

## A Black Perspective on Racial Conflict in Akron

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### Introduction

The complexities of race and racial conflict can be daunting at times to unravel and put into understandable terms. The question is can we, as Americans build an equitable society in which people are not judged by their outward appearance but as human beings. We know racism still exists and as a result racial conflict persists. We still have discriminatory criminal justice policies that, deliberately or not, hinder social mobility for minorities. Throughout the semester I have been listening to and examining stories recorded at the Akron Urban League. Each story is important for they remind us how much we have achieved in terms of civil rights yet how far we still need to reach where all ethnicities are respected in this country. There are five concepts (lack of agency, typification, social control, whiteness, and cultural distance) that I will look at to help understand the stories and how the stories build on the concepts.

### Doing justice to the stories

The first concept that emerged from the story circle that I will look at and how it ties in with the stories will be the lack of agency. In the context of politics agency means simply the power to do something; the power to exert one's influence to bring change to policymaking and so forth. In a social context, agency means the capacity to improve one's condition, to have the capacity to protest a law or vote on an important issue. Overall, having agency enables a person to withstand adversity and to persevere. The chapter *Nihilism in Black America* from West's book Race Matters expounds on a sense of hopelessness among black individuals that suggests a lack of agency; the feeling of being deprived of resources that empower them to make a difference in their lives. He writes, "The accumulated effect of the black wounds and scars suffered in a white-dominated society is a deep-seated anger, a boiling sense of rage, and a passionate pessimism regarding America's will to justice."<sup>1</sup> From listening to the stories there was this frustration that was commonplace in the discussions that followed; a belief that the American justice system is not in their corner. The cynicism felt during participating in the story circle was overtly displayed by the one person who told her story about crossing the Mason-Dixon Line and experiencing white animosity when she was drinking at a white-only drinking fountain.<sup>2</sup> She was forced to succumb to the institutionalized inequalities of her time and was powerless to do anything about it.

She says, "*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*

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<sup>1</sup> West, Cornel. "Black Nihilism in America." Race Matters 1993, pg. 18

<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> participant's recorded story; session 1; story circle #5

*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 as 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 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."*

Racial conflict confused her as a child, because the distinction asserted made no sense to her, yet there it was, leaving a taste and "still shaping" her perspective today. The little girl in the story was just about ten years old. To be that young and facing an institutionalized antagonism towards a people on the basis of race is disheartening. One thing to keep in mind is that the little girl initially does not see color; her perception allows her to see things for what they are. Youth in itself serves as a buffer for it renders us carefree and not antagonized by the divisiveness and bigotry in adult society. The little girl did not see the stratification among blacks and whites until she went to get a drink of at a water fountain at a park in Alabama. She did not see a difference between the "black" and "white" drinking fountains but because of the American caste system at the time she was coerced into believing the stereotypes; to accept her inferiority on the basis of race. It was an unfortunate time growing up for black children as well as for white children for they were born unaware of the disease of institutionalized racism; nonetheless, over time it was inculcated within them the falsehoods of white supremacy and black inferiority. The stories that I listened to are reminders of the importance to ensure people of this country that they have a voice in America and that they have the agency to invoke change. Agency in politics is the notion that a person has the wherewithal to make an impact on policymaking in a system of government; an individual or group that has clout. Nevertheless, agency can be broadened to encompass the idea of a person having the capacity to make a difference in one's community. When a person lacks agency there is a deprivation of the confidence to actuate change to ameliorate one's current condition.

Having resources is essential in becoming an effective agent, an individual with the ability to lead and have control over one's situation. Lack of agency and the lack of voice are felt in this one story here, a story in which a young man is pulled over by the cops and has his car checked with a warrant showed to him. Moreover, the police brought out the police dogs to drug search the interior of his car because they believed that the car the young man was driving had been spotted in numerous times in drug-infested urban areas that are known to be where drug trafficking occurs. Here he elaborates:

