

I. INTRODUCTION

Racial conflict have been a problem in the United States since its founding and it continues to be commonplace that racial issues are overlooked. The complexities of racial conflict imprison the black community behind invisible walls of hopelessness and disparity. Although these walls are invisible, the moral is that the weight is felt everyday infringing on their rights to contribute to a fair and just society. One of the walls is held up by racial classifications that lure people to construct, or deconstruct, individual identities based on attributes associated with that specific race. These constructs, in the past and in the stories we gathered this year support the ideology that whites are dominant over other races and thus the desired standard. Some ideas on race have dissolved into a more tolerant attitudes while others remain hidden behind whites who have a culturally blind eye toward racial conflict since they do not directly encounter prejudices. What is discouraging is that the growing illusion of a racially equal society produces a common excuse that encourages misunderstanding and encourages divisiveness.

II. DOING JUSTICE TO THE 2009 STORYTELLERS & THEIR STORIES

This summer at the University of Akron on the 27th of May the Law, Mediation, and Violence class, with the help of Dr. William Lyons attended story circles at the Akron Urban League. As a class, we arranged eight story circles to answer the following prompt *think about a personal story about race or racial conflict that helps us understand your perspective or feelings about race today*. With three minutes each, one out of the eight participants shared their experiences with racial conflict, past and present and in this paper, I will analyze the narratives from the Akron Urban League to help understand the impact of racial classification. By the process of gathering field research through listening to the stories, transcribing, and analyzing them I have organized each narrative into correlating themes.

Additionally, when people tell a story, any story, they have a beginning, middle, and an end. It has been my job in listening and analyzing the stories to uncover what the storyteller truly wanted to say without all the fluff of generating a narrative. When the storyteller has a concrete example in their story of feeling disenfranchised, they are not going to use that particular language that helps to set up a common tone of the ideology of race and racism in today's society. My purpose was to give justice to the stories to help uncover the underlying meaning in them and to recognize that racial conflict is decaying society.

The narratives recorded at the Akron Urban League enumerated themes that assisted in highlighting the complexities of race and racial conflict. Urban League story circles explicitly identified racial profiling/typification, white normativity, cultural differences, agency and structure that all contribute to the examination of a salient theme known as racial classification. Racial classification entails the categorization of certain populations based on a set of attributes believed to be linked to an individual's race. These classifications focus on negative behavioral characteristics that represent the target as lazy, uneducated, under qualified and villainous; the stereotypical black population. The stories that I listened to evolved from an individual's experience of feeling wrongfully classified, to stories about identity construction, or deconstructed, in each case based on the color of their skin.

The first sub-theme that emerges in analyzing the narratives from the Akron Urban League is racial profiling/typification. Racial typification is the notion of falsely classifying black individuals

as being criminals and the misperception in our culture that crime is a black phenomenon. The study on the racial typification of crime conducted by Chiricos, Welch, and Gertz focused on trying to explain why our prison populations have exploded in the last thirty-years and have become predominately black (despite the fact that racial rates of criminal activity have remained the same). Racial classification “demonizes blacks as the locus threat”¹ and has heightened the perception of racial conflict by encouraging whites to fear blacks as a proxy for crime, classifying blacks as being criminal. Race and the threat of crime energize overwhelming social control that classifies black individuals as being the perpetrators to crime. One of the storytellers, Mark* expressed that his rendezvous with law enforcement was preempted because crime is classified as having a black face:

[The Police officer] said ‘this car was spotted in many drug areas so I wanted to see what was going on with the car.’ So I had to give him permission to search my car for [drugs] and so he stripped out everything and took my CD player out, he took my stereo out to see if there [were drugs] in there, looked under my seats, behind my trunk and stripped everything out.²

Here Mark describes his experience of being racially classified as a drug dealer based on the pigmentation of his skin: an error encouraged by racial typification. In this scenario the presence of a black man mobilized police action. With no real evidence to mandate the search of the young black man’s car other than “this car was spotted in many drug areas,” we can see one impact of racial typification: frustration at being singled out by an officer of the law. Mark further recalls the confusion that occurred after the police had stripped the interior of his vehicle:

My mom came and asked what was going on so [the police officer] told her the same thing. And she asked ‘why he was stripping out my car?’ He said “‘cause it was spotted it in many drug areas.” [My mom said] “There [are] probably many cars that [have] been spotted in many drug areas, but they never would do anything like that.” He told my mom to back up and then I got into an argument with the cop and he threw me down, you know what I’m saying, and he took me to jail.

