

Digging Deep into Racism
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I. Introduction

We did story circles at the Akron Urban League on May 27, 2009. Our circle included myself and three African American males, a Bi-racial female, and a Caucasian female. We recorded the stories and transcribe them back at the university. On the basis of my evaluation of the stories in my story circle this paper will focus on Racial Inferiority, implicit racism, and dealing with cultural awareness. These topics will help us understand some of the different layers that shape views within the black community. The stories give an insider's view on how many African Americans have been shaped due to racial conflict. Next, we understand why the black community feels a sense of dissatisfaction towards leadership in society. Then, we will examine the outcomes of racial conflict in society. We will also explore how the lack of structure and abundance of angst affect the black community. Finally, we will see the results of racial inferiority within the black community [actual or perceived inferiority?] and the role racial stratification plays within the black community.

II. Doing Justice to the 2009 Storyteller's and Their Stories

There were several stories in my story circle that encompassed racism. In order to analyze the stories around racism, the paper will examine three topics: Racial Inferiority, Implicit Racism, and Reflection & Awareness. In each story you will be able to relate to one aspect of the story and racism. The stories will take us through a chronological look at racism and how it has changed.

Racial Inferiority

In my story circle it was evident that the participants had been affected by racism in many different ways. America teaches us now that we're human beings and that we are equal based on that fact. The truth, however, comes from our history here in America that the black community has not been treated as equal and this has resulted in the denial of equal opportunity. The story teller #2 shares a very emotional story about his great uncle (told to him by his cousin), who was a very imposing, strong and sometimes an intimidating man. His uncle was a man with over 300 acres of land; nevertheless the white community affected his life and the lives of his family.

Father being a big imposing man um her Mother being a very fair skinned woman she was commonly mistaken for being a white woman. Um, they use to say that when they would go to town in a wagon that um she would be would make her ride in the back and she would tie a bandanna around her head to some people it would signify that this was a black woman so don't say nothing to em or don't, you know, as young kids would say bust em out as they goin into town. Um but his Father um who was a slave, you know, former slave left over three hundred and some acres of land to him and his brothers, you know upon his passing¹

¹ Story teller #2.2(2.2 denotes participant number 2 the second story told), Story circle #6, African American man in his forties.

The storyteller goes on to tell us how the white community targeted his family because of the color of their skin. The white men in the community tricked him and took what was not theirs. They took his land, his livelihood, and his dignity as a hard working family man. The storyteller makes us aware that the daughter of the great uncle is still emotional to this day. These white men treated this man as pond scum or an obstacle, not a human being. Because he was Black and that meant inferior to whites, they did not think his property was as sacred as the property owned by whites. So they just took it.

And a lot of the towns people, white folks in town didn't like the fact that this large opposing black man had all this land so they made a lot of claims and made a lot of approaches to him to try to get him to sell the land he wouldn't do it. So one night as his daughter is saying these towns men actually went to his neighbor, his best friend and said go borrow his shot gun, tell em you goin huntin. They did that so that when they would come to him he would be unarmed. And they went out and borrowed his shot gun and um ok the relative said, the relative said that um that afternoon as they were kids and played outside they could look across the field as see the coned hoods over the crops. And her mother grabbed him and brought him inside. Make a long story short, they banged on the door for him. Um her mother told them to go upstairs and told him to go upstairs and hide I'll make em go away. But they wouldn't go away. They kicked in the door, they beat her um, he heard this ran downstairs, they shot him. Drug him out by his ankles. Drug him down the dirt road to the end of the road which was a gravel road and hung him up in a tree.²

Being White meant being legal, especially under a hood and willing to beat women and threaten relatives to enforce their false vision of racial inferiority. We know that Klan membership included leaders in the white community: mayors, sheriffs, judges, and businessmen. Enforcing racial inferiority became a celebration of white community.