*"Well my story was coming to school, which was here at the Urban League, I was driving in my Camero it was me and two of my other friends was coming here for school. So a cop car got behind us and we got pulled over and he asked me for my license and registration. I had my license and registration and about another two cop cars came right behind us. The K9 dogs and the snuz(?) is like the drug cars, cop cars for the drugs. So they searched our car so I had to call Miss Rogers and she came down here. She talked to the police and everything and she asked what was going on and he said" this car was spotted in many drug areas." Mind you I just go the car 2 weeks ago, 2 weeks*

*before this had happened. He 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 everything and so he stripped out everything and took my CD player out, he took my stereo out to see if there was stuff in there, looked under my seats, behind my trunk and stripped everything out. And my mom came and asked what was going on so he told her the same thing. And she asked, 'Why he was stripping out my car?' He said "'cause it was spotted in many drug areas," like he told Miss Rogers. So she said, 'There's probably many cars that's 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. My graduation from Urban League was next week so he luckily God was there for me. I got out a day before graduation after everything like that. It was just a messed up moment that I had.'*<sup>3</sup>

This young man lacks agency because he is not in control of his situation, prohibited the dignity of a having a voice for his sake. The theme of racial profiling also manifests itself here in this story for the young man is suspected of being involved in drug trafficking because he drives a car that is suspected to have been spotted in marked drug areas. These police officers did not have a warrant to check his car. They pulled him over with a false preconception, blinded by their own stereotypes of young black men. During the young man's plight it is unbeknownst to him that he has the agency to refuse to allow the police officers to search his car for they don't have a warrant. This unwarranted search is an infraction against the young man's Fourth Amendment right, but then again he may not know this, or he may not believe that the officers will honor this, during the altercation. It is one case when blacks are denied agency in their communities, but it is another case when blacks are not educated about their own agency or educated to believe that state officials are not likely to recognize their legal right, which renders them vulnerable.

A second way to understand the importance of the stories told is to pay attention to racial typification, which in the Chiricos article is translated as black people being classified as criminals due to the color of their skin; that crime is a black phenomenon; that being black is a sufficient criterion to assume a person is a criminal.<sup>4</sup> Racial typification is just one form of classification. The racial classifications of blacks as being lazy, unassertive and prone to commit crimes have been permeating through American media for decades if not centuries. These classifications have led to racial profiling, the unwarranted notion that a black person is somehow connected to a crime on the basis of being black. This suspicion has no factual basis whatsoever but is solely based on race. The concept of typification connects all themes and stories together for behind each story is the experience of being wrongfully classified as either a troublemaker or somebody who is not qualified. The themes of each story point out the specifics of the storyteller's plight; nevertheless, there is a main message that resonates through all the stories that have been told: that in American society we have a propensity to classify people on the basis of their skin pigmentation. The stories that I have listened to explain the predicaments the people have been placed in not because they display erratic behavior, but due to the fact they are black.

One woman does me the honor by telling her experience about being classified:

*"This young lady that I thought was a good friend of mine and we're still friends to 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*

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<sup>3</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> participant's recorded story; session 2

<sup>4</sup> "Racial Typification of Crime and Support for Punitive Measures," Ted Chiricos and Kelly Welch, *Criminology* May 2004, v42n, pg. 360

*me that they're questioning you about what time I come in? They didn't question what time she came in came to find out he kept a log on me. There was no log on anybody else in the whole department. Me, the only black, in the department worked to my advantage because I had worked for the employee's relations manager. 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 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."<sup>5</sup>*

Here the woman targeted in this story is foremost hard worker who does not have a history of causing trouble in the workplace; she has never given any indication that her behavior is detrimental to the working environment. What is evident here is a woman being typified on the basis of race, being seen as a miscreant who needs to be monitored closely every time she is on the clock. Listening to the full story I got the sense of a hard working woman trying to overcome a daunting ordeal in trying to obtain respect in the workplace. The woman being the only black person in a professional environment intimidated others at the General Electric Company and that includes her supervisor, who was the individual documenting everything she did while she was on the clock. The white people in the workplace were not documented; they were not monitored closely as if they were ticking time-bombs that are imminently going to cause discord. She was one of the more hardworking and more diligent employees there, since this supervisor gave her two jobs after one employee was let go.

