

Racial Conflict in America: As told by Akron, Ohio Residents
Rafah Al-Obaid

I. INTRODUCTION

Racial conflict has been an issue in the United States for centuries. The idea that one race or ethnicity is superior over others has existed for at least as long and in different forms. In American history, this superiority was embedded at one time in the laws¹. Through protests, pressuring groups and individuals in power, laws and amendments were changed and created to be race-neutral, marking a step towards allowing opportunities for all, one principle our country, the United States of America, was founded on. Today our laws are race-neutral on paper but unfortunately, they are enforced or judged by individuals who may not necessarily be 'color blind'.

Racial stereotyping and racial profiling are two sides of the same coin of racial conflict. Racial stereotyping is assigning individuals to racial categories based on their appearances and then making assumptions about these individuals. According to Albert J. Meehan and Michael C. Ponder², 'racial profiling is typically defined as the police use of race as the sole basis for initiating law enforcement activity.' While racial profiling could be changed and possibly stopped, racial stereotyping is a deeper process, which takes more effort.

II. DOING JUSTICE TO THE 2009 STORYTELLERS AND THEIR STORIES*

This summer at the University of Akron, with the help of Dr. Bill Lyons, the Law, Mediation, and Violence class attended the Akron Urban League. We put together eight story circles, which included six to eight residents* of different age groups from the Akron, Ohio area who were kind enough to share their experiences about race and racial conflict, past and present. In this paper, I will show using these personal accounts, scholarly articles, and my own perspective that racial conflict is not black or white; there is a grey area. Listening, transcribing, and analyzing these stories, I have organized them within themes that I felt best described the underlying meanings of them. I will link these themes with either racial stereotyping or racial profiling.

Racial Stereotyping: Racial Typification

Racial typification was a theme that seemed to stand out among the stories. *Racial Typification of Crime and Support for Punitive Measures*³ states "[Jerome] Miller⁴ observed that: 'There are certain code words that allow you never to have to say "race" but everyone knows that's what you mean and "crime" is one of those ..."'. Racial typification will be viewed in the sense of racial stereotyping⁵.

¹ Explained in greater detail in a documentary: *The Power of an Illusion: Race*

² Race and Place: The Ecology of Racial Profiling African American Motorists, pp. 403

*Names have been changed

³ Ted Chiricos, Kelly Welch and Mark Gertz pp. 359 – 360

⁴ The executive director of the National Center for Institutions and Alternatives

⁵ In this paper, I refer to stereotyping as non-authority figures assigning individuals to racial categories.

A young college man, James,⁶ told a story of his experience when visiting a university in a southern city of Ohio:

My football coach, he was like, 'I have a couple schools lined up for you to go visit.' One of the schools I went to visit was in Muskingum. My mom took me to my overnight visit. My coach warned me there is a lot of white people there. I mean it's not; it's not to be the same surrounding as Akron. So I's like it's all right I can deal with it one night. They showed me love. Me and my mom's is taken me home and we stopped at this little convenient store right down the street from the school. It was still on campus. So we stopped at a convenient store and my mom she went to like the checkout line before me so they thinking I'm in the store stealing, I guess (chuckles). I dunno why. So some older white manager came to me like 'hey you boy' and I'm like (laughter) 'Boy' I was like 'excuse me, I beg your pardon'. Then my mom overheard it and like she just started going off, cause I mean my mom, I'm, if you guys don't know, I'm mixed, so my mom is white. So they didn't expect to get cussed out by a white woman about me. I just realized I didn't realize that racism is still alive today, you know what I mean.

James explained the older white manager actions that since he is a young black man the manager automatically figured he is stealing. This story shows the theme of racial typification of linking race to crime. We see how rural and urban areas respond differently to dark skin. What is unfamiliar is more easily reduced to a common stereotype. One wonders if his mom was not white, would he have been arrested or otherwise targeted.

Another young black man, Kevin⁷ discusses how having nice things automatically connects him and other young black men to illegal activity:

Uh, you know what I'm sayin, labeled, as a you know drug dealers just cause they like nice things you know. I always liked then nice things as ever ever since I was a kid you know always had a job. Always bought everything I want and um and uh you know people sometimes look at me 'he doin somethin, he doin somethin.' But um I go to work every day. Now, I try to give back to the community. I used to work wit kids, you know whatever what not, but still um just cause I like the nice things it's like I'm doing something. Like [James] said he had a Monte Carlo and I like Monte Carlos too you know, but I don't get one cause I don't wanna get pulled over you know. That's sad I can't get what I want just for the simple fact Imma be harassed you know what I mean.

