

Spinning a Web of Discrimination: An Examination of the Themes of Racism Prevalent Today

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to identify themes of racism and discrimination in society today. The focus of the research is on racism and discrimination at the individual level which is then connected to themes of racism on a broader scale. In order to gather this information, a method of research-gathering known as story circles was used. Story circles gather narrative data from individuals based on a given prompt. In this case prompts dealt with experiences of race and racism. The findings of this research are that racism and discrimination saturate many aspects of today's society. Several themes, such as racial profiling by police and bias within the courts emerged from the stories of participants from the Akron Urban League. The conclusion from the connection of these themes with themes of race existing in scholarly literature is that racism is a complex, interconnected system of legal and social control that rewards whites while punishing members of minority races.

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Introduction

“Racism does not limit itself to biology or economics or psychology or metaphysics; it attacks along many fronts and in many forms, deploying whatever is at hand, and even what is not, inventing when the need arises.”

--Albert Memmi, Racism (p. 78)

Racism has always been an uncomfortable subject in the United States. While no one wants to admit to being racist, discrimination and bias pervade modern day America. Racism is not an issue of skin color alone, as acknowledged above by Albert Memmi, but is a sum total of cultural characteristics that society uses to identify someone by race. The fact that racism permeates all aspects of life, especially for those most harmed by its effects, is the motivation of many to study its causes and search for a way to quell the ill-effects of racial attitudes. The intention of this study is to expose racial attitudes and open the doors for the much needed discourse about the impact of race in society. In order to accomplish this, I will identify major themes of discrimination and divergence among races, specifically focusing on the impact of racism on African Americans.

The method of data collection used in this study is a technique known as story circles. This system was created by John O’Neal as a way to examine racial issues, but it can be a useful method of gathering narrative data on any subject. A story circle is exactly as it sounds—a group of people gathered together in a circle to tell real life experiences and learn from one another. The two story circles used in this study come from the Urban League of Akron, Ohio. Each circle is made up of 8 participants of varying age, sex, and racial characteristics. Participants are given a prompt, in this case

dealing with experiences of treatment based on race and each person is given approximately 3 minutes to tell a story related to the topic. After everyone has had a chance to tell their story, the moderator facilitates a discussion to recognize common elements of the stories and possibly identify a theme or themes. In the circles used in this study, two separate prompts and themes were used in each story circle, resulting in twenty-eight stories and four subsequent discussions.

The purpose of using story circle techniques is to use powerful first-hand accounts of racism and discrimination to awaken participants who may not have realized the extent to which racism exists. Because everyone is allowed to participate and is uninterrupted, this method allows for an environment of acceptance, without the fear of being judged. The results of story circles can often be surprising. Similar prompts may result in discussions that stray far from one another but provide equally relevant information in studying race issues. In most story circles, the first story or first few stories guide the direction of subsequent stories and can influence the discussion as well. The effect that this has on the research is that in many cases, there arises one theme or aspect of race with the most powerful and numerous support. The stories analyzed here, while clearly focused on certain race issues, bring to attention many connected themes of race in America today.

The information accrued as a result of recording and transcribing story circles provides qualitative data to the researcher to complement quantitative research in addressing race. However, one of the greatest assets of story circles is that the stories humanize the information represented by numbers in empirical analyses. The participants in a story circle provide primary information that not only provides evidentiary support for findings, but adds an emotional quality to research by putting faces to the numbers. For example, much quantitative research has been done to confirm racial profiling by police and show its prevalence, but hearing stories from individuals who have been treated with malice by police, people who fear the police, tugs at the emotional side of a person.

Racial profiling is one of the most controversial race issues of today, and it is consistently reported in the news. Indeed, it is the most central theme discussed in the story circles used in this study. There are many others including white privilege, racial bias in the courts and criminal justice system, the criminalization of black culture, the new idea of “post-racialism,” and conflicting information regarding explicit and implicit racism. While one story circle put an emphasis on the switch from explicit racism, the out-in-the-open “what are you looking at, boy?” attitude of the past to a new, implicit racism, where race is used as a factor in jobs, policing, and the courts, the other circle contains evidence to support that explicit racism is not as rare as it might seem. Together, these themes outline the broader perspective that race is a characteristic that is more divisive and troublesome than any other social issue in America today.

