

Racial Conflict
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I. Introduction

On May 27, 2009 I attended an event at the Akron Urban League called Story Circles. The Story Circle was an event that consisted of all kind of people, some were young, and some were old, it was a very diverse group of people. In my Story Circle there were eight people, including me and another facilitator. The first thing we did in our Story Circle was to introduce ourselves; we wanted to make everyone feel as comfortable as they possibly could. Then we asked everyone to tell us a story about a racial conflict that they or someone close to them had experienced. My co-facilitator and I asked for a volunteer to go first, and before we could even get the words completely out of our mouths there was an older man who was eager to tell his story. This man started the Story Circle, and you could tell that everyone was interested in what he had to say. After he talked everyone wanted a chance to tell their story, and although everyone was eager to tell their story people still remained respectful of others.

As you read my paper you will see that after listening to the stories that were told, I developed themes. I developed one major theme, and three sub-themes. My major theme is Stereotyping. I choose this theme, because that's what a lot of stories in my Story Circle seemed to focus on. After transcribing the stories and listening to them several times I realized that I could subdivide this theme even further, and that's where my sub-themes came from. My sub-themes are: The Token Black Friend, Police Racial Profiling, and Lack of Education about African American History.

II. Doing Justice to the 2009 Storytellers and Their Stories: Stereotyping

There were several stories in my story circle that revolved around stereotyping. In order to analyze the stories around this theme, this paper will be divided into three sections: The Token Black Friend Phenomena, Police Racial Profiling, and Lack of Education about African American History. Each of these three sections highlights one aspect of the connection between the stories and racial stereotyping. After the first participant told his story it was obvious that the other participants were affected by his story. It seemed to be a trickle-down effect, bringing all the stories together around the theme of racial stereotyping.

“The Token Black Friend Phenomena”

In my story circle there were a no stories in which any white participant noted that he or she was called ‘the white friend’ by their white or black peers. But there were several stories about white Americans referring to ‘their black friend.’ When being called “my black friend” it is like whites are saying you are not like the rest of the blacks, you are the exception. In essence they are saying if you did act like (their stereotyped misperceptions about) most blacks you would not be my friend. So these stories are about stereotyping by race, similar to the commonly heard analysis of then candidate Obama as ‘transcending race,’ to appeal to white voters.¹ These stories help us to better

¹ Tim Wise, in his speech on campus during Rethinking Race Week last spring argued that, while electing Barak Obama president was certainly a very significant achievement, to the degree that he is seen as an

understand this phenomenon of the token black friend. In one of my stories a young man talked about how he was the only black student in his whole school.

I've gone to private elementary and high school. And as a young man, I did not understand, I didn't see everything. And I thought, I started to see more and more as I got older. And I never really felt completely embraced by my white counterparts. It felt as though, I wasn't just a friend, I was their 'black friend.' It was kinda like being black was like a commodity. You know, its cool, he's black..... and they couldn't really see me just as a friend, as a person.²

Here our storyteller describes experiencing friendship as something to be bought and sold, something to try on like a new pair of jeans for the big party but toss aside when it was no longer cool or stopped being convenient or easy or beneficial to the white consumer. This is, of course, nothing like an honest or real friendship. It is not surprising that the storyteller would find these experiences confusing; that living in a community of fake friendships would make it more difficult for him to feel like a fully accepted member of the great American community. This participant also goes on to say how being around this type of dishonesty and ignorance encouraged him to go to a black college.³ At a black college he could be around some members of his own race, he would not have to worry about being “the black friend”. He makes this clearer by saying:

When I think of Americans, I don't think about nobody in here, you know what I mean, I think about her (referencing participant #5 who is white), I think about white people. And it's sad, it's sad to think that, because we built it. But then, I mean, it just started to hurt me more and more, the more and more I started to study about how we see ourselves due to society putting some impressions on us. And that's what drove me to go to a historically black college. And there, I started to see, even though it's a black college, its kinda like the white experience, in a sense that, you're completely comfortable. You don't have to impress anybody. Whenever I'm around a group of white people, I feel I have to represent my entire culture. I have to be on my p's and q's. I have to speak articulately, and not use curse words. I can't really be myself it seems like. And being in a black school, I can be more comfortable.⁴

exception who transcends race, his role model status may make it more difficult for young black men who are not half white and willing to transcend race as he has chosen to do. Wise explicitly connected this ‘Obama transcends race’ analysis to the phenomena we are analyzing here, noting that when we say to an African-American ‘I don’t even see you as black!’ We are also suggesting that, if we did, he or she might not be such a close friend.