Now a rational person would wonder what is the logic or the justification behind assigning the woman two jobs if she's going to be typified as a troublemaker; a woman targeted by a supervisor who wants to take away her employment and her dignity. Oftentimes blacks have to work twice as hard to get where get where whites are and the case is evident in this story. Here this woman has to fight through two barriers: attaining the respect that she deserves from management and her being the only black person in the workplace. Listening to this story there is the imagery of betrayal. Here this woman had a friend, a white woman, who knew what was happening in the working environment. Her white coworker was aware of the injurious acts the racist supervisor was committing against her, and she just stood by along with the other white coworkers and allowed it to persist. The storyteller here had to find out on her own. The person she thought was a friend, did not have the courage along with other white coworkers to be honest with her on what was going on.

This is sad for the woman in this story had to find out on her own what was going on inside the company. She could not really rely on anyone; henceforth, she had to take matters into her own hands by bringing up the situation to an employee relations manager. At the same time this story divulges the woman's courage and resiliency. Being targeted on the job and not being told why can be daunting and frustrating. Nevertheless, this woman would not allow herself to be placed in a predicament by a person, who unwarrantedly wants to take away her employment and her dignity; she did not allow the forces against her to impede her from implementing her agency to do what was right.

Being classified of course does not always occur in the workplace, but in different aspects of society. Here in this story a woman is being classified while shopping at a grocery store. This was a

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<sup>5</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> participant's story; session 1

memory that she tried to repress because it is so poignant. At this grocery store she is accompanied with her daughter and husband, who is a Vietnam veteran. She says:

*“Okay personal stories are few. Personal story more so ‘cause I’ve been sort of blessed or I’m a great negotiator. Um, or as people would say I’ll talk my way to get things right. So, I really have had few bad experiences, and the one that that really brings in my mind now I think a lot of the things I’ve tried to put out of my mind, um, was um, my experience in the grocery store with my family: my daughter and my husband. He had just come back from Vietnam. We are in the Grocery store and we were standing in the aisle observing... making decision about something that we were going to buy, and the cart was in the middle of the... was in the aisle and enough room was there for a cart to come by in the opposite direction. 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.”*

In this hegemonic encounter, this white woman feels that segregation is the linchpin in maintaining order. Blacks and whites being around each other in her mind will always lead to discord. A black family with the father being a war veteran in her irrational in point of view still does not qualify them to be on their level.

*“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.”*

Here we see a predicament in America’s racial conflict, where the member of the powerful, dominant group claims to be so weak and helpless as to be ‘harassed’ by the simple presence of an African American unwilling to step off the sidewalk or otherwise disappear to ensure her comfort and reinforce her irrational insistence that she was superior because her skin was white. She expected the manager, or someone in authority, to simply enforce her vision of a racially pure society in that grocery aisle, at the moment, in response to her demand.

*“And my daughter is there at age 6, I’m there, my husband is there, and I just could not believe what was happening. Having been the wife of someone in Vietnam, any day expecting to get a letter saying that something had happened to him, And he was in uniform so it was not as if she did not know that he was military. 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... 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 Negroes should not be allowed to shop in the same places and how we just did not appreciate things.”<sup>6</sup>*

Listening to this story the imagery that comes to mind is woman with her family feeling at a disadvantage because of skin color. At this time she is not doing any protesting, she is not creating any raucous that would justify the white woman berating her and her family in public. This family of three is just spending time together shopping at grocery store. What is striking here is that the woman’s husband is a Vietnam veteran, who fought for his country and he along with his family are big typified as miscreants. It had to have been absolutely disheartening for black men returning home from war; to have fought for their country only to be welcomed home by the treachery of inequality and maltreatment.

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<sup>6</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> participant’s recorded story; session 2

The theme that resonates in this story is a common and irrational fear, the baseless notion that all blacks are troublemakers and have to be contained for they are a threat to the white power structure. What is powerful here in the story is the imagery of a mother of a six-year old, the wife of Vietnam War veteran being berated by a white woman along with her family and later in the end the white supervisor of the grocery store stands his ground for the woman and her family. The woman did not think for a second that the white supervisor would be in her and her family's corner; however, he stood up for what was right. He saw through the one woman's racist behavior and could see that she and her family have done nothing wrong and were being typified by the racist white woman as miscreants just for being black.