The format of the presentation of this information follows the pattern of completion of each portion of the research. First, there is a broad overview of Circle Number One, followed by arguments supporting each of the themes of the circles from the stories themselves. Following that, there is a similar breakdown of Circle Number Two. The themes and ideas discussed in the first two sections are then examined in more detail and connected to the scholarly thinking available on the subject of race in

an analysis of the relevant statistical data supported by the narratives. Finally the paper wraps up with a conclusion tying together the main ideas of the circles and empirical research.

Analyses and Identification of the Themes of the Two Story Circles

I. Analysis of Story Circle Number One

Throughout the first circle, themes of racism and racial conflict clearly showed that today's society is a far cry from what many have identified as being "post-racial." "Break that cycle of illusion," and "I just didn't think it was that bad, I guess," are two ways in which participants in the first story circle summarized the narratives they just discussed. Indeed, the impact of white denial is a resonating theme throughout Circle Number One. In addition to that, running as a central idea throughout most of the stories is the growing impact of *implicit* racism as explicit racism fades. This represents a switch from what we will see in Story Circle Two, where one participant remembers how, when he was growing up, an African American male would have been beaten for being on the same sidewalk as a white female, to a more "[h]idden racism, where...somebody can...hinder you from getting a job, or hinder you from a promotion, or, or the police will stop you." A third theme throughout this first set of stories is that the only solution to the struggle our country faces in overcoming race issues is to change "from the bottom up," instead of relying on the system to change itself. This refers to the responsibility of the individual to make little changes, rather than expecting the government and powerful people to introduce broad sweeping changes to cure the problems of racism and discrimination.

White Denial/ White Privilege

American society has historically been presented as a white society. American History classes teach the history of the United States from a white perspective: the history of white pilgrims, white founding fathers and white leaders. In all aspects of society, white is portrayed as being the norm, from something as simple as the skin color of children's toys to something as complex as "Standard" English being synonymous with "white" English or the portrayal of Jesus as white Jesus. While telling his story, the first participant describes the moment in his life where he realized how society has portrayed that "white is right." For him, the realization that maybe the world was not how he had imagined came to him in an epiphany of sorts:

[F]or me, the real pivotal thing was that somewhere around my high school years I got pretty serious about religion and I um, really started studying Christianity specifically. And a lot of ways I really don't think it matters what religion you study, um, not necessarily from a theological point of view, but from what I'm talking about here because I started thinking about the character of who Jesus Christ was and I was walking around my church one day and I saw a picture of Him in front of this door. And there was all this light coming out of the door and here's this middle aged white guy with a beard and all of a sudden the thought hit me that, well, you know, Jesus probably wasn't this middle aged white guy standing in front of a door, dressed up in white people's clothes, you know? He was, He's from the Middle East. [Other participant: "Amen."] Yea. That's exactly right. And I started thinking to myself if I take this seriously that you got some Middle Eastern guy whom I

revere as God and who died, not just for me, to cleanse my sin, but who died to cleanse everybody's sins. People in all seven continents, people all over the world, then why in the world do you hold these problems against people just because they look different than you. When the guy you're worshipping looks different than you. And, that's, that was probably the most instrumental thing that really helped change my focus because, you know, in the whole spectrum of life, if you're really living to try and be a decent person, to try and do the right thing, race is such a small thing.

Based on their own information gathered from the stories, the participants in the circle represent a very diverse group. There are women and men of various ages, backgrounds and racial makeup. Because of the diversity of this group, the results were a mixture of people experiencing discrimination and/or racism and people witnessing discrimination and/or racism. The difference was often along a racial divide. For the most part, the Black participants had stories in which they experienced racism, whereas the white participants were more likely to tell a story of how they witnessed racism within a social group, or noticed discrimination in some aspect of society. Often, the stories told by African Americans were surprising and appalling to white participants, who, by their own admission, were ignorant of the extent to which Blacks face discrimination in the nation today. For example:

I have never been a racist person. I've never had like, me coming into this story circle, I felt I didn't have anything to offer to the table. Because I grew up in a small town where we're country folks, hillbilly rednecks. And never, we had my best friend that I told before that was in kindergarten was the only minority in the entire county. And I moved up here to go to school and this was my first, it was a huge culture shock to me. And coming here and listening to these stories, I still feel I don't have much to offer because I haven't experienced this. But listening... In our class, we have articles that we read and it's about racial conflict. And we have response papers and my response to these is, is generally "yes I know racism exists, but is it this bad? Is it really this bad?" And sitting here listening to all of these stories is very eye opening. And in a sense, I feel, well, I don't want to call myself ignorant, but I feel just blinded by all of this that is going on.