James comments on Kevin's story:

People don't see the hard work you actually put into it you know what I mean. They see us like, that's why I got rid of my chain, I got rid of all that man. I got cause I was racial profiled like I was as a thug that sell drugs. You don't see I just work 50 hours a week you know what I'm sayin of over time (laughter). See me rollin around clean, this hard work right here, people don't they don't wanna bear that.

Being racially stereotyped has consumed their everyday life. Both James and Kevin show how they have to keep in mind what they wear or drive so they can go about their everyday lives without having problems owing to racial stereotyping. Emphasizing what

⁶ Storyteller # 8, name has been changed

⁷ Storyteller # 4, name has been changed

Kevin stated, 'that's sad *I can't get what I want* just for the simple fact Imma be harassed you know what I mean.' They are denied what they want because of the color of their skin. This tendency to classify by race causes real harm, frustration, and anger. Kevin mentioned he works hard and tries to give back to the community, which should make him a hero, not a stereotype. When hearing the stories, you see how different individuals handle telling the stories. Although they were both bothered by the situations, James would try to lighten up the situation by laughing a little bit about the situation. I saw it as it may have been easier for him to deal with being stereotyped, whereas, Kevin took a more serious approach to the situations. He tended to keep a straight, blank expression and his voice showed the seriousness of his experiences.

Another story shows the that the courage to resist racial typification pays off when a young woman, Stephanie⁸ speaks of her parents experience before going to and while being in New York City, New York.

They used to go to New York for the to buy from the wholesales and so when they first started coming there would be like 'be careful when you're in New York, you know it's scary out there. The black people will do this and they'll do that, you know, make sure you're not walking around with, you know jewelry and people.' So one like probably like four or five years after they opened the store they went to a wholesaler ... My parents parked their car and they went and got their jewelry and they come back out. They got in car and this black man started like banging on the door ... So my mom like we're new here and they didn't know they're like you know my mom is like 'don't put down the window'... My dad is like 'no' ... and puts down the window. [the man] is like 'don't drive away because there is eight people waitin for you that are gonna jack you'... my mom is like 'no maybe he's the one that is gonna do it and he's trying to scare us'... And so my dad is like 'no we'll wait'... [the man] was waiting til the spot light turned green so they don't have to stop ... My dad like steps on the gas and pulls out all of a sudden eight 18-year old white kids run out with knives trying to chase my parents' car.

In this story, the woman made an instant judgment based on skin color but she was proven wrong when her husband drove away and they both saw white kids wanting to attack them. The black man's banging was not only not threatening; his banging was a warning. He had been courageous enough to protect them. This is a case of how stereotyping is can hurt more than just the black man who is assumed to be a criminal and through experiences as the one mentioned bring progress in changing the ideas of racism and stereotyping.

Racial Stereotyping: Nihilism and Modern Racism

Another theme that arose from the personal accounts was a mix of nihilism and modern racism. Cornel West describes the nihilistic threat as 'loss of hope and absence of meaning'⁹. This threat is the idea that there can never be a future because there is no hope (West, 1993). Nihilism in the stories is not as deep as explained by West but they seem to portray a feeling of hopelessness. I analyzed it as a feeling of hopelessness of acceptance among a particular group. Modern racism is described as more implicit 'a general hostility

⁸ Storyteller # 5, name has been changed

⁹ Page 15 in *Race Matters*

towards blacks as opposed to direct expression of racial superiority or inferiority¹⁰, expressed explicitly in the law (Chiricos, et al., 2004).

Modern forms of racism, unlike lynching and Jim Crowe laws, are harder to specify but just as disorienting, confusing, and dismissive of the humanity of those with dark skin. For instance, one of the storytellers, also a young black man, Phil¹¹, explains his experiences after he graduated from a mainly white catholic school:

Actin phony, that made me think about people who I went to school with, like I said earlier it was especially a white school. So then my high school years we would see them, everything would be fine. We would speak to each other in the rec. so now I see some of these same people and they, they will walk right passed you like they don't even know me. That's jus, I laugh at it because it just shows what type of person they really are but its jus crazy that they even act like that.

Although, Phil made friends with the white students inside of school, he was ignored by them after school was over. They expressed a form of superiority without in saying or doing anything. Their actions and silence, however spoke volumes to Phil. This kind of event can cause the man to feel the hopelessness of being able to be part of their groups because they look at him as different. Even deeper, it tells of the confusion and identity challenges embedded within the inability to know for sure when friends are real or 'actin phony' for reason you can never control.