Consequently, Mark’s mother understood the discrimination of the law, in stating that her son was racially classified to commit drug crimes. Calculating that her son would not be in this daunting situation if he was of a difference race, the participant’s mother was in disbelief of the degree of racial classification.

As previously mentioned, racial classification categorizes individuals based on a set of believed negative attributes such as being under qualified, deviant, hostile, and poor. Accordingly, the black population is misrepresented and in the following stories, the storytellers narrate their encounters with racial classification on how they are supposed to be socially recognized:

I was one of the first black female officers in a [Local City] I was a hundred pounds, I had a baby, I was living in housing, and all my neighbors and everything thought that I wasn’t eligible [to be on the police force]. I said I’m eligible because I don’t have a criminal record. I took the test and passed. I outdid all the guys you know as far as running, agility, and physical [fitness]. When I got on the police department it was totally different: nobody wanted to work with me and then they were insinuating that I couldn’t do the job.³

¹ Racial Typification of Crime and Support for Punitive Measures, pg. 379

* Throughout the paper I will address the participants of Story Circle #5 with assigned names allowing the reader to associate the story with a human being rather than a number, names have been changed to protect individual identity

² Prompt 2 Participant 7, I will refer to this participant as Mark for the remainder of this paper.

³ Prompt 1 Participant 2, I will refer to this participant as Lindsay through the remainder of this paper.

Lindsay shows that her neighbors could not comprehend why she would apply for a position at the local police department. The neighbors had assumed that she was not eligible because of the pigmentation of her skin. They had classified the black population as one whom commits the majority of crimes; therefore, being black, she must have a previous criminal record in addition to being lazy and/or under qualified.

A young participant told how he was racially classified when he was a child as being deviant and interfering with the other kindergartener's ability to learn:

My kindergarten teacher was Ms. Marshall, a white woman [...] I do remember about twenty-five kids in the classroom [and] I was the only black kid. One day, while I was doing my schoolwork, she grabbed me by my left arm it was a tight grip pretty hard. I was a little kid five years-old. She pulled me into the little library that we had in the classroom it was like in the back part of the classroom and she grabbed me by my shoulders and looked me straight in the eye and she was like, "I don't like your bad behavior in the classroom. The other kids are doing what they need to do and you're not listening." And I was kind of traumatized by this for I was five years old I didn't know how to take it and like I said I was the only black kid I mean all other kids were white. I was your typical 5 year-old. I was doing what any other five year old would do and she just looked at me and I was kind of scared for a second because I didn't know what she was going to do and she was like, "I don't like your behavior and if you do this again, I'm going to send you to the office." And she just sounded very mean-spirited while she was talking to me and after class she wrote [a pink slip]. I didn't read it. She told me to take the note after class and give it to my parents.⁴

In this narrative, Wilson is expressing that he was an average kindergartener attending to his schoolwork when his teacher was compelled by racial classification that resulted in a threatening grip. Wilson goes on to state the problem that the teacher had addressed in the pink slip:

In the [pink slip] the teacher Ms. Marshall wrote how I had mental problems how I wasn't fit to be in school I was a troublemaker I couldn't interact well with my classmates I would get easily frustrated

This pink slip addressed a common identity that is linked to the black population: that they are troublemakers, even at the innocent age of 5 when racial ideologies are unknown to children.