--Participant #5

This storyteller represents a privilege possessed by whites in America. This privilege is not only the privilege to not experience the discrimination and racism faced by minorities in this country, but also the privilege to not have to know about the injustices occurring in the world around us. As a result of this obliviousness to the harsh realities posed by racial conflict, many whites take the position that race is not a problem in the United States. This *white denial* stems from the ignorance of whites of the maltreatment of minority citizens that is occurring every day. The idea was expressed by Participant #3 as well, an elderly white man whose adopted children are African Americans and who fights for racial equality: "You know, most white people think I am clear off the wall. They don't agree with me. Cause they are denying it. They just don't see it." At another point, while discussing his role in trying to help a young African American who he believes has been wrongfully imprisoned, Participant #3 stated, "We're trying to help these families, just like you, uh who have suffered from racial profiling, from the criminalization of blacks, and from the white denial. Its uh, white denial that's aided and abetted by the

smoking a joint...(storyteller says to police officer)" If you're not going to arrest me, let me go. Send me home." So the next thing I know, he just started hollering. "I'm busting you mother fucker!" And he grabbed me in the arm right here and just started digging his nails into my arm. "I'm busting you mother fucker! I'm busting you mother fucker!" He got me in a choke hold, wrestled me down to the ground. And I was raised that you don't talk back to the police, you know. You definitely don't cuss the police. That's how I was raised. So he's hollering and cussing at me. Here's another police officer coming from the mall. He runs. They both just pounce on me. They just maul on me. Put me in the next seat of their car, they call the paddy wagon. Now they got 20 police officers there. He puts me in the back of the paddy wagon. Then he comes up with a tape measure. I don't know where he got it from. He said "yeah, I miss, I missed this. I don't know how you stashed this in your van, but I found it". You know, and I started hollering "don't stash that in my van, I didn't steal it so don't go stashing it." And he started laughing, right? So they took me to jail. They charged me with shouting profanities and it cost me \$25 to get out of jail.

These two examples of implicit racism are merely a hint of how bad racial profiling has become. In a group of just eight people, telling two stories each, two specific examples of unfair treatment by police officers were discussed. Profiling combined with the institutionalized bias toward African Americans and other minorities has created a sense of distrust for the police and judicial systems. "I just feel like that's a racial prejudice, how they're keeping back black people down with this felony thing and how they're just not, they do everything in their power not to let people, white people get felonies, cause they know they need to get jobs and they need to live out here" (Participant # 5). Although we live in a society with laws protecting against discrimination, it is clear that there are ways to use the law as a means of spreading implicit racial bias.

From the Bottom up: Personal Responsibility and Racial Equality

There is clear evidence in this first circle that the presence of racism and its harmful effects are indisputable. There have been stories about facing criminal charges based exclusively on race, being treated differently based only upon looks, and still others that discuss the pain that can be inflicted solely with words. To quote one of the volunteers, "Your tongue is a powerful weapon. And one little word can hurt, kill somebody's world in an instant" (Participant #7). But when it came to how to solve these problems, the consensus was not that there needs to be a change in police and government policy. Instead, the participants believed that the way to improve race relations was to start at the individual level. Only by changing people's minds at the personal level, can there be an opportunity to change these policies and institutionalized practices of racism and discrimination.