Typification can be argued to be a form of controlling mechanism. Another form of social control would be felon disenfranchisement, which is when offenders are denied their voting rights because of their felony convictions. According to Behrens, felon disenfranchisement laws are supposed to be race neutral; however, race in the U.S. is tied to punitive measures.<sup>7</sup> Behrens goes on to say that the imprisonment rates of blacks have exceeded the rates of whites sevenfold. Hence, felon disenfranchisement is a form of social control for it keeps a population in check. Disenfranchising felons unfortunately undermines the voting power of minorities, especially the black population. This a mechanism designed by the white power structure to eradicate the suspected racial threat posed by the black population. Behrens affirms that there is a connection between race and criminal punishment: "Felon disenfranchisement laws are "race neutral" on their face, but in the United States race is clearly tied to criminal punishment: African- American imprisonment rates have consistently exceeded white rates since at least the Civil War era (U.S. Department of Commerce 1882) and remain approximately seven times higher than rates among whites today (U.S. Department of Justice 2002) (See Angela Behrens' Ballot Manipulation and the 'Menace of Negro Domination' [pg.2]."

There are other mechanisms of social control that don't just fall into criminal justice policymaking. The stories that were told give perfect examples of social control in which injustices were actuated against them to keep them in line. The concept of social control is important to understand for it is so applicable in our everyday lives. Social control is implemented in the mass media, government policies, schools, and churches. It is a mechanism employed by the majority population to maintain the status quo and to impede the minority populations from challenging its position. Society is partly blameworthy for the nihilism that blacks experience as they run into roadblocks when there are policies put in place that benefit only the white power structure. We are left with a people feeling powerless and stripped of agency, which is pejorative to the black psyche and contributes to creating a culture of nihilism.

The fourth concept that I need to use to make sense of these stories is whiteness. Whiteness or white privilege is a culprit in the loss of agency in the black communities. Whiteness is more than just being white: it is having all the perquisites that come with it. In a story told by a woman at the story circle; she gives us her experience with whiteness. In this story she has to deal with a company paying a white woman more despite the fact that she and the white woman have been at the company just about the same amount of time doing the same amount of work. She elaborates:

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<sup>7</sup> "Ballot Manipulation and the 'Menace of Negro Domination'": Racial Threat and Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 1850-2002," Angela Behrens, Christopher Uggen, and Jeff Manza, *American Journal of Sociology*, November 2003, v109n3, pg 560

*“Um I went to uh college at a secondary school and I finally got a job doing accounting. Back in 1983 they did not hire accountants. I put in- sent in my resume it was a P.O. box so I got the job there the guy who interviewed me little did I know that he was involved with uh an African-American woman. So he hired me I get the job and I was doing a good job I later find out that the girl that I got the job of \$12,000 with... a girl who went to another secondary school, nine months school was getting \$18,000 a year and this older white lady told me how much she was making so I found a way to let them know. So then a position came up I was doing general office accounting and a position came up in um 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 that 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.”*

Here in this piece the woman has to make a deal with the management to prove to them that she is underemployed and that she is not receiving the respect that she deserves. The idea of an employee having to do this in order to be treated fairly is just plain absurd. She goes on to say:

*“Well 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 me so I went to E.O.C and I filed with them to tell them that there was discrimination because they could not prove to me why I could not get the \$18,000 and I could prove to them that I did the job and there was no bad markings on me for the job so after we went through all the of that they wind up showing- seeing that they couldn't prove that I was not qualified and they could not justify why they was only paying me they would've had to show all their records to show why they was paying me \$12,000 and paying the other girl \$18,000 and we had been there the same amount of time.”<sup>8</sup>*

In this story themes of classification and disparity are evident here. The storyteller of this story is a black woman and she is classified as someone not qualified for a raise even though she went above and beyond in doing her job. The affliction of disparity on the basis of race rears its ugly head in just about all aspects of society and here in the story is a prime example of it. The white girl is being paid \$18,000 and probably deserves to be paid so; however, she did not have to run into any roadblocks to get where she is at. On the flip side the storyteller, who is black, has to prove that she deserves to be paid at \$18,000 by doing the same job as the white girl for three months while being paid at \$12,000. The black woman does her job excellently; she gets great reviews; nonetheless, they still would not give her the raise that she deserves. The management team not giving her the raise was not a matter of her not about being qualified enough, but about race conflict. White privilege does not just pervade through the job market and workplace, but through other aspects of society such as the American prison system.