And all that afternoon people drove up and down the road, and rode horses and paraded up and down cause they wanted to see this big Negro that finally whatn't so big after all. You know um the reason why there was no birth um death certificate is because somebody cut em down and never saw him again. Um, they never knew what happened there was no um a funeral, there was no memorial, and there was no grave marker, no nothing. So um, it's kinda like something that was lost in our family but today we're working to try to find some things out. We're working with the Southern Popular Lost Center to try to find some things out. But just to see the expression on my Great relative's face you know. Um, to hear the emotion in her voice as she tells the story, it was something else.³

Here we see in the 1830's racial inferiority was the norm. History teaches us that the black men were not considered equal regardless of their land. The storyteller makes a point to let us know that his family is still searching for answers to the death of his uncle. We couldn't image the loss that the daughter of that black man felt not knowing that her father actually was lynched. As a result of the lynching there wasn't any closure for the family.

The story circle continued to evolve. We heard our next story teller speak of racial inferiority in a historical context that is reflects social change. This man tells us of the work conditions that blacks encountered. Through his story we can hear how hostile the work environment was for a black man and how this experience began to shape his views on racism.

² Story teller 2.2, Story Circle #6

³ Storyteller 2.2, Story Circle #6

My Grandfather told me when I ah, as I was thinking back when I first started being conscious about race. He grew up in the South and he had a job that was called a Pullman Porter. And at that time that was one of the best jobs that blacks, Negroes whatever could get they worked the train. And he said his first day at work, he went to the Quarter Master to get em a pair of pants and the guy gave em, the pants were too short, they came all the way up to his knees. So he said he he went back to the Quarter Masters he said he was a big huge white guy with a big face and he said he said sir, you know they are very mannerble, sir ah these pants don't fit. Said I need another pair of pants. Now he looking behind him and its shelves full of pants. And he said 'what you say boy', and he said I need a pair of pants that fit this come all the way up to my knees. He said the white guy looked at him he said boy it would be easier for me to get a shorter Nigger than to give you another pair of pants. So he was serving lunch all day with pants all the way up to his knees. And it was a very profound story and I never ever in my life forgot that story.⁴

Here the storyteller illustrates what many blacks experienced during this time period. This story tells how this man took this experience and made sure that his grandson was aware of the relationship of the two communities. We see here that the white Quarter Master considered blacks less important, and more easily replaced than clothing. The dignity of a Blackman did not even register as relevant to this white man. This experience is what impacted the views of the man telling the story and the group hearing the story for the first time. He illustrates this by saying:

And I thought wow, how how how powerful that symbolize what was going on in their lives. He could reach back and give the man a pair of pants so he could just have some dignity in his work. Just walk around serving folk with regular pair of pants and he told him it would be easier for him to get a shorter Nigro than to give him another pair of pants. And I just wanted to to get that story out because I've always thought of that and never and never was able to actually share it in this type of setting. Um we have a minute or I'm up.⁵

White's belief in black inferiority amplifies the cultural distance between the communities and encourages fear by exaggerating cultural differences and muting human similarities. Story teller #1 tells his personal story in reference to cultural distance. He explains how an incident in the south between a black and white woman effected his families desire to participate in a family reunion. The fear evolved out of a need to protect the family, in particular the storyteller himself from a potentially harmful situation.

I was about 6 or 7 years old. My family was going to go down south to a family reunion and I talked a lot all the time my dad and mom was always worried about me talk'n cause I'll always talk back to people I was supposed be talk'n back to. White people, black people or anybody. But There was an incident in the south., the Teal incident that occur a young black male from Chicago had went south to Money, Mississippi. An allegedly whistled at a a white woman and was brutally murder by two or three white men., And in were we were going was not far from Money, Mississippi, so my dad wouldn't let me go. I didn't realize to years later the reason he didn't let me go was because of his fear of me being in that area. Talk'n like I talk. And in his mind thinking something might happen to this boy if he goes down there.⁶

⁴ Storyteller 1.2 (1.2 denotes participant number1 story 2), Story Circle #6, African American man in his fifties.

