

Race and Community
Kristilyn Cottle

I. Introduction

During the process of interviewing participants' at the Urban League on Wednesday May 27th, 2009, stories prevailed that dealt with the personal experiences of race or racial conflict in the participants' lives. Within these stories, as a group, we were able to identify themes that linked all the stories together. After defining common themes amongst the stories, we dug further and were able to clump these multiple themes into one. We were able to relate this one theme to almost all of the stories we heard in the story circles. The theme that will be discussed in this paper is race and community.

Our story circle was group number eight and we were comprised of four women and three men. Two of the women in the group were white and two were black. Of the three men, two were black and one was white. Story tellers two and six were the black females and story tellers four and five were the white women in our circle. Story teller number seven was the white man and teller's one and three were black. Unlike the other story circles that had almost all minorities in them, with the exception of the few white people in the class, we had a pretty equal number of ethnicities.

II. Doing Justice to the 2009 Storytellers and Their Stories

After all the stories in the story circle were analyzed, the theme of race and community held the most significant impact on the group. The idea of race and community was portrayed in many different ways and in almost all of the stories that we heard within the story circles. Each member of the group was able to relate a story in their life that dealt with either their race or the race of person they knew and the community they belonged in or were a part of. Although this section could be broken down into a few subcategories, it was easier to keep all the stories together because they identified with each other so well. Each of the stories that related to race and community had a valuable meaning behind it that the teller wanted the audience to know how race and racism impacts not only individuals but also their communities.

Story teller seven¹ was able to relate to race and community in all of stories he told, but one stood out more than the others. This particular story teller begins his story by explaining how he and his wife wanted to buy a house and start a family. When they began to look for a home they realized how expensive houses cost and they wanted the most for their money. His wife also wanted to be a stay at home mom, like a lot of women during the time of this story.

“When we went to buy a house we wanted to live near our church so we started looking on the west side of Akron and my wife also didn't want to work outside the home so we wanted to get as much

¹ This particular story teller was the only white male in the group. He gave a second view to the situations that the black participants in our story circle number 8.

*house for our money as we can and unfortunately or fortunately for us you can get more house housing prices are less in the black community.*²

The story that story teller seven told before the one about buying a house was of how he grew up without thinking there was a problem when people are of different races. His father was a United Methodist Pastor in the Cleveland area. When he was younger he had a black boy live with him and his family. Although he and his family were white, they had a black man living with them. The fact that this young boy lived with him made it easier for him and his wife to decide that living in a black community was okay. This related very well to the theme of this paper, which is race and community.

“We had a young black man and Cleveland in the middle 60’s there was a thing called the inner city renewal society and there was a young man, lets call him, Charles, that came and lived with us a kid my age a young man and so I remember having for the summer having another brother and ub that was really cool.”³

Not only does story teller seven relate his younger years and his married life to race and community, he discusses his time as a firefighter and being a part of a firefighter community. Even though he is not talking about his neighborhood community, he relates the relationship that firemen and women have as being a community or a family. They go through struggles and chance fate every time they go out to a fire together. Each member of this firefighting “family” puts their lives in each other’s hands. But for this story teller, his life changed in 1988 when his close knit, all white, firefighters started to integrate and hired its first full time black fireman.

“...I was hired as a local firefighter and I lived in an all black neighborhood all my kids playmates were black but I worked in an all white setting. And there was not one single full time black man working for the city in 1986 its all the way up to 1988 and I was there when I integrated it by hiring the first black firefighter. It was challenging to hear a lot of the comments and then a lot of people targeted me and having fun as they were getting ready to get integrated but you could see the discomfort with people facing some of their own misperceptions or demons or whatever...”⁴

This story teller is trying to explain how the white firefighters in his squad had a hard time adapting to the integration of full time black firemen. He uses the words misperception and demons to describe how the white firemen looked at this change. They would make comments that would bother him because he would remember the story about how Charles lived with him and his father raised him to not look at race. The theme Race and Community is apparent with this story of the full time black firefighters.

The next story that we heard was from story teller one and his encounter with race and community. While he was working at a movie theater as a college student at Kent State University, he came across a little old lady every Tuesday when she would come to watch her

² Story teller 7(a), 2009. Part (a) is the first part of one story while part ((b) is the second part of the same story and so on for any other parts of a particular story. This story teller’s story can be found in the document labeled Story Circle 6, 7, 1.

³ Story teller 7(b), 2009

⁴ Story teller 7(c), 2009

movie. Story teller one said he was always curious why she came in on Tuesdays and he finally asked her during one of her weekly visits to the theater.