"Break that cycle," they stated, "break that cycle of illusion." Here they address the idea of racism as a cycle. Based upon their stories, this cycle which was started long ago, is passed down through the generations and through the practices of policing and governing. The illusion refers the ignorance of the majority to the suffering and hardships faced by the minorities. In order to break this cycle, Participant #1 suggests, "It's going to be one person changing and using that influence in their life to change someone else. Just like the old church adage that a lot of us have probably heard, 'if each one reach one,' maybe we can make an impact that way." Participant #2 shared his optimism, saying he is

“looking forward to working from the bottom up.” Expanding upon the thoughts of these predecessors, Participant #8 vows to continue working for equality, “for solutions...for love.” For the members of this circle, there seems to be only one solution to addressing the inequality minorities are still struggling with today, and that solution is personal responsibility. It is the responsibility of the privileged whites to acknowledge that there is a racial conflict, rather than deny it. It is the responsibility of those who already know to have the important discussions that will lead to an understanding of the struggles of their fellow Americans. And it is the responsibility of those with the power to rectify these injustices to use this power to create a more fair and just society.

II. Analysis of Story Circle Number Two

The research provided by the use of story circles is valuable due to the diversity of information that may be gathered in each cycle. Two separate circles may provide totally different themes and ideas, or they may be very similar. With the second story circle, the themes were much more obvious and focused. While the theme of racial profiling was central to a few of the stories in the previous circle, here there is much more evidence of race-based policing and police brutality. Contrary to the findings of the first circle, there is much evidence that, in addition to the implicit racism witnessed by biased police activities, explicit racism and discrimination still exist and still cause pain. Finally, the discussion also focused on the impact of culture, more specifically Black culture on stereotypes and racial profiling by the police.

Racial Profiling and Police Brutality

I got pulled over 3 times in one night (storyteller 3: wow) just by a cop car. I drive a Monte Carlo a 86 (storyteller 3: you're a drug dealer) yeah they said and then I'm like do you have a reason for pullin me over? And they always say my license plate light (laughter.) I'm like my license plate is lit up. It's glowing. What you want me to do? (laughter) (storyteller 3: let me get a fluorescent light for you) (storyteller 3: they have to say something) (story teller 6: they make up anything they pull you over they make up anything) --Participant #8

It may be hard for someone who has not experienced racial profiling to understand what it must feel like to be the target of police scrutiny based on looks alone. For most whites, being pulled over by the police is a rare experience. Not only that, but whites are accustomed to being stopped by the police when they have done something wrong. Because of this, it might seem hard to believe that people who are following the law in every way may be stopped by police and treated as criminals. Here's another example:

It's crazy you really you really can't even drive at night. Or go nowhere. They make it don't even wanna go anywhere man. They sit at everyday sit in the empty empty lots just waiting on you coming around. You don't even hafta be speeding or anything. If they feel like pullin you over, they gonna pull you over—they gonna find their reason and then if you say anything, they can talk to you crazy, but you can't say anything to them. If you just raise your voice a little bit then step out the vehicle, then soon as you get out you scared whether they gonna plant somethin on you or not. That's crazy. Yeah they try to tell me get outta the car I got pulled over the other day leavin from my

grandmother's house. First they said I didn't use my blinker, but I see you right there so why wouldn't I use my blinker? Then they said I didn't have a license plate light (laughter, SP8: "The number one reason." SP3: "That's the common thing."). They told me I had to do my finger print and finger print on the summons or I had to go to the county. I'm like, "for what? What did I do?" I'm goin to the county for nothing. I gotta go to the county cause I don't fingerprint. Man, that's crazy.

--Participant #6

As bad as racial profiling by police officers might be, it is even worse when that bias comes out in the form of brutality. Everyone is familiar with the brutal attack by Los Angeles Police officers on Rodney King. Unfortunately this was not an isolated incident, but in most cases of police brutality the videos are either police property from a dashboard camera or witnesses to the beatings will not come forward. However, that does not mean that the stories of excessive force and unnecessary violence do not exist.