⁵ Story teller 1.2

⁶ Story teller 1.2

This story tells us that the events towards blacks in the south not only impacted the black southern community, also had a great impact on the minds of the black community in the north. This fear that was imposed on the family began to shape this storytellers view on racial inferiority.

Within the same story the teller shares with us when he was a boy, him and his grandmother would have lunch at Woolworth's. Woolworth's being the local department store had a cafeteria where people would have lunch while shopping in the city. The storyteller tells about his first experience explicit experience of racial inferiority:

I was about ten years old I had went downtown right here on main st. and we went to eat lunch with my grandmother; it used to be called Woolworth's and we went in we had to way in the back and we waited forever to get a hot dog and a coke and I told my grand mother I said why can't we sit up there with all those people at the regular lunch counter. But I didn't know that it was reserved for white people only she would say oh be quiet boy you they goin wait on us don't worry about it, in my mind I could realize at that point there was a difference.⁷

The story tells us how in the sixties that the black inferiority was explicit. The white community expressed their ethnocentric views visually by separating the blacks and the whites. The grandmother's statement was the overwhelming thought processes of many blacks in the community.

The storyteller continues to show how racial inferiority has molded his outlook on life with his story about a golf ball. The results of the incident is a part of him today.

I was about fifteen years old and I had a girlfriend that was liven in seven stories west. Which is way out on north Hawkins at that time was considered Fairlawn what'n wouldn't really Fairlawn, but black folk called it Fairlawn cause it was way away from where we lived and I was leaven her house and didn't have any money to catch the bus, didn't have a bike so I'm walking back way back to the Westside an a car pulls up and these bunch of little white boys are in the car and I noticed one of them leaned out of the window and I turned cause whatever it was I didn't want to get it in the head and BAM hit me real hard in the side crack my rib and I looked down and it was a golf. I picked that golf ball up and I'm fifty six years old. I still have that golf ball at home. And I never like golf even up till Tiger Woods started playing I never really like golf that was a personal attack.⁸

This story is a great example of how events shape individuals. This man saw the game of golf as a traumatic trigger to the incident that happened in the sixties. As individuals events and incidents are the little pixels that make up the big picture. From this last story we can learn how this analogy is true.

Implicit Racism

Implicit Racism is the covert or unconscious forms of prejudices or discrimination that take place in society. Explicit racism was written into the law, but with the end of Jim Crow racist attitudes had to be expressed more subtlety, indirectly, implicitly. This type of racism is more prevalent in contemporary times. We see the result of implicit racism in a lack of leadership encouraging a general insensitivity to other cultures. We can draw an understanding of this topic from several of

⁷ Storyteller 1.1

⁸ Story teller 1.1

the stories articulated in the story circles. These stories of implicit racism became more apparent with the individuals in their thirties and forties.

A man in his forties tells us that while attending the University of Akron he encountered unwillingness from the administration to mend racial conflict among the students. The initial appearance from the University seemed to be cooperative and collaborative. The final results left the group unsatisfied with the outcome and questioning the University's ability to deal with race relations. The man even tells that the incident made him upset with local leaders in the community. The lack of involvement from the communities' (city and university) leaders left a bad taste in his mouth for years. The man says:

1986 at the University of Akron campus main campus here in Akron. Um I was a part of the Black United Student organization. We were celebrating Martin Luther King day Martin Luther King's Birthday um when we got a call in the bus office earlier that morning telling us that we needed to get to one of the dorms a it was a incident that happened, a so we rush over me and some of the officers of the organization we found someone hung a sheet out of one of the dorm windows that said happy James Earl Ray day. And ah not only do we students calling the bus office but we had the people in the city and we had the beacon journal and other media outlets calling asking what's going we approach the university and said could you please get that sign taken out of the window and the university was kind of slow in its response to get the sign removed.⁹