“I’m in college I work at a movie theater this old white lady that comes in every Tuesday she’s about 90,000 years old the sweetest lady in the planet sweetest lady on the planet she comes in on Tuesdays. I asked her, why do you come on Tuesdays by yourself? She says it only takes one to watch a movie. She comes in so everyone knows this is my last day workin so she comes in on a Tuesday she says well around well uh I say my name we’re friends aren’t we I say yea. keep in mind I love this lady a whole semester man I was I was getting knowledge from her you know what I mean she said we’re friends right I said yea so I figured she felt like this was the only opportunity she had to ask this in particular question.”⁵

Story teller one had no problem with the fact that this sweet, old lady wanted to ask him a question. He felt like it would be no problem and told her to go for it and ask her question. Since it had been a whole semester of these two getting to know each other, it seemed like they were friends. The background of this lady actually helped to prove that this story related to the theme. She was a white lady that came from a predominately white neighborhood here in Akron. She had moved from her old town in the south that was also a majority white. He continued with his story.

“She says well we can talk here and I said yes and she said well let me see it (laughs from everyone). I said excuse me Mrs. Crabtree what was that? She said I know ya got it let me see it. I says uh really she says I know ya have a tail I need to see it. I says I got a tail? She says listen my pastor told me when I was a little girl that brothers black people had tails that they were descendants from monkeys. So she was so cool in her um in her being comfortable with me knowing I’m leaving she thinks like her only black friend is about to leave so she needed to get this information ya know what I’m sayin and I didn’t fought her she was educated this way and then she grew up and she started living in lake cable. She went from wherever she was down there went to lake cable that’s predominantly white area out there so she’s just this regular lady askin her homeboy let me see it cause you got it and then I had to actually tell her no we don’t and she was shocked and she and she wasn’t even embarrassed to ask me she just knew it was her last opportunity she has no black friends they closed to seeing black she ever seen was the Cosby show period and I was her only black friend.”⁶

Given that her pastor at her church, the community she was raised in, taught her that black people had tails, her idea of race was very invalid. She had been miseducated or misled into thinking in this inaccurate fashion. Why her judgment never changed as she got older and moved into the Akron area, we cannot know for certain. Story teller one was dead serious as he was telling this story and the group had been laughing when he originally said that the lady wanted to see it. We didn’t understand that there was a deeper meaning behind her very simple request. The fact that the old lady didn’t even know she said anything wrong made this story an even more profound demonstration of how our views on race are linked to the communities we live in. Just like the firemen story where the firemen were dealing with racist reactions to integration in their “firefighter community,” this lady’s judgment was clouded because of her place in an all white, insulated and privileged, but misled community.

⁵ Story teller 1(a), 2009. This excerpt can be found in the document titled story circle 6, 7, 1.

⁶ Story teller 1(b), 2009.

Another story that was able to be defined under the theme race and community was told by story person six. In this story she describes a situation from her youth that helped shape her into the person she is today. The story that she tells is about her youth in Alabama. Story teller six begins by saying that there wasn't much racial tension when she was young but there is one incident that has helped her become the important person she is today.

*“And of course we didn't see a lot of racial tensions at that time. But we knew that they existed because school teachers and ministers was high on the respective list of both white and black. And of course um there was one incident that I remember and what really makes me continue to work hard today.”*⁷

The other background information that is necessary from this story teller's life is that her mother was an important person in her town because she was a teacher. During this time, teachers were looked up to her and other influential people like ministers. She continues with the one incident she remembers as a little girl. She was from a small town in Alabama that had both black and white farmers. After the crops were harvested, the white men would get the money for them, while the black men were ripped off. With this part of the story we are able to connect it to the theme of race and community.

*“There was some farmers that did not get their check when their crop was plowed up and there was some that did get it. The white got their check and of course the minorities did not my mother being a teacher and very much you know respected they came to her and said to her we need to know what's happening, we would like to be able to know when we can get groceries because for two years straight they hadn't been able to get anything from the local grocery store but the white could but and she called them together and will never will forget it on a Sunday evening she said I want you to get along... I never will forget that as a little girl when he stood up there this white gentlemen stood up for all of these that hadn't gotten their monies and my mother of course had written to the president of the united states and told them of their dilemma and they brought it to pass because this white man signed on with her in order to make a change for everybody.”*⁸

