co-curriculum can be designed and implemented to the benefit of the student, the institution and the world.

References

- Evans, J., Forney, D. S., Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Helms, J. E. (1993). Introduction: Review of racial identity terminology. In J. E. Helms (Ed.), *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research and practice* (pp. 3-8). Westport, CT: Praeger
- Hogan, D. E. & Mallot, M. (2005). Changing racial prejudice through diversity education. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(2), 115-125.
- Kawaguchi, S. (2003). Ethnic identity development and collegiate experience of asian pacific American students: Implications for practice. *NASPA Journal*, 40(3), 13-29.
- Patton, L. D. (2006). The voice of reason: A qualitative examination of black student perceptions of black student centers. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(6), 628-646.
- Tatum, B. D. (1999). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?: And other conversations about race*. New York: Basic Books.
- Taub, D. J. (2006). Decision to enter the profession of student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(2), 206-216.
- Torres, V., Howard-Hamilton, M. F., & Cooper, D. L. (2003). Identity development of diverse populations: Implications for teaching and administration in higher education. In Kezar, A. J. (Ed.), *ASHE-ERIC higher education report*, 29(6). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.