



COUPLING DEGREES, BREAKING THE SILENCE, AND SEEING WHAT I CAN BE

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— ABSTRACT —

This paper provides a Black student’s perspective as she finds her voice through her dual undergraduate degrees in Speech and Hearing Science and Comparative Ethnic Studies. The paper follows her development through graduate school as she encounters her first Black professors and mentors. Her graduate experience culminates with the student using her voice effectively to combat racism in her graduate program with her peers and in her clinical environments.

KEY WORDS: Voice, anti-racism, microaggressions, mentorship

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“For many people of color, learning to break the silence is a survival issue. To remain silent would be to disconnect from her own experience, to swallow and internalize her own oppression.

The cost of silence is too high.”

*Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together
in the Cafeteria?:*

And Other Conversations about Race
by Beverly Daniel Tatum

It has always been apparent to me that most people avoid talking about race and racism; and if these topics are brought up, the burden to initiate or discuss is usually on Black people and people of color. This has been a realization of mine since high school because I was frequently subjected to microaggressions (defined as the everyday, subtle, intentional — and oftentimes unintentional — interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups (Limbong, 2020), and it was always my responsibility to let my peers know that I was offended. These conversations typically ended with self-guilt and feeling bad for making

my peers feel uncomfortable or “racist”. Years later, I realize that these experiences have impacted my relationships with my non-Black peers because in my interactions, I find myself always anticipating a microaggression or assuming a defensive posture ready to respond to what might come my way.

Fast forward to my undergraduate career at Washington State University, I had the opportunity to study Speech and Hearing Sciences along with Comparative Ethnic Studies (CES). Coupling these two areas of study, I was able to holistically understand how power dynamics function between race, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, educational background, and religious background. With this knowledge, I pieced together a plan for initiating and facilitating proactive conversations about identities and began implementing my plan with family members and peers. It took me *eight years* and these critical conversations to realize it was not my job to make my White and non-Black peers feel comfortable, but rather hold them accountable for how they project their racial biases. In other words, my job was not to prioritize White comfort over Black pain.

During my 5th year of my undergraduate career, I had the privilege of working at the Diversity Center at Washington State University. During my time there,

I led a series of workshops that addressed uncomfortable topics. The series was held every other Tuesday, and they were titled “Tough Talk Tuesdays.” Each tough talk addressed different issues such as toxic masculinity, implicit biases, why black lives matter, LGBTQ topics, and white privilege. Conducting these workshops, I learned that continuous guided discussions are most impactful when trying to unlearn misleading information and unpacking biases. I say this because topics of race are not usually normalized for those who are white identified. In fact, the topic of race is usually uncomfortable for most people especially when these topics are addressed across cultures and races. A lot of people also feel uncomfortable addressing race-related issues because they are afraid they might “offend” someone or say the wrong things. Discussion-based workshops allow people to share their thoughts in a safe place, while also learning from others. I believe this approach has the best chances for long-term success because it acknowledges participants’ feelings and allows them to discuss their experiences in order to better bridge the disconnect that often happens cross-culturally in a field like ours that is 92% White.

My graduate program in speech-language pathology has turned out to be a critical component of my personal and professional development. Jackson State University (JSU), a historically Black university (HBU) in Jackson, Mississippi, has provided me with opportunities to gain self-confidence that I have never experienced before at a university. For the first time in my 23 years of life, I was learning from professors who looked like me. The racial representation presented throughout the faculty made me feel like I actually belonged in the field of speech-language pathology. Dr. Betty Sutton was the first black professor I ever had in my life, and her presence shifted how I would matriculate through the master’s program. I felt more comfortable asking questions in class, going to office hours, and I was more engaged in my coursework. I have noticed this shift over the past year in all my classes, and it has been comforting to see how the impact of having a professor who looks like you can set the tone for your academic path. Becoming a speech-language pathologist finally seemed attainable. Coming from the Pacific Northwest where I was one of two Black women in my cohort of 60 people, studying at JSU was a culture shock. Having for the first time, Black professors and mentors like Dr. Sutton and Dr. Brandi Newkirk-Turner helped me see what I could be.

Another experience that helped me to see that I belonged in the field was the ASHA Minority Student Leadership Program (MSLP). I was selected to participate in the program during the first semester of

my graduate program at JSU. At the same time that I was having meaningful cultural experiences in an academic environment at an HBU, this program allowed me to have similar ones within my professional association. The program put me in the same spaces as other students who had similar experience and made leadership opportunities available to us. Through the program, we learned how to better advocate for ourselves in academic settings, how to get involved with state organizations affiliated with ASHA and different leadership opportunities where more racial representation is needed. My experience through MSLP allowed me to navigate my academic spaces at JSU differently. More than before, I made efforts to connect with my classmates who are from different racial backgrounds, and I felt as if I was more comfortable with my own identity because of critical experiences I had at my HBU graduate program.

As I take time to reflect on my development and how I was finally able to break my silence, I have benefited from having a dual degree in CES and Speech and Hearing Sciences and from being able to incorporate these degrees simultaneously. The degrees complement one another and have propelled me to become a leader fighting racism in my program, in the clinic, and personal relationships. I realize that my HBU, JSU, has allowed me to build upon my undergraduate degrees and take an intersectional approach to my educational studies and how I approach my clinical practice. My graduate program has allowed me to hone my critical thinking skills, actively acknowledge my own implicit biases, and break the silence to find my own voice. My professors have supported me and have facilitated my growth in this area by allowing me to partner with them to host sessions similar to “Tough Talk Tuesdays” that were held at my undergraduate institutions. Most importantly, I have had the opportunity to interrupt the silence and the biases of others, to help educate my white peers, and to help provide them with the tools to recognize and be accountable for their biases.

References

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