

Of Smog and Moving Walkways: Understanding Prejudice, Privilege and Racism Through the Work of Beverly Daniel Tatum



“Stereotypes, omissions, and distortions all contribute to the development of prejudice. Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information. I assume that we all have prejudices, not because we want them, but simply because we are so continually exposed to misinformation about others. Though I have often heard students or workshop participants describe someone as not having a “prejudiced bone in their body” I usually suggest that they look again. Prejudice is one of the inescapable consequences of living in a racist society. **Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us 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?** If we live in an environment in which we are bombarded with stereotypical images in the media, are frequently exposed to the ethnic jokes of friends and family members, and are rarely informed of the accomplishments of oppressed groups, we will develop the negative categorizations of those groups that form the basis of prejudice.” (p. 5-6)

“Many people use the terms *prejudice* and *racism* interchangeably. I do not, and I think it is important to make a distinction. In his book *Portraits of White Racism*, David Wellman argues convincingly that **limiting our understanding of racism to prejudice does not offer a sufficient explanation for the persistence of racism. He defines racism as a ‘system of advantage based on race.’ In illustrating this definition, he provides example after example of how Whites defend their racial advantage—access to better schools, housing, jobs—even when they do not embrace overtly prejudicial thinking. Racism cannot be fully explained as an expression of prejudice alone. This definition of racism is useful because it allows us to see that racism, like other forms of oppression, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals. In the context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color.** Another related definition of racism, commonly used by antiracist educators and consultants, is “prejudice plus power.” Racial 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. While I think this definition also captures the idea that racism is more than individual beliefs and attitudes, I prefer Wellman's definition because the idea of systematic advantage and disadvantage is critical to an understanding of how racism operates in American society." (p. 7-8)

"For many White people, the image of a racist is a hood-wearing Klan member or a name-calling Archie Bunker figure. These images represent what might be called active racism, blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination. Passive racism is more subtle and can be seen in the collusion of laughing when a racist joke is told, or letting exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, of accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and of avoiding difficult race-related issues. **Because racism is ingrained in the fabric of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating. All that is required to maintain it is business as usual.**

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go in the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.

So not all Whites are actively racist. Many are passively racist. Some, though not enough, are actively **anti**-racist. The relevant question is not whether all Whites are racist, but how we can move more white people from a position of active or passive racism to one of active antiracism. The task of interrupting racism is obviously not the task of Whites alone. But the fact of White privilege means that Whites have greater access to the societal institutions in need of transformation. To whom much is given, much is required." (p. 11-12)

Additional points:

- There is no such thing as passive anti-racism; all anti-racist behavior is an active push against the system, and while such action may take a variety of forms, the key component is action
- While all Whites benefit from racism, they do not all benefit equally due to multiple identities and interlocking systems of oppression
- Not all people of color are equally targeted by racism
- While Tatum developed the smog and moving walkway analogies to describe racism, other forms of systematic oppression can also be applied

Emphases Ours. From: Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race.* New York: Basic Books, 1997.