An older black gentleman, Wilson¹² discussed two instances of his feeling of the nihilistic threat.

One of the most denigrating things that happened to me growing up was that um we black boys we would see a white woman coming we would have to get off the sidewalk. And if you didn't get off the sidewalk there was a beating waiting for you. Anyone who was around that was white enforced that law. Oh, we just could not be on the same sidewalk as white women. Of course you're probably old enough to know uh that racial scar that is a part of all of us to a great extent and that is segregation is built on the elevation of a white woman and the castration and dehumanization of the black male and this what I am a product of. And I have a very difficult time getting away from it sometimes.

I had (inaudible) dehumanization of all black people go through, you had to work hard to overcome that stuff and here is my Christian religion telling me I should love my enemies and I have a hard time overcoming that but thank God I think I've overcome it.

The way Wilson explained his experiences had to have been the most moving of all the stories told. He experienced the violence associated with side walking as 'enforcing the law', even though these were not legal but cultural rules. An older man that has seen the world change in many ways, including the form of racism but still feels the, as he calls it, the dehumanization African-Americans went through for centuries is a difficult story to hear. Listening to many stories and discussing them with the class, I have seen the pattern of nihilism with the older generations more vivid than the younger generations. As Wilson

¹⁰ Page 364

¹¹ Storyteller # 6, name has been changed

¹² Storyteller # 1, name has been changed

describes in one of his stories, it is a miracle that he can find the strength and forgiveness to love his enemies when they treated him with such hatred and disgrace.

Racial Stereotyping: Othering

Another story really stood out for me, because it should fear linked to skin color. A white woman, who is a professor, told her experience in Africa.

I had to spend a year living outside the country and I picked Swaziland, which is a tiny coun, Swaziland, which is a tiny country in southern Africa and um well I was there and I had a lot of really wonderful experiences and I was mainly studying women and women's work... All afternoon we worked in the garden then evening time came, it was my chance to interview some people. And there was this one older woman who was just really, I don't know I just I wanted to talk to her. I was drawn to her and she kept avoiding me and I finally said to somebody 'could I, would you introduce me. I would li; I would love to talk to her.' And she said 'she doesn't want to talk to you because she's afraid of you and she's never spoken to a white person before and she's afraid of you.' And I didn't, never I don't think women get this very often people aren't afraid of us and so we don't know what kind of, I mean this small thing. This is not the kind of fear where I think she thought I would hurt her but to understand what it feels to have people afraid of you, um was really eye opening even that small amount to me well both as a woman, as a foreigner and as a white person.

It shows that racism is not just an 'American' problem. All throughout the world unfamiliar groups are considered the threatening other. Just like in the United States, there was the idea throughout history that non-Protestant non-Anglo-Saxons are the scary other.

The next story, told by a black woman, Denise¹³ mentioned an experience about her sister-in-law who is a white woman married to a black man, Denise's brother.

My sister-in-law caught a lot of flat from black females because she was dating a black male and so she got beat up, not physically, but it was difficult and it was hard on their relationship. They stuck it out but she couldn't go to the bank without somebody having some type of comment you know. And of course my family we always welcomed her like 'you're not white' you know. And she wasn't a female that tried to act 'black' she was just herself and man the black females did not cut her any slack like (laughter). Sorry, we're not all like that (laughter).

Racial Profiling: Racial Typification

Racial profiling, as mentioned before, is stereotyping by those who enforce the law such as police officers. Racial typification by police officers was the strongest theme among the stories told.

Denise, also, spoke about her brother's experience during a traffic stop.
Several years ago (inaudible) this red Chevy S10 pickup and because it was nice and it had rims and it was lower they automatically associated him as being a drug dealer. He got pulled over randomly. He wasn't breaking any laws. They pulled him over randomly and they ripped out the

¹³ Storyteller # 3, name has been changed

seats. They ripped out the dash. They ripped out everything searchin for drugs... I get this page like who is what number is this so I called back 'who is this man' [the caller said] 'they got your brother on Copley Rd. They rippedid his truck apart'. So I fly up there, of course they're telling me I'm interfering (inaudible). I'm getting ready to be thrown in the paddy wagon. And I'm like 'Oh my God what is wrong. What did he do? What did he tell me what is going on'... My brother never dealt with any illegal activity... My brother was so angry. Now he's 300 pounds. He's huge and he his whole body was literally shaking because that was blatant racism, discrimination, you know. This man is married with kids and tryin to make a living but they ripped out everything. They even damaged stuff. He tried to pursue them paying to get things fixed.