The fact that a white man stood up for these black farmers, in a context where no one else in his white community would do so (in fact, where all the other white farmers were more than willing to benefit from the discrimination against black farmers), was the linking concept that made race and community identifiable. Race didn't matter to him, as it did for all the other white farmers, so he broke with his own community and reached out to the black person. He did this because he felt that everyone should be paid for their crops. In the end yes there was happy ending and the black farmers got their money and a bill was even passed. But you have to think of all the downsides to this happy ending. The first being that the only reason this bill was needed at all was because white leaders felt free to pay white and not pay blacks for their same crops. Even though there was a happy ending for everyone, it did take more for the black farmers to receive such ending. They had to leave their fields and families to have this secret meeting with the story teller six's mother and eventually this white minister. They had to fight twice as hard as the white farmers to get something they deserved from the beginning. This story told by story teller six was very informative on how

⁷ Story teller 6 (a), 2009. This excerpt can be found in the document titled story circle 6, 7, 1.

⁸ Story teller 6 (b), 2009

a community can come together, no matter what their race, and make change happen. In this case, that change was getting a bill passed that made all farmers get paid for their crops.

Story teller two had the next story that related to the theme of race and community quite well. Her story was about a previous coworker of hers that got into a verbal then physical disagreement with a neighbor. This was a more recent example of race and community and it is an all too often seen experience in today's society. A lot of the racial conflict that was seen in the past can still be seen in certain communities or neighborhoods today. Although racism is illegal, there seems to be a way around it that some people are able to find.

*"I used to work at info line and a coworker of mine at the time called she had called me all hysterical, it was like 1130-12 o'clock at night. She was like I need you to call my mom and tell my mom I'm going to jail. So I'm like, that's not your character you're going to jail? Going to jail for what? So she tell me that one of her neighbors, she was a Caucasian lady had got into it with her about cutting her music down or whatever, so she knocks. So the other lady knocks on my friend's door and asked her turn the music down. So they get into an altercation or whatever sort and she calls her a "nigger" [emphasizes it quietly] and then they get to fighting and my friend went to jail even though the other lady was over her house and hit her first. And so, I just thought that was kind of racial."*⁹

With a theme like race and community, it is easy to understand how this story fits into it. The white neighbor in the story was the one who started the disagreement and in the end the black coworker was the one who was in trouble. For a neighbor to come over to your house and start a physical fight is wrong in general, but not being able to stick up for yourself because you are black makes the situation even more intolerable. The community that these two ladies live in is affected by race and there is obvious racism in the neighborhood. When a community has racism in it, it becomes difficult to function as a society. Physical as well as verbal arguments can become a common factor in neighborhoods (that is, about place rather than race) such as this one because the power-poor situation of residents can increase despair. The white versus black difference creates a sense of tension that stays even after communities try to come together and eliminate racism. Knowing the whites have power, the African Americans in the community feel they will never be equal. This feeling is then reinforced when incidents such as the one with our speaker continue to occur.

The next story that I was able to include in the theme of race and community was told by story teller five. It is actually related to the previous story told by story teller two. In the aforementioned story we learned that racism is still seen today. In this story we heard from story teller five we see how racism impacted people around 25 years ago. It was actually told by one of the three white people that were in our story circle. She is describing a story that her father had told her about when he was younger and his mother ostracized one of his friends for being black. Her father had joined the military at a young age and this experience helped him become a different person and story teller five is grateful of this.

⁹ Story teller 2(a), 2009. This excerpt can be found in the document titled story person 2.

“My father was in the military at a very young age. I think he enlisted at 19 um so when he went away to basic training. The area we grew up in was predominantly white and it had been from the time he had been little also. But you learn things in the military and there are... He made some really good friends with African American people. So when it came time for thanksgiving, he invited a few friends home. One of them was African American one of them was a white guy.”¹⁰

This story teller goes on to describe how her father’s family did not like the idea of a black man coming to stay in their house. But at the time her father didn’t know it would be that big of a deal for his military buddies to come home for a visit. This black friend of his was obviously a patriotic American and not a bad influence since he was in the military. He was willing to put his life on the line for his country. Her father was going to depend on this man if he ever got into trouble and his mother couldn’t look past his skin.

