

# When You're Called a Racist

By Beverly Daniel Tatum  
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**F**OR many educators, few words elicit a more visceral, defensive response than the accusation of racism. Well-intentioned teachers and administrators do not want to be seen as promoting bigotry and hatred. But the strained nature of U.S. race relations is such that whenever white educators are interacting with students of color and their parents, there is often the fear of the "r" word.

Fear of the "racist" label often leads to dysfunctional communication between school and home, disadvantaging students of color. A case in point: A black female student in a voluntary desegregation program is bused from her urban neighborhood to a suburban school. Her homework is done haphazardly, sometimes not at all. Her manner in class is disinterested, though not disruptive. Yet, the teacher makes few critical comments on her work, and gives her no feedback about her classroom demeanor. The teacher never contacts her parents to discuss her progress or lack of it.

One reason for this limited feed-

back might be the teacher's low expectations. Perhaps he believes this is the best the student can do. Another reason I have heard educators give to explain this behavior, however, is their fear negative feedback will be perceived as racist. Thus, they withhold criticism, providing less than honest feedback.

This pattern, so often reported to me by parents and teachers, has been demonstrated in research studies. In a recent study, white reviewers were more likely to praise a mediocre essay when they believed the author black,

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and more likely to criticize the same essay when they believed the author white. A related study, however, showed that white reviewers communicating their impressions to a third party are more critical of blacks than whites. The implication of these findings is that, as some educators seek to avoid charges of racism by withholding negative feedback, some black students (and perhaps other students of color) are in danger of having their work evaluated negatively and never hearing about it.

### **Racist in Itself**

Of course, the irony is that such behavior is in itself racist. It denies students of color the honest feedback needed to improve their performance, the kind white students regularly receive. Such differential treatment based on race is discriminatory and contributes to the underachievement of many students of color.

"Of course," you may be saying, "all students deserve honest feedback. But I don't want to be called a racist, and some students of color use that word like a weapon. How am I supposed to react? I'm not a racist! I don't have a prejudiced bone in my body!"

To this claim, I respectfully reply, "Check again." Many of us grew up in neighborhoods with limited opportunities to interact with people different from our own families. There is still a great deal of social segregation in our society. Consequently, most early information we receive about "others"—people racially, religiously, or socio-economically different from ourselves—does not come as firsthand

experience. The secondhand information we do receive has often been distorted, shaped by cultural stereotypes, and left incomplete.

To highlight this process: Several years ago, one of my students' research projects probed preschoolers' conceptions of Native Americans. She asked three- to four-year-old children at a local day care center to draw a Native American. Most were stumped; they didn't know what one was. But when she asked them to draw an Indian, they readily complied.

Almost every picture included one central feature: feathers! Several also included a weapon—a knife or tomahawk—as part of the drawing, and described the person in violent or aggressive terms. Although this group of children, almost all of whom were white, did not live near a large Native American population, and probably had little if any personal interaction with a Native American, they all had internalized an image of what Native Americans were like.

How did they know? Cartoon images, in particular the Walt Disney cartoon movie *Peter Pan*, were cited as their primary source of information. At age 3, they already had a set of stereotypes in place. These stereotypes to which they have been exposed become the foundation for adult prejudices.

Sometimes the assumptions we make about others come not from what we have been told or have seen on television or in books, but from what we have *not* been told. The distortion of historical information about people of color leads young people (and older

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ones, too) to make assumptions that may go unchallenged for a long time.

For example, a young woman, preparing to be a high school English teacher, was dismayed she had never learned about any African-American authors in her English courses. How was she to teach about them to her future students when she hadn't learned about them herself? A white male student in the class responded to this discussion with frustration: "It's not my fault that blacks don't write books." Had one of his elementary, high school, or college teachers ever told him there were no black writers? Probably not. Yet, because he had never been exposed to them, he had drawn his own conclusion there were none.

### **Misinformation**

Whether due to the negative media images of marginalized groups, or to the impact of disparaging jokes and casual comments made by friends and family members, or simply to omitted historical and cultural information, I assume we all enter adulthood with some (perhaps considerable) misinformation about people different from ourselves. And often that misinformation translates into prejudice.

Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information. I assume we all have prejudices, not because we want them, but because they are so hard to avoid. Racial prejudice is a seemingly inescapable consequence of living in a racist society.

Cultural racism—cultural images and messages affirming the assumed superiority of whites and the assumed

inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air—sometimes so thick it is visible, other times less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we breathe it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as "smog-breathers" (and most of us don't want to be described as prejudiced), but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air? Inevitably, we are all at risk for developing some of the negative categorizations that form the basis of racial prejudice.

Certainly some people are more prejudiced than others, actively embracing and perpetuating negative and hateful images of those different from themselves. When we claim to be free of prejudice, perhaps we are really saying we are not hate mongers. But none of us is completely free of prejudice, no matter how much we would like to be. Prejudice is an integral part of our socialization, part of the air we breathe, and it is not our fault.

To say we are not at fault for the stereotypes, distortions, and omissions that shaped our thinking as we grew up does not mean we are without responsibility. While we may not have polluted the air, we need to take responsibility, along with others, for cleaning it up.

Each of us needs to look at our own behavior, particularly as educators. Am I perpetuating and reinforcing the negative messages so pervasive in our culture, or am I seeking to challenge them? If I have not been exposed to positive images of marginalized groups, am I seeking them out, expanding my own knowledge base for myself and my students? Do I acknowl-

edge and examine my own prejudices, my rigid categorizations of others, to minimize the adverse impact they might have on my interactions with those I have categorized?

Unless we engage in these and other conscious acts of reflection and re-education, we easily repeat the process with our students. We teach what we were taught. The unexamined prejudices of adults are often passed on to children. It is not our fault, but it is our responsibility to interrupt this cycle.

The first step is to acknowledge it is operating. When someone accuses you of being a racist, always consider the possibility. If we breathe in enough smoggy air, we will eventually cough some up. Just because that was not our intention, it doesn't mean that wasn't the outcome. Of course, just because someone said it doesn't mean the accusation is well-founded. (My children regularly accuse me of being unfair, but that doesn't make it true!) But it is always important to consider that it *might be*.

While my experience facilitating professional development workshops has taught me that it is white educators who most often express worry that they will be accused of being racist, it can certainly happen to educators of color as well. While people of color are not systematically advantaged by racism and do not experience the privileges white skin affords in this society, people of color are also breathing the smog, and may internalize negative stereotypes about their own groups as well as others. All of us have had our thinking shaped by the racism in our environment to some degree.

So what should any of us do if we are called a racist? The best response is nondefensive. Imagine this: A parent has just angrily accused a principal of being racist, and the principal calmly replies, "You know, I probably am. It's pretty hard to live in a racist society and not be affected by it. But I certainly don't intend to be. I would appreciate it if you would tell me what I did that made you think so."

Such a nondefensive response is immediately disarming and opens the way for communication rather than closing it off the way a defensive claim of complete innocence would. Our concern should not be if someone else spotted our racial prejudices but whether they have spotted us actively working to rid ourselves of them.

### Just Say Yes

Do our students see us seeking out new information, trying to learn more about people different from ourselves? Initiating cross-racial dialogue at school rather than waiting until there is an incident that requires a reaction? Modeling positive, mutually respectful interracial relationships with colleagues and parents? Questioning policies and practices like ability grouping, for example, which often have a negative impact on students of color? Administering disciplinary actions equitably, with similar punishments for similar offenses regardless of the race/ethnicity of the student? Holding high expectations for everyone?

The more often we can answer "yes" to these questions, the less often we will need to wonder what to do when someone calls us a "racist." **ED**