² Storyteller #7

³ Let me note here that, while the storyteller clearly experiences these ‘friendships’ as dishonest and ignorant stereotyping, and even as confusing and hurtful, we know from the literature on white privilege that his white counterparts were likely unaware of his feelings or reaction and would be shocked to hear the analysis here, even likely to deny that race or racism played any role, or that there was any stereotyping going on, because this is an aspect of white privilege. Members of the dominant group do not need to learn about the minority group, do not need to see the power of white normativity (assuming that what is white or the way white folks do things is the norm, the default, and everyone else needs to fit into that movie). And of course, white privilege also includes not seeing the racial stereotyping dimension to these friendships and encourages the denial that racism is relevant in this situation at all.

⁴ Storyteller #7

Here we see that this storyteller equates ‘the white experience’ with being able to easily and regularly live in world where ‘you’re completely comfortable.’ Unlike his own non-white experience, where he feels compelled to posture and focus on impressing others who know nothing about him or his community—and appear content to believe that there is no need for them to know anything about him or his community. The stereotyping mobilized by his white ‘friends’ might seem innocuous to white students who only interact with blacks on their own terms, but for this man it constructs his own homeland as a place where he ‘cannot be himself.’ Here we see that impact of “The Token Black Friend Phenomena” extends from school friendships to this man’s sense of identity and the lack of inclusiveness in the white community. We see that token friendships sow the seeds of confusion and distrust, undermining our sense of ourselves as agents able to control our own lives. These consequences are broad and deep, in large part because these fake friendships do not exist in a vacuum. There are other forces at work, including forces where powerful leaders in our communities also stereotype according to race that reinforce the token friend phenomena analyzed here. In another story we see this happening but in a totally different setting. This participant was not the only black student in her school, matter of fact she went to a school that was pretty diverse.

...And there was this girl, I don’t remember her name, I really distinctively remember her face though, and like, if I seen her today, I probably would, I don’t know what I would do. But like, we were talking and she was always around me and all the other black people that were there, and she was just so, you know, interested in portraying that she was such a cool person and that she had all these black friends. Like not just friends, she had black friends, like, it was key to her to point out that she had black friends. Like, so we’re talking and all of a sudden she’s like, I went to this party with my niggas the other day,” and was just talking like, just talking like it was nothing. And she kept saying it. I’m like, what is goin on. Eventually I get mad cause I’m the type of person that you could, you could say things that’s gonna make me mad, but I won’t say anything, but if you keep on talkin like, if you just keep on being ignorant, then I’m gonna say something. So I’m like, “what’s going on, why do you keep saying this, why do you think its ok to say this.” And she goes, “Oh, its ok, my other black friends told me I could say it.”⁵

In this story we see a connection to participant #7’s story. The same ignorance still occurs in a completely different setting. This kind of struck me as odd, because one might think since the girl in this story was around a significant amount of blacks everyday she would have known better, even if peers of hers told her it was okay to use that language.

Police Racial Profiling

Some of my stories focused on the negative effect that racial profiling may have on a person. Quite a few of the stories that the participants told had to do with how they felt disrespected by the police. One particular participant told a story on how he was harassed by the police while standing at a bus stop.

But the people that I feel is was just experiences like with police like I don’t understand some of the things that they do to me and my friends sometimes like I remember one time matter of fact right across the street at this bus stop and I’m a student at this school right here and I had papers in my hands; that’s all I had was papers and I walk over just waiting on the bus and this police officer at

⁵ Storyteller #3

first he pulled up and he asked me what am I doing here and it kind got me upset a lil' bit and I [got] a little got frustrated a lil' bit and I look at the bus stop like I'm under I'm bout to uh I'm at the bus stop and I started to get smart with him and I just left it alone like I'm at the bus stop sir so he drove up the street and then he probably thought I was about to leave or something just because he you know because I'm sitting there he drove up the street and about probably three or four minutes later he drove back down again and he pulled in my parking lot right there he sat and looked at me probably in between four or five minutes and my bus came it dropped me off this was when we had remember main street bus stop downtown I went downtown and when I got off at that bus and like it was crazy like that same man was sitting at that bus stop waiting on me like like it was the weirdest thing to me like the police to me is s'posed to be ones who protect and serve us and its like they more racist than anybody out here to me.⁶