Ready alright um I got a call early like 9 o'clock from one of my buddies he wanted me ride to the [city name] Airport and to pick up his mom so he come he get me we comin down um state rd. we see police cars everywhere. We in [city name] we see police cars everywhere and um I'm wondering, like what's going on so we get like you know if you ever been on State Rd. it veers off [street name] or Main Street so we took the [street name] way instead of going straight down Main so we goin down [street name] we see [city name] police out too. Apparently somebody um shot somebody with a shot gun and uh it's like a 300lb black guy maybe 400lb and uh (inaudible) so we get down by like [street name] going um down the hill (inaudible) all the cop cars all the way up the hill they was followin us the whole way I was like what you do did you do something (laughter) I didn't know somebody got shot til afterwards so they pulled us over in the middle of the hill this is a steep hill it's like a really steep hill so mind you they said the guy was in a rusty Chevy Caprice mind you a blue one uhh my friend had a Chevy Caprice 4-door but uh he got a very clean Chevy mind you so uh you can't there's no way you can get primer mixed with this clean car so they pulled us over uh lieutenant he pulled right in front of the car matter of fact um try to ram us kinda in front of the car like cut us off so he had to throw his car in park without hitting the cops you know so he hopped out they all hopped out surround us like 6 cars (inaudible) with their guns pointed at us. I was scared. I just woke up I was scared like what's going on? Get your hands get your hands up my hands already up gets your hands up get your hands up he yanked me outta the passenger's side you know get down on the ground get down on the ground my hands in the air you know the dude just I dunno if he just didn't like black people or what. He was like a sergeant you can tell he wanna shoot me he had the taser in my face and he had the regular gun in my face and um I was really scared and um he yanked us out the car he throw my arm behind my back like like all in one motion I was already on my knees and he like just he kinda like throw me to the dirt and I remember his partner just comin over and just stomped me in the face like my tooth gone til this day right here just stomp me in the face kicked me at least 3 times. They had my buddy um in the um cop car he said he didn't see any of it you know what I'm sayin um so I went right to the hospital and reported you know what I mean and my sister reported it went down there and complained and everything. Like a week later they sent her a thing saying that didn't happen uh it woulda been um recorded on the dashcam. I'm

pretty sure it was recorded on the dashcam since the Captain was or the lieutenant or whatever or whatever they got cameras or something but uh they just basically tellin me it didn't happen and mind you they um the suspects they was lookin was in a rusty car a 300lb guy so this is a big dude you know I'm a little dude my other dude is no bigger than you maybe you know I just think it's sad how they just cuz one black person did somethin we all suspects now you know (inaudible) I guess I heard the sayin you know I guess we all look alike but uh you know you can't get me mixed up with some 300lb guy it was horrible.

--Participant #4

In this case, not only did police make an assumption based on race, they also acted with excessive force on two cooperative suspects. Instead of admitting their mistake and apologizing for not only wrongfully arresting the two gentlemen but also for the physical harm and the fear of staring down a gun barrel, the police force were quick to deny that it had happened. This problem is clearly not limited to a select few people, as most African Americans who participated in these circles had a memory of being treated unfairly by police officers. Even more important than the fact that all these stories exist, is that the circumstances surrounding the events are similar. There is a common theme of law abiding citizens being treated as criminals based on race and race alone.

Not to be too harsh, the members of the circle discussed the importance of the police and displayed respect for the men in blue. Participant #1 stated, "we're not police bashers. We need our police department, and my beginning statement is we have a good police department but you have a few rotten ones" and sometimes he is even "glad to see 'em roll up." However, there is still this overwhelming evidence that current policing strategies are resulting in an unfair amount of scrutiny of African Americans, especially given the relatively equal crime rates between African Americans and whites. One volunteer, Participant # 7, brought up a very interesting point. She acknowledged that there are some officers who do an exceptional job, and there are those who are truly "rotten." But perhaps bringing in those officers who are in between, "who make the same thoughtless mistakes that people make all the time, that we make about assuming somebody must be like something because they fit the profile...wouldn't it be amazing if we had one of those guys in that chair? Just think how much one of those woulda learned tonight." She was suggesting that a greater interaction between police forces and all members of their society may be one way in which profiling and discrimination in policing may be reduced.

The Impact Explicit Racism has Today

Earlier, there was a quote from a man who remembered the beatings a young black male would receive for being on the wrong sidewalk at the wrong time. While decades ago these practices were brutal examples of prejudice in this country, most would like to believe that all examples of such terrible treatment of human beings stopped long ago. Clearly, from Participant #4's account of police brutality, such racism still exists within the police force, but one might wonder if the same problem exists in other aspects of society. There is much evidence to suggest that there is a variety of people that hold on to hate and racial stereotypes. As one example, let's examine what happened when Participant #3's African American brother and his white girlfriend were having a baby. Here's how her family reacted:

Her family, it was mainly her mother um her father basically went along with what mom said you know to make it easy on himself but her family basically told her um 'you've embarrassed us' um 'don't come home we don't wanna see the baby (chuckle) don't come home for Christmas, holidays' and told her and she's telling me this um 'not only have you embarrassed yourself but you've embarrassed us. How are you going to tell people, you know? It's bad enough you're pregnant but you're pregnant by a black man. So they disowned her so of course my family had already welcomed her into the family um then but when um the baby came along her mom started comin around a little bit but it made me very uncomfortable that you would disown your own child but now you want to try to attempt um to embrace your grandchild.