“Umm... my grandmother did not take a good liking to this. She must not have known when they were coming home because when they got there, she wouldn’t let him in the house. She would she said there was no black boy is going to be at my house. He can come and eat dinner but he can not stay here. So my dad, being the guy he is, fine if your not going to let him stay here, none of us are going to stay here. So they went down the street and rented a hotel room and they stayed there for thanksgiving. Umm... I think they ended up going back to the house for dinner, but they did not stay there.”¹¹

After analyzing this story it is clear that it is a perfect example of how our views on race are linked to our place in a community.. The story teller’s grandmother was raised in a time when it was acceptable to explicitly state that blacks were considered unwelcome in the home and they were seen as inferior to the white people. This is not how the father wanted his friends to be treated so he stood up to his mother and wouldn’t stay at home for the little time he had off to be with his family, perhaps marking a small cultural transformation. The inability of the grandmother to see beyond race, and the soldiers unwillingness to deny his battlefield friendship on the basis of race, caused a sense of hostility amongst the family or the community that was supposed to be together for thanksgiving. Now if you look at story teller five she will tell you that she is the person she is today because of her father and this experience he went through at a very young age.

“And I think that says a lot about my father and how we were raised as kids. Umm... You know that wasn’t a big issue in our family if your black your black and that’s all there was to it.”¹²

The final story that relates very well to the theme of race and community was told by story teller three. He was very quiet during his first story during the story circles but opened up more for round two. This story was from his second time around the circle and he really wanted to get this point across because he was more involved in the conversation and talked louder. He begins by discussing his time down at Ohio University as a college student. He grew up in a town that was predominantly black but played on sports teams that were half and half. So he thought he was confident in a racial sense of the word.

¹⁰ Story teller 5(a), 2009. This excerpt can be located in the document titled story person 5.

¹¹ Story teller 5 (b), 2009

¹² Story teller 5(c), 2009

“Campus got along pretty great and I thought I was pretty independent. But then I found out that I wasn’t as secure as about who I was in any racial context. Once when I, when out with some friends, a friend and I saw, I was looked upon by some of my other friends and they kinda asked me why I was with this person out on a date so to speak? And I thought I was cool [Person 1 yells “right”] and secure within my self. But just the social pressure of being able to, like I said, uh uh, for me it’s, it’s not so much about umm... outside in, it’s about inside out.”¹³

This story teller was very inquisitive about telling how he feels about people and himself and how he thinks other people look at him. He never knew that people would look at him as wrong for dating a certain person. He thought he was completely okay with how he looked at himself and he thought he was secure within himself. After encountering a friend of his and listening to how he felt about himself, story teller three changed his mind on his insecurities. He then discussed how after walking in a parking lot one day he heard the clicking of locks and then started noticing girls grip their purses tighter to their shoulders.

“And I found out at that time that I wasn’t as secure within myself to where I could walk around with whoever I wanted to without worrying about what people think. And again I will go back to what I said the first time. I think a lot of times we project our own insecurities on anyone or anything that’s different. I think the one racism that most of us is black men experience now and we experienced it from white females and black females and you’re walking through a parking lot and you hear the click, click, click. And you see all the sudden, all the sudden the close has to come up closer under the shoulder straps.”¹⁴

When you hear cars lock and see girls clench their purses closer to their bodies as you walk by, you would start to feel a little insecure about yourself. After he said this, he looked at the one white man in the group, story teller seven, and asked him if he had this same problem or if it was a black thing. Story teller seven said that he had not experienced this type of situation. Then story teller one, the other black man in the group, said that he experiences it all the time. To add to the conversation, story teller two stated that, “I do it whenever I see a person because my dad taught me that you keep your door locked.” I agree with this interpretation because whenever I’m alone I always hold my purse tighter and lock my doors. The point of these stories added together is to detail the fact that the fear of black strangers is greater than the fear of white strangers. This all ties back to the theme of race and community. People perceive black men as dangerous and women fear them more than other races. This is concluded with story teller three and his experience and also with the addition of the other group members.

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

How My Thinking Changed

Once we finished all the story groups, before we left, we took the time to write down our initial thoughts of the whole process. When we were first told of the story circle idea I was kind of skeptical on how it would all play out. With the first story of the firemen, my

¹³ Story teller 3 (a), 2009. This excerpt can be found in the document titled story person 3 (2).

¹⁴ Story teller 3 (b), 2009

initial reaction was as follows, “good for him because he stood up for himself and he was happy to be a part of such a great group of fireman.” My thinking hasn’t changed that drastically from my initial response even after reading all the articles and listening to the stories again. I really think it is good that he stood up and chose to live in black neighborhood. This was because of his past experience of having diversity in his life. This story gave me a deeper understanding for the idea of interracial living and jobs. Today we have laws that make it so race is not a factor behind getting a job. But after reading some of the articles and through discussions in class it has become apparent that this fact may not be true. With the next story my original thinking was that it was funny. But then the story teller told the next half of the story and it was no longer a joke, it was a serious issue of racial stereotyping. “I was disgusted especially after taking human diversity classes,” was the thought I wrote down in my field notes and this is still true after thinking about it more seriously. I do have a deeper understanding of why someone would say something like what this woman did say. I talked with classmates about my story and some of the African American students in the class said that white people used to think that black people had tails. This was because they looked like monkeys so they must have a tail. Through all my years of school I had never heard this before but apparently it was because I was sheltered from it.