Another participant, Tiffany, discussed how her son was a victim of being racially classified because of a negative disposition about young black men and the stereotypical crimes related to this population, (even though no crime was committed):

The mother didn't know what was going on, it was strictly the school system and this particular bus driver, deciding to label another one of our little black young men, but they just picked the wrong one because rather than just go along with it I told them it wasn't happening today. You are not doing that to my child, that's not going in his record that is not going to follow him simply by grabbing somebody's pant [leg] and tugging them, and now you are trying to tell me that he tried to pull her pants off.⁵

This narrative is controversial in the sense that both parties involved in the story were friends and joking around to the point where the young-white-girl said "oh, Jake* you're trying to take my pants off, pull my pants down," while she was giggling her way off the school bus. It was not until the bus

⁴ Prompt 1 Participant 5, I will refer to this participant as Wilson through the remainder of this paper.

⁵ Prompt 2 Participant 3, I will refer to this participant as Tiffany through the remainder of this paper.

* Name has been changed to protect identity

driver threatened to kick the white girl off the school bus that she finally “confessed” to being sexually assaulted.

Why would this mother fight against the school system to keep this “sexual assault” charge from being processed on her son’s criminal record? Devah Pager (2003) analyzes the consequences of incarceration for the employment outcomes of black and white job seekers; seeing that a criminal record presents a major barrier to employment, with significant implications for racial disparities, especially for blacks. The percentage of call backs received for both categories of black testers relative to those for whites, blacks without criminal records received 14% callbacks, compared to 34% of white noncriminal. In fact, even whites with criminal records received more favorable treatment (17%) than blacks without criminal records (14%); therefore, race continues to play a dominate role in shaping employment opportunities, equal to or greater than the impact of a criminal record⁶. Blacks are less than half as likely to receive consideration by employers, relative to their white counterparts, and black non-offenders fall behind even whites with prior felony convictions. Tiffany knows the impact of stories like this based on her lived experiences, confirming the power of a criminal record and of her story.

Another female participant discussed an instance of being racially classified as a threat to society and the disenfranchisement she felt while grocery shopping with her family:

There was a little white lady, who wanted to us to move out of the aisle so she could come by because she did not want us in the aisle with her. Well, my husband having been in Vietnam is not the best person to be saying “boy, move out the aisle. Let me by.” He said, “You can come by.” She left her cart, went up to the grocery store manager, had him to come back, and let him know that we were harassing her. [...] and the manager approached us with an attitude that we were automatically in the wrong and that we were bothering her. And I have ne[sudden pause]... I just don’t know when I’ve ever felt so degraded and so disrespected and it just had to be the grace of god that he looked and saw my husband in the uniform and the lady was just... just braiding and just going on about how colored people should not be, uh well she used the term why Negros should not be allowed to shop in the same places and how we just did not appreciate things. And this is the way Negros treat you. He finally asked her “what did they do?” She said “I can’t get by, they won’t let me by.” And he looked and he saw the situation. He said “ma’am, you can get by. They have a right to shop, just like you.”⁷

Samantha is expressing that the manager already implicitly associated her family as the trouble makers and acting villainous toward the innocent white lady. By braiding up and down the aisle suggesting that “black people do not appreciated things,” the little white lady tried to justify her action by attaching racial classifications on this family. This story amplifies the disparities of racially classifying individuals who did nothing to ask of this treatment.

In the following narrative, Tiffany shows the effects of racial classification that tried to discredit her job performance, being the only black in the department:

This guy lost his job because he realized that what he was doing was basically entirely about race there was- it had nothing to do with my job performance, just it had nothing to do with what time I came to work or how well I did my job because how can you justify giving somebody two jobs if they are not doing the first one. By me being the only black why was my work the only work being documented? Why was my coming and going

⁶ The Mark of a Criminal Record, pg. 958

⁷ Prompt 2 Participant 1, I will refer to this participant as Samantha through the remainder of this paper.

the only thing being documented? Nobody else in the whole department was being documented and then with all the tension it caused we had a wonderful department but then they caused that divide because now you're pitting one employee against another strictly based on race.⁸

Tiffany was affected by racial classification to the extent that her manager decided that, if by chance, he needed to reduce the department this participant should get laid off. The reasoning behind the manager's rationale was not because of her job performance, having to take the workload of two people, but for classifying the color of her skin. Tiffany was the only black in her department. The manager documented her "laziness" by asking her co-worker questions such as "What time did Tiffany come in today? Was she a couple of minutes late?" Tiffany's professional evaluation would not have been up for discussion if the manager focused on her job performance or racially classified her.