Here we see an experience with city officials, police officers, leaders in the community who appear to be stereotyping this man on the basis of his color. The story is told as if it is the type of thing that can happen anytime, as if it is more the norm, not so unusual, even though it is clearly upsetting and stands out as an example of exactly what should not be happening in our community for this storyteller. This experience, and likely others left unstated during our story circles, contributed to this same participant also explaining that he did not trust the cops at all in his second story. He touches on this by saying:

I regret a lot of things I've done. You know. But, just because of the police, like, that make me, that's the way they are towards, like, I don't ever wanna call them for help just because of the little issues I got into. And, like, in my life, it's just not with me, I mean, it's probably everyone in my family, we don't really trust the police at all. Like, really feel like they today's KKK with a badge. And you know with them with a gun and everything, I remember what happened with Jeff (referencing participant #6's brother); like that don't really make sense at all. Like, I don't understand that, but when they get a badge and a gun, like, they just feel like they above everybody. Like, that's just really my whole problem with em, and I really will probably never trust the police till things start changing, so I don't know.

We can see in this story that there is a connection between the random and oddly big-brother-like surveillance at the bus stop experience and this man's willingness to cooperate with the police, willingness to share crime-related information, willingness to see the police as legitimate authority figures deserving of his respect and support.⁷ We also see in this story the strong distrust this participant has for the police. We are taught that in emergencies the people we should trust to come to our aid are the police, and this participant clearly believes that if he were ever in a binding

⁶ Storyteller # 2

⁷ Developing this type of distrust of police, and the consequences noted in our text, are not unique to this individual man. We know from Sunshine and Tyler that when the police treat citizens without respect citizens are less likely to share information or cooperate with the police (making it less likely that the police can effectively fight crime), less likely to support policies that empower the police and less likely to voluntarily comply with the law because they see the police as acting as if they were above the law, reducing the legitimacy of the law. Sunshine and Tyler (2003), "The Role of Procedural Justice and Legitimacy in Shaping Public Support for Policing," *Law & Society Review*, 37, pp. 513-47.

situation the police would be the last people he would call. Another participant told a story of racial profiling:

Matter of fact, not too long, the other night they stopped me pulling in my driveway. And ah, I got out; they told me to stay in the car right in my driveway. And I said, what's the problem, they got up and they said "Oh...you...ah...fit the description of somebody." And then ah they rode off, but not before they humiliated me, you know, people don't really know, oh, what's he doing now. That disturbs me, you know. And so you see a lot of racial profiling.⁸

In this story we see a man who was humiliated by the police for no reason at all. I could tell by the look on his face that he was bothered by this act, it was almost as him telling the story made him relive the whole thing over again. In another story a man told us of how the police shot his very close relative to death. You could tell in this man's tone that he really had no respect for the police, just like the other two participants.

And right now what I see as far as police going force now it to me I feel like it's a straight Klan rally especially 2nd shift and 3rd shift it's a straight Klan rally you know um I mean I had my little run ins. And then my brother got killed by the police last year got shot 22 times, in front of his son, and when he got shot in front of his son my nephew told me that that police was like he was on drugs you probably just his adrenaline to kill a black man, you know just to shoot like that and he said they was just mad you know right now today ever since then they still harass the family they don't too much they have they did a couple things to me like try to run me over downtown in broad daylight but what happening is instead of taking it out on the older ones they taking it out on the younger ones, and you now as long as they can discourage them and get them to the point where they got them locked up and just harass them they dirty I don't trust them and that's it.⁹

For this story I actually did some research on what this particular case was about. The guy who was shot did have a gun on him, and when he went to pull the gun out to show the police they shot him. Out of the twenty-two times the police shot the man the majority of the shots were in his back after he was already down on the ground. The most shocking part of this story to me was that the man was shot right in front of his son, and the son could just see pure rage in the cops' eyes. This story also helped me to understand that this kind of hate for the cops can be passed on by generation, because this young man had to see his dad brutally murdered by the cops, he himself will most likely never trust the police either. It also surprised me that the man said the police still harass the family, as if the family had done something to the police, and not the other way around.