The police officer who stopped her brother automatically figured he was involved in illegal activity because he was a black man with a nice truck. This is a classic case of racial typification and profiling, and the resulting anger and confusion that makes a 300-pound father shake, losing his stuff without reason can make one wonder how he motivates himself to try to make an honest living.

Phil spoke about a random traffic stop he encountered:

I got pulled over the other day, leavin from my grandmother's house. First, they said, I didn't use my blinker but I see you right there so why wouldn't I use my blinker. Then, they said I didn't have a license plate light (laughter). They told me I hadta do my fingerprint and fingerprint on the summons or I had to go to the county. I'm like 'for what, what I do' I'm goin to the county for nothing I gotta go to the county cause I don't fingerprint.

According to Phil, the police officer never told him what he did wrong or why he was getting a summons. The police officer gave him two choices fingerprint or go to county but he never said why. If he had not fingerprinted he would have wasted a whole day or more of either work or school and who knows what might happen while in jail. Although this situation is not as bad as being incarcerated for illegal activity, a summons is still something that would go on a person's record. Devah Pager states, 'employers were less likely to consider applicants who had any prior contact with the criminal just system' (Pager, 2003). Pager explained that the mark of criminal record on blacks was always harsher than on whites. Although Phil's situation is not as harsh but in my opinion, it gives an idea of how criminal records are more easily accumulated by to blacks because they deal with racial profiling.

Racial Profiling: 'We all look alike'

The 'we all look alike' phenomenon is the idea that when one black man does a crime they all become suspects because the cops cannot tell them apart. Kevin explains through this story exactly what the 'we all look alike' phenomenon means.

I got a call early like 9:00 from one of my buddies. He wanted me to ride to Akron and to pick up his mom. So he come he get me. We comin down um State Road. We see the police cars. We in Cuyahoga Falls. We see police cars everywhere... If you ever been on State Road, it veers off Howard or Main Street. So we took the Howard way... We goin down Howard, we see Akron police out too. Apparently somebody um shot somebody with a shot gun and uh it's like a 300 pound black guy maybe 400 pound... so, we get down by the like Howard going um down the hill (inaudible) all the cop cars all the way up the hill they was following us the whole way... I didn't

know somebody got shot til afterwards. So they pull us over in the middle of the hill... They said the guy was in a rusty Chevy Capri; mind you, a blue one. Uh my friend has a Chevy Capri 4-door but uh he got a very clean Chevy, mind you, so uh you can't there's no way you can get primer mixed up with this clean car... So they pulled us over. A lieutenant, he pulled right in front of the car matter a fact um try to ram us kinda in front of the car like cut us off so [his friend] he had to throw his car in park without hitting the cops... So [the lieutenant] he hopped out, they all hopped out, surround us like six cars (inaudible) with their guns... I was scared like 'what's going on' [the cops said] 'get your hands up, get your hands up' My hands already up... he yanked me outta the passenger side you know get down on the ground...the dude just I dunno if he just didn't like black people (inaudible). Sergeant you can tell he wanna shoot me. He had the taser in my face and he had the regular gun in my face. And um I was really scared. And um he yanked us out the car he throw my arm behind my back like like all in one motion. I was already on my knees and he like just he kind like throw me to the dirt. And I remember his partner just comin over and just stomped me in the face like my tooth gone till this day right here (pointed to his tooth) just stomp me in the face kicked at least three times... the suspects they was lookin was in a rusty car a 300 pound guy so. So this is a big dude. You know I'm a little dude. My other dude is no bigger than you maybe (pointing to Phil). You know, I just think it's sad how they just cause one black person did something we all suspects ... I guess I heard the saying you know I guess we all look alike but uh you know you can't get me mixed up with some 300 pound guy. It was horrible.

Here we see violence from government authorities that is random and unchecked. Chiricos, et al. state, 'It has also been argued that the assumption of black criminality leads to the more likely use of deadly force in encounters between police and suspects in some urban neighborhoods.' The assumption stated by Chiricos, et al. was seen in the story by Kevin but also in the next story told by James.