Story teller six’s story was one that I will never forget. “It didn’t surprise me because this was true back in the day,” was my original thought in my field notes. What did make an impact on me was how the white preacher stood up for the black farmers when he didn’t have to. He wanted to bring the community together and stop the unfairness that was present within it. I now have a deeper appreciation for the idea that blacks and whites back in the day could get along if there would have been more people like this preacher. I also understand why the woman who told this story went on to have the career she has today. She is a very influential person within her community and is looked up to by many people. She said that this story she told was the main reason why she decided to go into the career that she did. Story teller two’s described the situation her coworker was involved in. My initial thought was “I could see this happening because it happens all the time in this country.” This initial thought is actually a very good description of other stories I heard from fellow classmates. We read a few articles that related to the situation that black people usually get in trouble more than a white person even if it isn’t their fault. The articles and the conversations we had in class gave me a better understanding of why this type of thing happens. People still look at race as an identifying mark on whether they get a job or not. I do not think this should be a factor anymore and race shouldn’t even be a question on a survey or a job application. Even though it is illegal to do such a thing, employers find a way around it all the time. This should be corrected and it should no longer be like this.

Story person five had a great story about her father being in the military. My initial reaction was that I was stunned. I had met this girl in the beginning of the class and she seemed like a great girl that comes from a nice family. I couldn’t picture her family going through this type of situation. But after listening to the story again, I picture the time that this incident took place and it actually makes a lot of sense. Her father didn’t want to raise his family this way, so that is why the girl I know is such a lovely young lady. I now have a deeper appreciation for her family even without knowing them because her father was able to rise above his mother’s feelings and stand up for what he believe in. During that time doing something like that was probably very difficult. “Wow! But true,” was my preliminary

thought behind story teller three's story about the women clicking their locks and clinching their purses tighter and closer. This idea still hasn't changed but I have expanded on it. I now think that yes it is true, but it is so wrong to think this way. I started paying attention to how I act when I am alone in comparison to when I am with other people and if someone is near me. I do act different when there is a man following me to closely even if is a fellow student after class. Most of the time I do not look back to see what the race is of the person who is around me, but I would admit that I do lock my locks when I am in a neighborhood that is said to be majority black. I now have a deeper understanding for why black men are more subconscious about when they walk down the street and if white women are around them. I know this isn't how it should be but it is the truth.

Importance of Scholarly Data

The stories helped me understand and appreciate the importance of the scholarly data because I was able to relate these stories to the articles from our class. Being able to actually relate to an article that was written by really intelligent people that have been published made the articles more interesting. During my initial responses, I even noted certain points in the stories that I could relate to some of the articles we read in class. I did this with the movie we watched on housing developments as well. After going through the articles again for the second assignment of the class, the individual themes paper, I would come across a sentence or a paragraph that would remind me of a particular story and this is a great feat. Before this class I wouldn't actually read the articles that teachers would assign in great detail. Now that this class is over I can honestly say I enjoyed reading some of these articles. They gave me a new perspective on life and the racial hardships that are still faced today. The stories helped me to understand how the older generation of blacks and whites faced racial hardships. When I put the idea behind the articles in context of the stories, it opened my eyes to a whole new idea of racial tensions in America.

Final Reflections

The main thing I learned from this entire project was history that has been hidden from me throughout my years in school. I heard real life stories that came from people that were actually a part of the time racism occurred. In school we read books and stories in the books about racism, but there was no direct connection to the story teller. The meaning behind the story was flawed by the lack of emotion. Emotion is the main reason why these stories were so impactful on me. I will walk away with a new perspective of what black people and white people went through many years ago, way before I was born. I didn't realize how racism affected the white community or even communities such as firemen. When the firefighters from my city walk into the store I work at, you would never believe that 40 years ago the black firemen wouldn't be there. This is just one of many new experiences I will take with me from these story circles.

References

Story Tellers 1-7, Story Circle #8, stories collected on May 27, 2009 at the Akron Urban League for *Law, Mediation and Violence* at the University of Akron.