Lack of Education about African American History

This theme to me is the most important, because it is the one I think I learned the most from. I never realized myself how much I did not know about my own culture. I also never realized that at least one reason that whites and even some black's stereotype is due to the lack of education about African American history. It does make sense because when one is taught about black history in school it is almost like they teach you about the same people every year. At one point in time I thought I knew everything there was to know about Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and Phyllis Wheatley, because that was all I ever heard about year after year. Until college I never heard of people like: Marcus Garvey, W.E.B Dubois, and Carter G. Woodson. These people

⁸ Storyteller #4

⁹ Storyteller #6

are very important to African American history, and American History, and it saddens me to know that some African Americans will never know who these people are. I think a lot of blacks may have the attitude that blacks are inferior or less educated, because we do not hear about all the Black Heroes, we do not know that some of the most vital things that we use in our everyday life were invented by black people. In high school I was told that Thurgood Marshall was the first African American Supreme Court Justice, but that was all I was taught. My teachers seemed to leave out the fact of all the struggles he had to go through to get there. It's like they wanted us to believe that being black back then was an easy thing. It never occurred to me that the people teaching us about African American history never knew that much about it themselves.

In one story we hear a man talk about how blacks are set up to fail once they start school, he expands on this by saying:

And as far as education uh talk about black colleges and everything black folk have been given an Eurocentric education, something they can't use when they leave I mean their set up to fail if they wanted to give `em an Afrocentric education something they could understand then it would be um a step in the right direction.¹⁰

To me it is amazing how in hearing this one man talk I realized things that I had not noticed until the day of the story circle, like the fact that in high school I had an African American history course that I took, but it was taught by a white man. I understand now what he means by being taught a Eurocentric view instead of an Afrocentric view. In another story we hear of how a man always thought the holocaust was so much worse than the slave trade:

For the longest I thought the Holocaust was worse than slavery and that's so false, but that's the way they try to make it high school they try to tell you that the holocaust was this bad they show videos and everything, when in actuality it was about a few million in the Holocaust and about maybe sixty million in the slave trade but, but the way the way they try to make it seem that the Holocaust is so much worse.¹¹

After hearing this story, again I remembered something that at the time it really did not matter to me because I was so young. I remember in fifth grade our teacher made us read this whole chapter book on the holocaust during class, and I do not remember ever having to read a book about the slave trade or the civil rights movement. I never in all of my years of schooling before college did I have to read a book on African American History; the information I did get about African American History was in the regular history book.

In another story we hear this same participant tell us how he never had to do a black history report in high school, not even during Black History Month.

In high school I remember my senior year it was black history month so you know I was expecting something cause they hadn't done anything my entire four years there so my history teacher gives an extra credit assignment an extra credit assignment something you didn't have to do you know what I mean we are not being taught our own history and then I started to go around and ask certain white people do you know who Malcolm X is and the vast majority of em said no and to me its like how can somebody big such a huge part of American History not be, not be taught in the schools.

¹⁰ Storyteller #1

¹¹ Storyteller #7

When I heard this story I was not shocked that some of the participants white classmates did not know who Malcolm X was, because I myself did not know that much about him until after I took a Pan African Studies class in college. Even in my African American Studies class in high school we did not learn that much about him, so I could only imagine the lack of education he received concerning his culture if he went to an all white school.

III. Final Reflections

Before the story circle I remember calling my dad, and asking him did he have any stories dealing with racial conflict I could use for a story circle. I did not think I had any stories of my own that were significant enough to share. As people went on to tell their stories, I realized I had several stories of my own to tell. I did not think I had any stories to tell that concerned racial conflict. I did not know that my own stories concerned racial conflict until I heard the other stories. There were things that happened to me in the past I never thought were significant. For example on more than one occasion I heard people of another race use the “N” word, and at that time it did not bother me, but now it offends me. When first hearing the storytellers tell their stories, I initially had a feeling of pity. I could not imagine having to endure the difficult things the participants had to experience. There was a man in our story circle, who told stories of seeing The Klu Klux Klan burning crosses. After hearing this story I remember thinking “how could he see things like this, and still remain so open minded”. I know that I could never go through something, and still remain as optimistic as this man. I believe in order to go through any traumatic experience, you must be a very strong individual. Or maybe seeing these things is what made him such a strong individual. Sometimes we do not know where our limits are until we have reached them, and we surprise ourselves by being able to handle certain events in our lives.

References

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