White privilege had emerged from the Urban League story circles as another sub-theme. White privilege is a set of perceived advantages enjoyed by whites that are not experienced by non-white individuals in the same political and socio-economic category. White privilege is also a sense of dominance over people of color due to the unacknowledged privileges that are taken for granted. The ideology behind this model is that white privilege, or white normativity, is the default standard by which is considered the norm: ideal. Hence, whites do not need to learn or understand other cultures especially that of the black population. This culturally blind eye may explain why whites do not see racism or deny the existence of it altogether.

Moreover, Tiffany in the prevailing narrative on being the only documented employee in the department expressed a sense of white denial: another aspect of white privilege. Here she explains that her co-workers/friends did not question the manager's desire to document her arrival time because they had thought it to be normal or for the good of the company:

This young lady that I thought was a good friend of mine and we're still friends to this day... it caused problems between us. She's white I'm black, but it caused problems because I'm thinking if we're friends why would you not tell me that they're questioning you about what time I come in? They didn't question what time she came in; come to find out [the manager] kept a log on me there was no log on anybody else in the whole department.

Tiffany could not comprehend that this time log, based solely on race, did not raise any questions from her white co-workers who were not getting questioned on their own arrival time into the office. Essentially, because her co-workers were white, they did not see a problem with the time log: white denial of unequal treatment. The manager had kept a time log on the only black individual in the department for the reason that racial classification contributed to the need to find evidence to support the firing a lethargic threat to the office environment.

One of the participants in the story circle expressed a sense of deep hopelessness in the actions of his football coach by withholding the black athlete's college letters:

I went to [a local] High School I played football coming to my senior year I was number fifteen in the state out of all football players in the area. We had a problem with our coach like he would [keep] some of the letters that we- I get but I would never know about [them] because he would throw [them] away. I would get letters from Ohio State and Michigan, Missouri. He was all the way for the white athletes because he felt that

⁸ Prompt 1 Participant 3

they weren't head cases so he would keep- he would give them their letters and everything but for the black people he would give us D-II, D-III letters and then keep all the white athletes letters because he felt like he felt all the black athletes that he had at Garfield High School at the time was just head cases and he got a bad experience because all the black athletes that he sent to college either dropped out or didn't do good in college or not doing nothing at all right now. I had got into an argument with him one day after one of my football games. I asked him why- where was all my college letters because I had a big article in a newspaper after week or two so I came up to him because I had talked to another coach from Akron East High School he told me what the [head]coach is actually doing, but I didn't know about it until he told me. I went up to him and I asked him what is going on and he denied everything about it, but my mom had went up there next day and she seen letters for me like from big schools that I never even thought were just going to be looking at me and so she got mad at him [and] cussed him out. I got kicked off the team with three games left it messed up everything. I didn't graduate from high school so I had to come here I got my GED⁹

Based on prior encounters with the black members of the football team, who went off to admirable colleges, this coach had classified that *all* black athletes are head cases. The seemingly lack of concern for the participants future demonstrates the ability for racial consciousness to characterize another person's identity. We see here the coach is mobilizing a hegemonic tale¹⁰ in which the common sense wisdom of the majority, both situational and historically specific, constructs identities- how we see self and others differently- to explain how consciousness is racialized here with the black athletes. In defending his right to attend a renowned college, a domino effect of hopelessness ensued.

Another participant, Stephanie, in view of the fact that the pigmentation of her skin singled her out when another classmate, who was white, did not encounter the same problem in receiving her high school diploma at their graduation ceremony:

I used to live in Akron and then moved to Cleveland and that was my senior year and that was the year that I got pregnant. I trying to go school and we got bused it was in Cleveland so it was west tech we got bused and it was a predominately white school and trying to get on the bus everyday to go to school and every day I am sick, every day I am throwing up. I go to get off the bus and go home so now I can't go to school. And it just made me so angry because I really wanted to go to school, I love school. I'll never forget it was January the 13, 1981 and this was the day that I made it to school on my birthday. And the counselor called me in and said "why are you here?" and I said, I started to crying and boohooing "cause I want to graduate from high school." And she says "well, you have all your points and your requirements. I am going to send you home, don't come back." 'Cause they had just got my transcripts from Akron "don't come back till it's time to get fitted for your cap and gown. You are going to walk across the stage." I'm all excited and I'm like okay I'm [going to] walk the stage. So I go home of course and I'm going to rest and go sleep and do what I'm [going to] do. Three four months later, I go get fitted for my cap and gown. Everything is fine they had my name on the list. Well, the day of graduation, it was June the 23rd I just had my son on June 4th and I'm up there and I go in to get ready to graduate. My homeroom teacher was a white man and he came up to me and said "what are you doing here?" and I'm like "I'm here to graduate." He's like "No, you were not here and you were not in school all year and there's no way you are graduating." 'Cause he was my homeroom teacher and he [knew] I had not been there. So, I'm just standing there I am excited to graduate, I just had a kid 19 days ago and I'm still walking across the stage. But he wasn't going to let me walk across the stage because he

⁹ Prompt 1, Participant 7

¹⁰ Hegemonic tale will be presented in further detail later in the analysis of Fluery-Steiner (2002) juror reasoning study that focuses on hegemonic tales of racial inferiority and how people construct identities- how we see self and others differently- as key to explaining how consciousness is racialized.

said that I was not in his classroom I had not been there and he had been turning in absence sheets. Well the principle had saw my counselor and saw him talking to me and she could see the look on my face, and she came over to find out what was going on. He said "this student has not been here all year and she's not graduating." And the principle said "she is graduating. That other student who was a white girl who has not been here all year, you are not saying anything to her and she's graduating also." So it was a difference between the two of us, but he was trying to make sure I didn't walk the stage 'cause I had not been there. And she said that she has all of her points and requirements and she's graduating. I was belated by the fact that I was walking the stage, but you know I wasn't happy that he was trying to stop me from walking the stage. I think it was an honor that I did, by you know still being able to graduate and being a senior in high school and pregnant.¹¹

Stephanie's name was on this list of graduating seniors which goes to show that she had fulfilled the requirements needed to walk across the stage with the rest of her class. Seeing that the only justification for not allowing her to walk the stage was her absence, and that she was singled out when another classmate did not attend their scheduled classes, we can infer that the homeroom teacher ignored the white girl because of the color of her skin.

Another narrative showed the classifications of blacks to be under qualified; therefore, resulting in an unequal pay rate. In the following narrative Stephanie experienced the injustice with racially classifying individuals due to the fact that she was getting paid \$12,000 while a white woman, with the same qualifications, was receiving a salary of \$18,000 a year:

I was doing general office accounting and a position came up in accounts receivable so I asked for the job and they told that they didn't think I was qualified for the job and I said I think I am so I said I tell you what I'll take the job and once I do the job for three months that you pay me back for doing the job and then put me at a different salary up to \$18,000 and they said okay. I did the job, did a great job at it and then they would not give me the... when I went to my supervisor to say okay I want to get the raise because I am doing the job I got great reviews no problems no issues they told me that they said that it was a lateral move and I said you're not going to pay me \$12,000 for doing accounts receivable when the girl that left here was getting paid \$20,000 because she had experience, another girl has two years is getting \$18,000 and I'm not accepting it so they fought me on it and then told me that's not what they told me¹²

In this narrative the participant went to the E.O.C and filed a complaint based on discrimination because the department could not justify her low pay rate, even though she had no bad markings on her job performance, or why they were paying her \$12,000, yet paying a white girl \$18,000 when they worked the same amount of time. This participant was not qualified for the position when she asked for the marked salary, yet when she offered to prove her qualifications for no cost she suddenly became an asset to the company.

[Our] boss said [to me], "I don't want you to stop I want you to keep fighting because this is wrong and they're not supposed to do it but my hands are tied I can't do anything but you just keep doing what you're doing." And I took it all the way to the E.O.C and then after that they- I would start looking for other employment because they started treating me different and I did a settlement. They was offering to give me \$14,000 and I wanted \$18,000 so I just drafted up a letter and said I'll take this halfway they had to give a lump sum of about \$3 or \$4,000. They were not happy about [it] so I found another job.

