

INTERVIEW WITH BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM edited transcript

Beverly Daniel Tatum, is a clinical psychologist, professor and President of Spelman College. She is an expert on race relations and author of Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Assimilation Blues: Black Families in a White Community. [Underlining added by CT project]

How does racism affect everyone?

When I speak to audiences about this topic of race and racism, one of the questions that I often ask is for them to reflect on their own earliest race-related memory. In general, you can say that people of color tend to have earlier memories - particularly if they grew up in the United States - than those who are white. Having said that, when you ask them what emotion is associated with this early memory, almost everyone, both people of color and white people, will talk about things like fear, anger, sadness, shame, embarrassment, sometimes guilt.

What's really striking to me about this is not only do so many people have this experience, but when asked if they had discussed their experience with an adult or a parent or a teacher at the time, many people said they did not. They already knew that it was a topic you weren't supposed to talk about. Somehow the adults in the environment had communicated to them that this is something we don't discuss. Sometimes the people of color will say I was upset by what happened to me, and I was too embarrassed to tell anybody else about it. Sometime white adults will say that it was a trusted adult who was the source of the confusion. One of the things that makes the process so insidious is that it comes from people we know, love and trust. It's your mother who rented the videotape that was full of stereotypical images. It's your favorite uncle who tells the jokes at Thanksgiving. It's your next door neighbor who makes the casual comments that imbeds. It's your favorite English teacher who leaves writers of color off the syllabus.

What's really significant to me about this is not only that people have these negative experiences, but they've also internalized the idea that we shouldn't talk about it. And that, I think, is really problematic if we are ever going to get beyond the issue of racism as an impediment to social justice in our society because we have to be able to talk about it order to move beyond it.

How can we have control over racial stereotypes?

"The Lion King" was a very popular film, and my kids saw it more than once, I will confess. However, when I watched it with them, I pointed out some concerns I had. I told my children that I was bothered by the fact that the hyenas - who were the bad guys of the film - have voices that make them sound like black people and Spanish speaking people. Now, some people would say I'm making too much of that. But think about the fact that young children watch movies like this repeatedly and these messages are seen over and over again. They do have an effect on how we view others.

Now, am I saying that you should never let your children see a film that has a stereotype in it? No. What I'm saying is that you need to help your kids think critically about them so they can recognize them as stereotypes and think critically about whether they make sense or not.

Once, while we were driving through a city not far from where we live, my son saw a young black man running down the street. He said to me, "Why is that kid running?" I said, "I don't know why he's running. Why do you think he's running?" And my son said, "Maybe he stole something." And I was horrified to hear him make that comment. Where would he have gotten that idea?

So I said, "Well, what would make you think so?" He said, "You know, we're in a city. Sometimes people in cities steal things." And I pointed out that we have been in the city many times, parked our car, and never had a problem. I've had one thing stolen from my car in my life, and that happened in the small town, predominantly white, in which I live now. Well clearly he sees the nightly news. He watches television. He had absorbed those messages.

Books, computer games, the Web, television - there are so many places that we can be exposed to stereotypes, that we can be exposed to distorted information. And there is a whole universe of information that we're not getting. Think about these stereotypes, these omissions, these distortions as a kind of environment that surrounds us, like smog in the air. We don't breathe it because we like it. We don't breathe it because we think it's good for us. We breathe it because it's the only air that's available.

And in the same way, we're taking in misinformation not because we want it. When you or your child sits in front of the television on Saturday morning watching cartoons, you're not saying let's have our daily diet of stereotypes today. But you're being exposed to them because they're just there, in the commercials, in the images that you're watching. And it's so pervasive that you don't even notice it sometimes. In fact, a lot of the time you don't notice it.

We're all breathing in misinformation. We're all being exposed to stereotypes, and we all have to think about how we have been impacted by that. You sometimes hear people say there is not a prejudiced bone in my body. But I think when somebody makes that statement, we might gently say to them check again. That if we have all been breathing in smog, we can't help but have our thinking shaped by it somehow. As a consequence, we all have work to do. Whether you identify as a person of color, whether you identify as a white person, it doesn't matter. We all have been exposed to misinformation that we have to think critically about.

Background Readings – Race the Power of an Illusion
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A fuller version of the interview is available at:

http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-04.htm