As the story teller recalled the story you could see the passion in his eyes and how the events have affected him. The man felt that the university and the city could have done more to negate the racial conflict and build race relations at the university. He shares his thought when he says:

we called a meeting with some other student organizations, fraternities, sororities and the school it just seem like the whole um a a jest of the meeting was more or less a okay we're here to help satisfy you it wasn't let's get to the bottom of this, lets create a dialogue, let's start talking about some things in which we could do to make things better but lets see what we could do to make things okay for you and um it was just a a for us it was very disheartening because it was like you know a how could people be so insensitive and then on top of that how could they actually witness you know a bear witness to something like that and not be willing to help and not at least be willing to talk to those that were injured you know by such an incident so it left a bad taste in our mouths for awhile you know with the university and you know with even some of the city's leaders because we went to the city and they kinda told us its a university's problem so it really taught us a lot it really left a bad taste in our mouth during that time¹⁰

Another story teller, a young woman, in her thirties tells of her experience in high school during a black history month assembly at a parochial school. She shares how she was very involved in the school organization, multi cultural, which sponsored the program and the importance of the black history program. She realized that the administration did not share the same views in regards to the adherence of the school dress code for this assembly. The young lady felt betrayed and unclear as to why the schools that she was involved in choose not to enforce one of the basic policies of the school on this day. She tells us:

each class to were assigned to sit the with their specific class so once we sat down it was supposed to formed the African flag was supposed to be beautiful in color we all sat as a school in form the African flag and as

⁹ Story teller 2.1

¹⁰ Story teller 2.1

we sat um the sophomore class as as the flag began to form we all noticed that there was this huge white spot in the sophomore class there was a group of twenty student that decided to wear white hoodies and I still get kind of emotional when I think of this story it really because it really hit dear to my heart because I worked really really hard and this is probably been fifteen years ago this happened but um as everybody sat there and I looked up I was the only one standing along with a lot of faculty but I was the only standing there in the gym and I looked up and it was the majority of my friends sitting there with these white hooded sweatshirts on and the faculty did absolutely nothing. And these same people of course had the jeans on which meant that they were out of dress code because they did not wear the designated color that they was supposed to wear to wear the jeans I immediately went to the principal and said their out of dress code asked what could be done her response was well well I mean really nothing.¹¹

The young lady offended by the response of the principal proceeds on through the day. Because of the earlier interaction of the students and the lack of leadership or what many would call a double standard, an altercation ensued.

When the assemble was over you could only pretty much image what happen the black students versus the white it was a brawl in the lunch room the principal called us all down she wanted to suspend us well it was pretty much a riot in the principals office um but that was um one thing that really hit home to me and my first reaction was to go and confront one of the girls that I was closet to.

During this story you could tell that this form of implicit racism has shaped the lenses in which both these individuals view the communities that they are involved in. The individuals exhibited emotional scars from the events that occurred over fifteen years ago. The results of the scars have acted as molds in the shaping of their respective lives. The stories allow us to see that implicit racism is active in the minds of blacks at a very young age. The two story tellers were in high school and college, one private and one public institution where tuition was being paid and the satisfaction of being understood and respected was not accomplished.

Dealing with Cultural Awareness

The story circle continued to evolve with a sense of awareness about individual circumstances. The story tellers became more intimate with their stories. The stories began to peel away their layers and become more transparent with us a group. The stories gave a sense of where the individuals had come from and what the makeup of their character was.

A young woman in her late teens, early twenties made us aware of a story involving her grandmother. The reaction that the young lady gave was one of confusion. The young lady tells us how her family reacted to her grandmother worshipping in a black church on the other side of the river. As she told her story you could tell that the terms and behaviors that were shown towards her grandmother were not acceptable in her interaction with family and friends today.