¹¹ Prompt 2, Participant 6, I will refer to this participant as Stephanie through the remainder of this paper.

¹² Prompt 2, Participant 6

This story highlights white privilege as shown by the fact that the E.O.C wanted to settle this dispute by offering \$14,000 instead of the agreed upon amount; accordingly, not seeing the unequal pay as a form of racism. In not seeing this specific form of racism they had denied her multiple times of the pay that she deserved.

White privilege helps magnify the idea of the cultural distance between the races, which happens to be another sub-theme that had emerged in the story circles. Differences exist between the races, but white privilege amplifies distance/difference as exaggerated to increase divisiveness between the races. In examining implicit associates put on race and culture Fleury-Steiner (2002) provides a powerful narrative analysis of juror reasoning over death penalty cases that investigates the explanation for how it is that ordinary citizens appear to be taking structure into account in their analysis, even as they dismiss it in favor of individual behavior examinations in constructing their preferred response.

In the following narrative, Wilson tells of the idea on the differences in cultural and racial classification viewing how a black man and a white man should act:

One day I was approached by Levi he was a classmate... we didn't have a lot of class together and he said he had a scornful look on his face "you act kind of white." And I was like "what, what do you mean man?" "Well, the way you [talking] and you hang around the white kids a lot. Who do you think you are?" Now I didn't understand this at the time [because] I was 13 and I was trying to be friends with everybody. And for him to say that, another black person to say that to me it made me confused on how I should... how I should act around other people. I was so worried about how I was going to be perceived by people after that event. It bothered me quite some time and the next day he called me a "white boy" and like "why are you calling me this?" "Well you talking the way you acting, why you don't start hanging around your people." Just antagonizing me I'm like "dude, you need to let it off."¹³

In this narrative Levi had exaggerated that the cultural difference between the races has a negative undertone; from which we can assume that if one is black one should act accordingly to the classifications assigned to their race. Wilson was targeted by his black classmate due to the fact that he acted like a *preppy white boy*. However, the contradiction here is that how can a black man act white?

Two days later, after the choir class we went to Phys. Ed. On our way to Phys. Ed class he was like "I'm gonna get you." I am like "what are you talking about?" and after gym class he approached me and he shoved me to the ground. I mean he was a little bit bigger than me, he was about 5'10 I was a little guy about 5'6 and he shoved me to the ground and he was like, "make sure you think before you start coming around me acting like a preppy white boy." And I started crying and I felt like such a coward [because] I couldn't really stand up for myself. I just sat there until the class end... crying. He was taunting me the rest of the period.

This ruthless classification had taken a threatening turn when Levi had decided to physically attack Wilson. As shown by the fact that associating oneself with white people made one white in turn forces one to turn their back to black culture. It is disheartening to see that racial classification instigated the bullying of this participant, even though they were both black men.

¹³ Prompt 1, Participant 5

The final theme that emerges in analyzing these stories is the lack of agency and structure. Agency is a personal sovereignty and to the extent that an individual has agency, an individual is able to participate more or less in society. In the context of politics, agency is power. It is one's power to have control over one's life, power to bring influence to change; from which we can infer that agency means the capacity to improve one's condition. Overall having agency helps a person to withstand adversity and persevere. Moreover, structure is the societal constructs that people live within, like the laws that discriminate against people are structure inhibitors: Jim Crow laws and grandfather clauses illustrate this. Artificial pieces of society are all part of structure. Structure does not have to be good, bad, or neutral; it does not have to be something we participate in or not. Structure is part of the framework of society.