Here James shares his experience at a random traffic stop:

Well my think is I mean I know the drill you what I mean. I turn marked car up; I had my hands out the window (laughter). Imma reach over here you know (laughter). Am I allowed to (laughter)? But my whole thing is I treat them all the same, I mean with the upmost respect. But like the other day I got pulled over on my way to my house and um this, he was just rude. I mean he was a prick he wanted, he saw me 'Imma be mean to this guy. I don't like him'. He don't even know me. I mean he searched my car started wow abbb. They pattin me down hard. I mean, I know the drill 'put your hands up', yeah. Then he like. I'm like 'I'm a student at Akron U'. I showed him my zip card. He still don't believe me. I'm like 'what else I gotta do man. This is everything bro.' He's like; he said 'College students still shoot at cops.' (Silence) I'm like 'aight man'.

James tells his story as if being stopped randomly, searched and patted down with no reason is normal behavior. Moreover, 'he knows the drill' indicates this was not the first time, nor did he expect it to be the last either.

III. FINAL REFLECTIONS ON STORIES

This has been an enjoyable field study and research topic. Although, at first it was quite difficult giving justice to the personal account since we can never be too sure, what an individual is really trying to say or explain when telling their stories.

Initial Reaction vs. Final Reaction

My initial thinking was these situations seem a little too surreal, at times I even felt like a couple of the stories were too unbelievable. After thinking about the data and stories more seriously, my thinking has changed to the extent that when you are around individuals who have never been racist or racially stereotyped; it is difficult to believe that it is happening in our own backyard. In my initial reaction to the story about Denise's brother being pulled over, I remember thinking, 'WOW! I hear things like this happening on the radio, television or in music but to hear it personal account is surreal.' The other traffic stop stories at first I did not think much of them but as I started analyzing them more I never thought stereotyping can really effect a person's life down to what they wear or drive.

Understanding Racial Conflict through the Stories and Articles

The stories helped me better understand and appreciate the importance of the scholarly data because when researching a topic or issue personally allows the researcher to see their own perspective and understand how and why scholars compose their perspective to the same situation. When first looking at scholarly data on a topic that we are unfamiliar with may be overwhelming and not make much sense but doing the research also, I began to see why the scholars used terms such as 'white privilege', 'hegemonic tales' and the like. These scholarly ideas were found in my stories even when the stories were unlike the stories and studies that the scholars analyzed.

In brief, historical events about race and modern racism are very different forms with the same goal. As Wilson mentioned the idea of dehumanization of African-Americans explicitly in the past, it is still very much incorporated in our society today but implicitly. This is the challenge we face in changing and possibly stopping racial stereotyping and profiling. Through education, open minds, and learning acceptance we can advance further pass superiority and inferiority based on unwarranted discrimination.

References

#1, Wilson: Storyteller. 2009. Race & Racial Conflict. [interv.] Rafah Al-Obaid. *Story Circle 7*. Akron Urban League, Akron, May 27, 2009.

#3, Denise: Storyteller. 2009. Race & Racial Conflict. [interv.] Rafah Al-Obaid. *Story Circle 7*. Akron Urban League, Akron, May 27, 2009.

#4, Kevin: Storyteller. 2009. Race & Racial Conflict. [interv.] Rafah Al-Obaid. *Story Circle 7*. Akron Urban League, Akron, May 27, 2009.

#5, Stephanie: Storyteller. 2009. Race & Racial Conflict. [interv.] Rafah Al-Obaid. *Story Circle 7*. Akron Urban League, Akron, May 27, 2009.

#6, Phil: Storyteller. 2009. Race & Racial Conflict. [interv.] Rafah Al-Obaid. *Story Circle 7*. Akron Urban League, Akron, May 27, 2009.

#7, Storyteller. 2009. Race & Racial Conflict. [interv.] Rafah Al-Obaid. *Story Circle 7*. Akron Urban League, Akron, May 27, 2009.

#8, James: Storyteller. 2009. Race & Racial Conflict. [interv.] Rafah Al-Obaid. *Story Circle 7*. Akron Urban League, Akron, May 27, 2009.

Chiricos, Ted, Welch, Kelly and Gertz, Marc. 2004. Racial Typification of Crime and Support for Punitive Measures. *Criminology*. 2004, Vol. 42, 2, pp. 359 - 380.

Meehan, Albert J and Ponder, Michael C. 2002. Race and Place: The Ecology of Racial Profiling African American Motorists. *Justice Quarterly*. September 2002, Vol. 19, 3, pp. 399-427.

Pager, Devah. 2003. The Mark of a Criminal Record. *American Journal of Sociology*. March 2003, Vol. 108, 5, pp. 937-975.

West, Cornel. 1993. Nihilism in Black America. *Race Matters*. 1993, pp. 11-20.