Context Of Black Identity Compared To White Identity

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Historical Foundations of Black and White Racial Identity

Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, in her book “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria”, investigates the development of racial identity in all aspects of Caucasian and African-American children’s lives. Tatum investigates the reasons as to why many African-American teenagers end up at the same table at the school cafeterias in racially mixed schools. Tatum also notes that White teenagers in these racially mixed schools also sit together at the same cafeteria table. Tatum says that people rarely comment about the white students sitting at the same cafeteria table, but the same people loudly question why the black students sit at the same table during lunch. This in itself is a comparison of the White identity and the black identity by Tatum.

Why do these people not question why the whites sit together at the same cafeteria table during lunch? The reason behind this is that the white race is considered superior to almost any other race by almost everybody in the world, including the blacks themselves. Tatum states that Principals of these schools, teachers, white students and black students who don’t sit at the same table as those blacks who sit together want to know why black students sit together at the same table in the cafeteria. Racism dates as far back as the time of slavery of the Africans who were taken into America as slaves. Research carried out on the roots of African-American relationships shows that millions of African slaves were brought to the U.S.A. to work as slaves on plantations in the 17th and 18th centuries.

This is evidence that the whites viewed themselves as superior, thereby enslaving the blacks who are the Black Americans today. The context of Black identity compared to White identity is that whites are defined by colour, and they are the dominant race compared to Blacks. The whites stereotype the blacks in a lot of ways. A white person can do something which is considered normal to other people, but if an African-American does the same thing, he/she is considered or judged inappropriately. This paper makes an effort to compare and contrast the context of the Black identity compared to the White identity.

Adolescent Racial Awareness and Social Grouping

In her book, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum explains why Black students sit together at the same table in the cafeteria during lunch. Tatum says that racial crisis intensifies as a child grows up. During elementary school, children are unaware of their skin colour, and they interact freely with other kids who come from different neighbourhoods (Tatum 374). The fact that one is White makes them considered superior to Blacks (Tatum 377). The kid encounters cases of racism which are in society as he/she grows, even though this happens when they are unaware.

As the kid moves from elementary school to middle school, he/she interacts with other children from different neighbourhoods at a higher rate than ever before, and therefore, grouping by race occurs to a certain degree. Tatum states that kids of different neighbourhoods who attended the school from kindergarten to eighth grade also develop racial clustering by the sixth or seventh grade despite staying together throughout their elementary school life. As the kid reaches puberty, he/she comes across racism at a more individual level, and this motivates the kid to pursue his/her racial identity.

Black Identity Formation and Shared Experience

The main reason that Black students sit together at the same table in school cafeterias is that they feel the urge to identify with their race and determine their racial identity as Blacks. Tatum states that as children enter adolescence, they begin exploring identity questions such as “Who am I? Who can I be?” For a Black student, these questions involve asking oneself what it means to be Black. Adolescents of colour have been found to explore their ethnic identities compared to their White counterparts as a result of the dominant and subordinate status in society. Dr. Beverly Tatum questions why Black youths particularly think about themselves in terms of an ethnic group.

Tatum says that the reason behind Black youths thinking about themselves as a race is because that is the same way that the rest of the world perceives them. Tatum states that how we perceive ourselves is shaped by the kind of messages we get from the people who are around us. When Black youth reach puberty, the ethnic content in the messages they receive from people around them intensifies. This encourages the Black students to cluster at the same table in cafeterias.

Racial Exclusion, Inferiority, and Educational Consequences

Black students experience an array of events which make them question their position in society. These events make these Black students feel out of place. As the young adult goes through these events, he/she achieves a greater understanding of race and what it means to be a part of a group which is targeted by ethnicity and racism. Stereotyping is one event that makes Black students

believe that their white counterparts are better than them and that some activities are only meant for white students. Being smart academically, the type of music one listens to, how one dresses, and how one talks are what determine whether one is White or Black (Tatum 381).

When Black students sit at the table during lunch, they are able to share their experiences both with the school and with the community. They are able to assist each other in figuring out their identity as Blacks and what society requires of them. When sitting together at the same tables, Blacks are able to discuss what affects them, though they do not see beyond their skin colour. Black students perceive White students as superior, and this sense of inferiority affects many areas of their lives. Most Black students think that it is only Whites who are intelligent enough to be at the top of the class.

This conclusion that Whites are superior to Blacks makes most of them not go past high school because of this sense of inferiority. It is ironic how Black students alienate other black students who perform exemplarily in class, calling them white. Black students who sit together at the same table rarely associate with Black students who perform well or who listen to another genre of music apart from hip-hop or those who don't sit together with other blacks at the same table. The situation with these Black students who are rejected by their Black counterparts is quite challenging as they neither fit in the Black peer groups nor the White peer groups.

White Identity, Privilege, and Unequal Social Conditions

In elementary school, kids could make racial jokes with each other despite being from different neighbourhoods. Racially targeted jokes in high school were critical and taken seriously by the targeted group. The Whites make jokes about Blacks, which are taken personally by Blacks. Even in the comedy world, most of the jokes are racist, targeting mostly the Black community. Funny enough, most of these jokes are given even by Blacks themselves. White superiority is evident in today's television and film industry. Whites are given important roles such as doctors, presidents or lawyers, while Blacks are given minor roles such as criminals or other smaller roles. It is also ironic how a Black person can call a fellow Black person a "nigga", but if a White person called the same person that same word, it is considered racist.

White identity is evident in the way a White parent prevents his/her child from going to Black neighbourhoods, claiming that it is not secure to be there. The reason why this parent may perceive the Blacks as dangerous is unknown, as Blacks are very friendly people. Black identity is evident when a Black girl tells her family that she wants to get married to a White man. Most Black families would not accept their daughters marrying White men or their sons marrying white girls. White identity can also be seen in the judicial system. When a White person commits a crime and the judge is white, he/she is likely to get a smaller penalty compared to a Black person who committed the same crime. In a White school, a White student is less likely to be punished than a Black student when committing

the same crime.

White identity is also evident in that almost everything that is nice belongs to Whites. The Whites always receive better things compared to their Black counterparts. The best neighbourhoods belong to Whites, with the best schools, the best hotels, the best jobs, and many more.

Conclusion

According to T. Wise, few whites have ever thought of their position as resulting from racial preferences, which is also a demarcation of privilege that is the necessary flipside of discrimination (Wise, 2003). Being White comes with privileges that Black people don't have. According to Peggy McIntosh, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions such as maps, codebooks, passports, clothes, blank checks, tools and visas." This tries to define the scope of privilege between the Whites and the Blacks.

In conclusion, the racial clustering of students at tables in school cafeterias is a result of seeking identity and is a way of sharing their experiences as a racial group. Seeking self-identity is the result of adolescence, which makes people of a certain race aware of their racial identity as they try to answer the questions of self-identity of who they are and who they want to become. White identity is also superior to Black identity in a lot of ways. Whites have many privileges compared to Blacks in terms of education opportunities, living standards, and many other aspects of life.

Works Cited

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