The chapter "Nihilism of Black America," from Cornell West's book *Race Matters* expands on the sense of profound hopelessness expressed by black Americans, stating that the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is not only oppression or exploitation but also the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning.¹⁴ In listening to the stories, one participant describes the feeling of being deprived of agency:

I didn't know there was a racial difference and my experience and my story is really back when I was a child and I went to the southern part of the country down to Alabama and while riding down there on the greyhound bus we were all situated, comfortable, I was asleep, my mother had packed a bag, packed a shoebox with chicken potato salad, potato chips, hot rolls and quite comfortable and we got to a certain point in the highway bus driver pulled over and the entire bus had to shift their seats [and] all of the... at that time we were called colored, all of the colored people had to move to the back all of the white people sitting in the back had to move up to the front because we were crossing the Mason-Dixon Line. I couldn't understand it. My mother had to drag me back because I was happy with the seat I had. I couldn't understand it because at that time I was probably about 10-11 years old and I wouldn't really understand what she was talking about so she just said, "That's how it is Tina Ann, that's how it is." And so I was very unhappy for the rest of the trip and for that reason I have never... I think that embedded in me a dislike for the South because there was a difference there was a difference in treatment.¹⁵

No agency and appalling structure is bad because it forces people to participate in a broken system that they have no power to change. It is depressing to be denied the same degree of freedom and opportunity as your neighbors and have no power to do anything about it.

So then I get to Alabama and I also find out that I can't go to a water fountain and drink because the water fountain had white and the other water fountain had colored and nobody had described for me or explained to me what white and colored differences were. So I always knew water was white and clear so I went to the white water and of course it was a big issue in the heart of Mobile, Alabama with the white people in the park at this little colored girl drinking out of the white fountain. My mother had to explain to me white water was is white folks but the water that came out of the colored fountain was not colored so I didn't understand the difference between water so now here I have another rude situation that I had to try to understand the difference between white water and colored water and it was just a terrible, terrible time it was my eye-opener that there are differences in how people are treated based on their skin color, who they are and what their background is. And that began to sort of shape me with an intent to try my very best to treat everybody equal and fair and I do... I think go out my way to try embrace people into understanding because I still have that taste in my mouth I still remember to this day the fact that I was told, 'Colored people don't

¹⁴ *Race Matters*, page 15.

¹⁵ Prompt 1, Participant 1, I will refer to this participant as Tina Ann through the remainder of the paper

drink that water.' And that experience still shapes me in terms of how I look at how we treat each other I do still look to see is there a difference and today I know that we have come a long ways but we have not come far enough .There is still severe discrimination; there is severe disparity in the systems and I don't really honestly believe in my lifetime I'm going to see a fair and equitable world that we live in and that we as blacks, African-Americans are going to continually be on the lower scale of fair treatment. And that is my story.

Here Tina Ann had no authority to drink from the white water fountain because the structure in Mobile, Alabama segregated the coloreds from the whites. No one had explained to her the differences between white and colored. This being so, she innocently assumed that the signs were describing the color of the water and not her pigmentation. Even after her mother had explained to her that white water is for white folks she could not comprehend the difference. The profound hopelessness in the black community is a result of the severe disparities in the systems with no agency to overcome oppression.

The stories from the Akron Urban League illuminated the fact that the complexities of race and racial conflict have not left society, but has evolved into a more subtle type of racism. This type of racism hinders society, and in some circumstances scares society, from the responsibility of providing fair and equal treatment to everyone.

III. FINAL REFLECTIONS ON STORIES

My initial thinking when gathering the narratives was pure shock, clear discrimination, and a sense of disbelief, that all of the stories mentioned being wrongfully classified. In addition, what had first stood out to me was the fact that not all participants in the story circles said that their hometown was Akron, Ohio, which evidently shows that racism crosses state lines and is not explicitly confined to big cities. Prior to hearing the narratives from the Urban League story circles racism to me was non-existent: I did not believe that racism was an urgent problem to fix or a problem at all in the United States since there were no structural laws infringing on people's rights or racial conflict ending in violence. I did not see the suffrage of the black community; nonetheless, I was taken aback when I heard from the participants, who had experienced racism first hand, telling stories of profound hopelessness in the black community, substantial inequality among the races, and the degree that racial classification had impacted their lives. The narratives that were told did not come out of a textbook or a reading that was assigned to the class, it had happened to the participants sitting in the circle I was facilitating, and after thinking about the data and the stories more seriously my thinking has deepened in the following ways.