My Grandmother was born in 1948, she's sixty now, but she told me she used to tell me stories all the time when I was younger growing up. And she told me that when she was younger, she lived in Pennsylvania, um my whole family's Italian. But she would say that there was a river by her house and across the river was a church and on her side was a church. On her side she said it was a white church and across the river was a black church. And she useta always sneak over there with her and her brothers and sisters cause they said

¹¹ Story teller 6.1(6.1 denotes participant number 6, story #1), Story Circle #6, Bi-racial woman in her thirties.

that the black church there'd be more singing more activity going on than the white church she would just be bored. So but her Mom and Dad caught her going sneaking over there every Sunday to do that and she use to get made fun of real bad when she was younger saying that she, I don't want to say the word but, uh naw, um she use to say that people would call her a Negro lover and like harass her constantly when she was growing up and she use ta get in fights all the time with white people over it cause she didn't see no problem with it or nothing and that's just the story she told me.¹²

The stories continued and a young man in his thirties shared his story of feelings of isolation and lack of inclusion in community organizations. The black man lives in a predominately white neighborhood where too few of the minority children were participating in community activities. The man felt that the community did not reach out to minorities to include them in activities or to be a part of committee boards. These boards are often the ones who determine the leagues and the rosters of the board. He received a hostile response to his suggestion about increasing outreach. He shares his story by saying in detail:

this story really um is is pretty recent um, I'm coachin, I'm coachin my um, my younger son's baseball team and in the community we're in, we're in a predominately white community um and as I look out um in in the community there is a hand more than a hand full um I would say probably at least twenty percent um African African American minority minorities in the community, um but as I look at the baseball teams um in the community there's um no representation amongs um amongs the teams very little amoungs the teams as far as um African American's in baseball um or in the community there's very little um participation. I think there's two coaches, two head coaches throughout the entire league and were talking twelve hundred thirteen hundred kids that participate between a a five community league and it's been been that way for a very long time. Ah, even to the point that there is no representation on the boards. Ah, very little opportunity to speak up. Um, when speaking up your looked at as if why are you speaking. Um and that's just right now, today. I mean that's not ten years ago, that's two weeks ago. Um so I think when I look at it, I think I see race, racial conflict still um today. Where I look at where do I fit in. Um, where do I fit in I think is the ultimate question. Um not, not a very young black make, but definitely not a mature seasoned black male. Where do I fit in is the questions I still pose to myself today.¹³

This feeling of not knowing how to fit or were you fit in can be internalized within the black community as well. By noting this is “not ten years ago, that's two weeks ago” this story teller is suggesting that the impact of even more implicit forms of racism is not unlike the impact of more explicit forms on the past. The black community often times looks at ways to conform to the White idea of what is right. There have been many movies and articles written on the impression that Whites have on the black community. These impressions cause the individuals in the black community to question blackness and their ability to adapt between two cultures. In the story circle we heard of two distinct stories exemplifying this point of view. First, the bi-racial young lady tells about her struggle within the black community.

Ok I wana just talk a little bit about um me being an African American woman and um my daily story um as a very fair complected light skinned African American woman. Um on a daily basis probably at least once a day if I'm out in the community, I'm asked the very first question that I'm always asked is what are you? And um, I'm always finding myself battlin with people and telling them that I'm black. And I think

¹² Story teller 7.1(7.1 denotes participant number 7, story number 1), Story Circle #6, White female in her late teens-early twenties.

¹³ Story teller 5.2(5.2 denotes participant number 5, story #2), Story Circle #6, African American man in his thirties.

*that that's why I've always taken such an interest in race in itself. For me, um and I'll tell you guys as the group that I'm sitting here with that um, I'm seventy-five percent African American and twenty-five percent Caucasian, German. Um my father is bi-racial and my mother is one hundred percent black. But I find myself battling with people on a daily basis to prove my blackness. And I think that everybody probably has some type of mixture somewhere down the line. But it's like me, I have to go around and almost carry some certificate of blackness. So that's also, I think a um a race issue that I deal with. Um, and it's not a specific story, but it's my daily story. Um so that's that's a huge, you know, conflict that um I I think that sometimes we even have race within our own um race. Um so I just wanted to share that.*¹⁴

Reflecting on this story one of the men in the story circle shares a similar experience with the group. His mother conformed her communication style to adapt to black culture. He goes on to tell us how confusing it was to deal with the stratification within the black community. He shares his impression of the story of the struggle within in the black community.

