

2021

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Original Publication Citation

Tarver, S. (2021). Book Review: *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. *Journal of Human Services*, 40(1), 139-141.

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Book Review: *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi

Shuntay Tarver

The murder of George Floyd in March 2020 left many human services professionals asking: What can I do to eliminate racial inequity? Ibram X. Kendi's (2019) book, *How to Be an Antiracist* offered a timely and relevant resource for answering this vital question. Within the book, Kendi centers his own personal journey as an illustration for understanding the processes involved with becoming an antiracist. He reflectively critiques both his good intentions and inadvertent shortcomings in juxtaposition to necessary actions for becoming an antiracist. Kendi emphasizes three central tenets that directly align with professional mandates outlined in Human Services' Ethical Standard 16 to "advocate for social justice and seek to eliminate oppression" (National Organization for Human Services [NOHS], 2015). This review examines the relevance of Kendi's foundational principles to the human services profession and the challenges this text presents as a tool for human services educators, practitioners, and students seeking to learn *how to be an antiracist*.

Kendi (2019) postulates:

1. There are three distinct racial ideologies that fuel the actions individuals take to address perceived racial issues.
2. Black people [and, by proxy, other marginalized populations] can be racist.
3. People who assert that they are antiracist can simultaneously engage in racist behaviors.

Collectively, he challenges and deconstructs the actions fueled by good intentions by challenging readers to reexamine the outcomes of individual behaviors to evaluate if they are actually antiracist practices that are "supporting policy that reduces racial inequity" (p. 24). Kendi (2019) asserts that "there is no neutrality in the racism struggle"; rather, any action that is not antiracist, is by default a racist action (p. 9). He uses both a systemic and individual perspective for engaging in antiracist practices. The following examines the relevance of his foundational tenets to the field of human services and the challenges they posit to the profession.

Kendi's (2019) exploration of three ideologies that fuel individual actions in response to perceived racial issues is specifically relevant to human services professionals. Existing research indicates that critical self-reflection is essential to the human services profession and educational experiences of emerging human services professionals (Tarver & Herring, 2019). For example, Tarver and Herring (2019) explained that human services professionals "have the ability to influence, control, and access resources within their respective roles" (p. 8). Similarly, Kendi's (2019) distinctions between segregationist, assimilationist, and antiracist racial ideologies assert that honorable intentions alone do not automatically equate to equitable outcomes. He asserted that oftentimes actions fueled by segregationist and assimilationist ideologies not only fall short of being antiracist across lines of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, but also often inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes, assumptions of cultural deficiencies, and beliefs of inferiority. For example, Kendi explained that segregationists focus on building programs specifically for populations that are marginalized because they are perceived to be culturally incapable of benefiting from traditional approaches and thus need segregated interventions. Alternatively, assimilationists propose or endorse programs that seek to change cultural characteristics in favor of mainstream behavioral alignment because cultural features are perceived as inferior. In contrast, antiracist approaches seek to evaluate systemic influences that restrict opportunities for

entire populations (e.g., race, gender, class). Comparatively, only antiracist approaches challenge systemic inequalities rather than assuming inadequacies within the population. Thus, Kendi's (2019) challenge to readers to critically examine the origins of their perspectives also challenges human services practitioners to consider the impact of their actions, rather than their professional intentions. This consideration can equip human services professionals to fulfill Ethical Standard 7 to "ensure that their values or biases are not imposed upon their clients" (NOHS, 2015). It also encourages the evaluation of professional actions through examinations of professional decisions to determine if the outcomes of decisions actually enhance or diminish equitable opportunities for clients.

Kendi's (2019) second postulation asserts that Black people [and, by proxy, other marginalized populations] can be racist. In perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of his book, he defines this supposition as the "powerless defense: the illusory, concealing, disempowering, and racist idea that Black people can't be racist because Black people don't have power" (p. 138). He situates the Black experience as one that requires activating any and all existing power to create equity as opposed to being stifled by comparative analyses of power that disempowers and immobilizes antiracist progress. Kendi implies that all individuals who have limited power can and should work to be antiracist. He argues that despite the inequitable distribution of power, everyone has the ability to be antiracist within their respective spheres of influence. Consequently, Kendi's challenge to Black people can extend to all human services professionals who might perceive themselves to have limited power. Therefore, it is critical to be aware that even limited power is power that should be used to engage in antiracist actions.

However, while Kendi (2019) does well to galvanize those with limited power to access their power to engage in antiracist practices, he still places the responsibility of change on marginalized individuals. Although he partially acknowledges the systemic perspective of being antiracist, his argument does not appear to hold those with more systemic power accountable for the oppression of marginalized populations. Consequently, human services professionals would do well to place a stronger emphasis on Ethical Standard 14 that holds professionals to a higher standard of being "aware of social and political issues that differentially affect [populations] from diverse backgrounds" (NOHS, 2015). Although it is important to use power within our professional roles in antiracist ways, it is equally essential to do so through the identification and advocacy of professional and community allies who have more collective power to fight for equity and social justice.

Finally, Kendi's (2019) statement that asserting commitment to and engaging in antiracist practices does not absolve one from being racist is central to his text. He explained that the vacillation between being racist in one instance and antiracist in the next instance is solely based on the policies that one supports and aligns with in real-time. Consequently, Kendi challenges readers to evaluate their alignment with or challenging of existing racist policies and practices continuously. Thus, even when human services professions are successful at engaging in antiracist behavior, they must consistently evaluate such actions to be intentional about engaging in being antiracist.

In conclusion, *How to Be an Antiracist* (Kendi, 2009), provides a framework for engaging in critical self-reflection that will bring about both challenges and changes that can strengthen the professional development of human services educators, practitioners, and students. Many aspects of the book align with the human services ethical standards. Other aspects of the book do not align as seamlessly with the professional standards. Such instances could offer professionals, educators, and students the opportunity to critically examine their

stance on ethical dilemmas they encounter professionally. As a result, this book might be an important resource that can be used in a variety of contexts, such as a foundational text for diversity courses, a professional development tool for human services professionals, or a guiding tool for how agencies can align institutional policies and practices with antiracist actions. Kendi's (2019) book offers valuable insight for how human services professionals can engage in antiracist practices by emphasizing the importance of critical self-reflection, challenging professionals to rely on professional ethical standards amid ethical dilemmas, and reminding practitioners to consistently evaluate if professional actions are truly antiracist. Collectively, *How to Be an Antiracist* challenges readers to stay engaged with the processes involved in becoming an antiracist and aligns with human services' ethical standards.

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