First, racial classification attaches negative behavioral attributes to individuals based on their skin pigmentation and not the quality of their character, and this phenomenon of implicit association transcends racial boundaries. I believe that racial classification is the primary source for racial conflict due to the fact that false characteristics dictate how individuals perceive someone. All of the stories that I had listened to at the Urban League expressed the classifications that constructed their identity, for both whites and blacks, in a harmful light. In my field notes I stated that I was almost moved to tears because the effect racial classification had on society by which it had constructed laws to show that blacks were inferior: clear discrimination. What I would like to point out is that racial classifications is not assigned solely to black individuals from whites, it is unbelievable, but true, that people of one's own race can classify and discriminate for acting outside the classifications.

Second, there is a cultural difference between whites and blacks, although it is not to be feared or threatened. The primary reason by which people fear or feel threatened by difference is in view of the fact that whiteness is the default standard, which is agreed to be the norm. Seeing here it is easy to understand why differences are exaggerated and there is high divisiveness between the cultures, because if it is out of the norm, then it should be feared. In my field notes I had a big circle around “what is whiteness?” Is whiteness the way white folk carry themselves, is it the sense of dominance over other cultures, or is it the lack of observing racial complexities?

Finally, through gathering, more importantly, understanding and appreciating the narratives, we need to address the profound despair and hopelessness in black neighborhoods that lack good structure and no agency. Attention needs to be served to the lack of agency and the structural obstacles that inhibit blacks to equality due to the neglect from our government. Deep seeded anger lies in the black community that does not have the agency to provoke laws to enable them to have equal opportunity in our advancing society.

DATA

The stories gathered from the Akron Urban League encouraged me to understand and appreciate the importance of the scholarly data because it laid a foundation for me to build my analysis. If I had gone to the Akron Urban League story circles without prior knowledge of the complexities of racism I would not have been able to help give justice to the narratives or to the scholarly conversation about racism because I had not learned the tools to construct a fair analysis. Researchers are only beginning to uncover the surface of racial complexities and the keys to prohibit racial inequality.

UNDERSTANDING RACIAL CONFLICT

Listening, analyzing, and writing my final narrative analysis from the stories told at the Akron Urban League engaged me into a conversation that was unknown to me prior to meeting individuals who had overcome adversity. If I were to conclude my narrative analysis at this time I would not be leaving out an individual that left me with questions on his story, or rather lack of. My mission in facilitating story circle five was to make every participant comfortable in expressing their views on racial conflict and allowing us insight into their experience without fear. The raw nature of the material that was about to be recorded was agreed upon because as a circle we comprehended that this was the opportunity to talk about race without being censored. One participant, I will refer to this older black gentleman as Jacob, was hesitant to speak during the first prompt and passed. When all storytellers had told their narratives regarding our first prompt, I got back to Jacob asking him if he had any story that he would like to share. Jacob knew that his narrative was extremely powerful and chilling, so he stated he did not want the circle to be exposed to his lived experiences. My reassurance that the material the circle was discussing was vivid and if it is necessary to use unfavorable vocabulary it would only help us gather the idea of racial complexities did not support Jacob.

Jacob eventually allowed us to venture into his narrative on racial conflict when the story circle was conversing about different themes and participating in an open conversation:

This is my story; in regards to what you [pointing to Tina Ann] just spoke about I retired from the Marine Corps after 25 years in the service. I was also in Vietnam; I was in the First Gulf war, the Second Gulf

*War. I've met a lot of people. I've met some good people, some very good people and some assholes...eh...
I... that's my story.*

A well respected Marine who has served his country for twenty-five years could probably tell of stories about his times at war and his achievements of being in the United States Marine Corps, yet when it came to racial conflict Jacobs lived experiences were disgusting enough that all he could say was that he has *met some assholes*. Has racial conflict had a dynamic effect on his twenty-five years of service or his life? I will never know if this is true.

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Story Circle Stories, Story Circle #5, stories collected on May 27, 2009 at the Akron Urban League for *Law, Mediation and Violence* at the University of Akron.