*Confusion is what comes to mind, um. You remind me a whole lot of my Mother. Um um my Mother's very fair skinned very fine hair um, when we would go places together people would say who is that. That's my mother, are you adopted, no I'm not adopted, we come in all shades and colors you know. And just to understand, that you know my mother not only when she was an officer in the banks, when she went to work you know Corporate American then when come home she had to come and deal with it even in our own family in our own community you know this this this stratification in color and the lack of understanding and almost that you know you have to...I don't want to say dumb yourself down, but now you gotta ghettoize yourself when you come home. I always just say that you know black folks have have are the first bi-lingual people because we have to go and put on our voice when we go to work, we go to school then come home and put on another voice when we we get back so just the confusion of it all and and and just trying to wrap my mind around that whole concept of we just we all the same folk regardless of what we look like you know. Even you know, Caucasian we're all the same folk but why such the you know, disparity about color and all this and all that so confusion is what I was thinking.*¹⁵

One of the most powerful statements made in the story circle was by the young man, in his late teens, passing on every opportunity. The young man¹⁶ was given a living history lesson on the racial conflict that has existed in society. He was given a firsthand account on how racism moved from explicit to implicit and internal racism within the black community. The silence that this young exhibited intrigued me, was he silent because he hadn't experienced racism or has racial conflict become so implicit that the youth today don't know how to define racism. The youth of today have arguably been led to believe that there are equal to there white peers, but in reality they have to contend with the same obstacles that many of the storytellers have and will continue to deal with over time. The difference is that the racism is more implicit today, making exposure and awareness more difficult.

III. Final Reflections on Stories, Data, and Understanding Racial Conflict

My initial thoughts of the Story Circles were, this was great way for the Akron community to come together and share their opinions and feelings. The stories allowed the participants to share a part of their lives with others, and in return the other participants were able to envision the pain and scars

¹⁴ Story teller#6.2

¹⁵ Theme #2.2

¹⁶ Story teller#3, African American male in his late teens.

that affected their lives of individuals in the community. The dialogue brought young and mature adults to an environment where everyone felt safe to share their experiences. The exchange of stories is one way that the African American community can start healing and positively impacting our community. Initially, I thought my circle was full of individuals that had been educated here in the community that had first hand experience with racial conflict. The conflict ranged from cultural to institutional. On the surface, the participants showed the emotional impact to themselves. The participants expressed the confusion and dissatisfaction of conflict management. Their stories helped me to better understand and appreciate the level of scholarly data because these participants were living researchers. The experiences that the participants told were in line with articles written by Cornel West, Peggy McIntosh, and Michael Tonry. Cornell West shares with us his opinion of “Nihilism” and the solutions for our community. Peggy McIntosh explains to us the theory of “White Privilege” in her article. Michael Tonry is very concise with the examination of the lack of leadership shown in society. These authors and living researchers have ignited the torch for deeper understanding of the African American community, how conflict molds our views.

In addition, when I look at my life I can see more implicit racial conflict than explicit racial conflict. This project has served as a catalyst to more research into my community. The need to bring more awareness to the black community of the conflict that has occurred, more importantly the solutions to the conflict. The mature African Americans must accept the challenge to educate the youth and young adults about the past to positively impact our communities’ future.

References

Story Circle #6, Akron Urban League, May 27, 2009

1. Story teller #1(African American male, age fifties), Story Circle #6, Akron Urban League, May 27, 2009.
2. Story teller #2(African American male, age thirties), Story Circle #6, Akron Urban League, May 27, 2009.
3. Story teller #3(African American male, age late teens), Story Circle #6, Akron Urban League, May 27, 2009.
4. Story teller #5(African American male, age late teens), Story Circle #6, Akron Urban League, May 27, 2009.
5. Story teller #6(African American female, age thirties), Story Circle #6, Akron Urban League, May 27, 2009.
6. Story teller #7(Caucasians female, age late teens), Story Circle #6, Akron Urban League, May 27, 2009.