In Pager's article regarding the effects of a criminal record, whiteness comes in the form of whites receiving more callbacks than blacks after submitting their resumes. Thirty-four percent of the applications submitted by the white tester without a criminal record received callbacks. Seventeen percent of the applications submitted by the white tester that had a criminal record

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<sup>8</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> participant's recorded story: session 1

received callbacks. What is disturbing is that the black tester without a criminal record had fourteen percent of the resumes he submitted receive callbacks, which is exactly half of the callbacks that the white tester received. Pager goes on to say, “On the other hand, the effect of a criminal record may be worse for blacks if employers, already wary of black applicants, are more hesitant when it comes to taking risks on blacks with proven criminal tendencies.”<sup>9</sup> The white tester without a criminal record on the basis of race is not perceived as threatening because (1) he doesn’t have a criminal past and (2) there are not any negative stereotypes impeding his progress. The white tester with a criminal record still received more callbacks than the black tester without a criminal record and is perceived as less threatening.

The concept of whiteness helps us understand the black experience told from the stories in which whiteness explains how blacks can’t get as far as whites just by following the Protestant ethic of hard work. There are instances in which blacks have to work twice as hard to achieve something and to break through the racial barrier. The stories listened to give numerous examples of white privilege for they reveal the sense of entitlement that whites feel they deserve because they are of the majority. These perquisites are devastating to minority populations because they feel trapped in a blocked system devoid of the hopes that they can be competitive in the job market.

The final concept that emerged is about cultural distance in which whites have the preconception that black people especially, in the inner city, are prone to crime and have no hope of succeeding in life. The white people feel distant because of their own biographical experiences. This feeling of distance gives them a sense of superiority in terms of attitude and behavior. In the Fluey article, this preconception of impecunious blacks is defined as hegemony. By hegemonic, he states that whites say what they believe is factual and do not back up what they say because they feel what they are saying is axiomatic.<sup>10</sup> The stories told in the story circle touch on white sense of superiority because they all explicate instances in which the whites are looking down on the blacks. Listening to the stories focusing on the themes such as hegemonic tales and common fear, the stories clarify the cleavage of culture that exists in the minds of some whites; that there is a behavior gap that places them on a higher pedestal.

## **Final thoughts**

These stories shared at the Akron Urban League provided bestowed upon me the knowledge of the progress we made and how far we need to go in race relations. The scope of the challenge does not just encompass the Akron community, but the whole United States. What is essential in these stories is that they instill the importance of listening to one another. Too often while someone is speaking we are thinking of ways in our heads to refute what the other is saying. We need to listen carefully for everyone has an important story about race and everyone deserves to be heard. By doing that, we can bring people closer together to assuage the divisiveness that has hindered the growth of this great nation.

## *Bibliography*

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<sup>9</sup> “The Mark of a Criminal Record,” Devah Pager, *American Journal of Sociology*, March 2003, v108n5 pg. 945

<sup>10</sup> “Narratives of the Death Sentence: Toward a Theory of Legal Narrativity,” Benjamin Fluey-Steiner, *Law & Society Review*, v36n3 (2002), pg. 550

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1<sup>st</sup> participant's recorded story; session 1; story circle #5

7<sup>th</sup> participant's recorded story; session 2

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3<sup>rd</sup> participant's story; session 1

1<sup>st</sup> participant's recorded story; session 2

"Ballot Manipulation and the "Menace of Negro Domination": Racial Threat and Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 1850-2002," Angela Behrens, Christopher Uggen, and Jeff Manza, *American Journal of Sociology*, November 2003, v109n3, pg 560

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