The same storyteller also identified that her brother's girlfriend, who is now her sister-in-law was also the target of angry treatment from some members of the African American community. She specifically mentioned the verbal abuse her sister-in-law received from Black females. She recalled, "My sister-in-law caught a lot of flat from black females because she was dating a black male and so she got beat up, not physically, but it was difficult and it was hard on their relationship." It is clear that on the subject of interracial relationships, there are strong opinions and there are people who are not afraid to let these opinions be known.

While interracial marriage might still be considered a somewhat controversial subject, blatant racism can still be witnessed in activities as simple as taking a trip to the convenience store, participating in a sporting event, or just trying to do a task at work. The next three stories are examples of explicit racism in which the participants were doing exactly what society asks of them, but were still treated with disrespect. Not only do these stories show how widespread blatant racist views may be, it also reveals the deep painful impact such actions have on the subjects of such cruelty. The first story is a reflection of the harsh language used to demoralize Blacks and shows the stereotype that has arisen as a result of the criminalization of African Americans.

Um I played football in high school I was I was alright I wasn't too good so um after my senior year my football coach he was like I have a couple schools lined up for you to go visit. One of the schools I went to visit was [town name] um I think it's I [town name], Ohio I think so um my mom took me to my overnight visit. It was it was an alright school. My coach warned me there is a lot of white people there I mean it's not it's not going to be the same surrounding as [city name] so I's like it's alright I can deal with it one night. So it was cool. They showed me love and everything, but then on my way home I was really like deciding is this the school I wanna go to so I'm like alright so me and my mom's takin' me home and we stopped at this little convenient store right down the street from the school. It was still on campus. So we stopped at a convenient store and my mom she went to like the checkout line before me so they thinking I'm in the store stealing I guess (chuckle) I dunno why so like some older white manager came to me like 'hey you, boy' and I'm like (laughter) 'boy I was like excuse me I beg your pardon'. He's like 'boy' and I'm like (silence) and then my mom overheard it and like she just started going off cuz I mean my mom I'm if you guys don't know I'm mixed so my mom is white so they didn't expect to get cussed out by a white woman about me so my mom started going off and I'm like I just realized I didn't really realize that racism is still alive today you

know what I mean cuz you always hear stuff in school or like older people talking about how racism was back in their day I just I never fathomed that like it was still around but I guess it still is.

--Participant #8

The next example shows how when emotions take over, the deep-seeded hatred that has been passed down through generations can find itself exposed. Sometimes all it takes is something as simple as losing a game for anger to take over and hidden beliefs to come to light. When a rural high school lost a big basketball game to Participant #6's high school, the slurs came flying. Following the game, "while they was announcing us and stuff to get our medals and everything, you could hear the white fans in the crowd calling us monkeys and just saying all kinda crazy racists stuff to us." They also used the derogatory term "boys" when referring to the team, exhibiting a hatred the participant himself acknowledged he would "never understand."

Other times racism might just prove to be an unexplainable fear of a person. Participant #3, a nurse at a local hospital, witnessed this while trying to perform her duties. She spoke of how there was a certain patient who refused to let her draw blood. Because she was used to patients being afraid of getting blood taken due to a fear of needles, the resistance did not seem to be a big deal. Unfortunately, her elderly patient made her reasons for struggling painfully obvious. Participant #3 said, "her daughter was in the room with her and she's like 'mother what is it' (laugh) this woman said 'look at her, she's black'... It wasn't because I had a big needle. It was 'don't touch me, you're black.'" These forms of blatant and explicit racism counter the claim from Circle #1 that there has been a switch from explicit to implicit racism. In fact, while implicit racism may be on the rise, there is proof that explicit racism is still common and still unfounded, blind, and denigrating.

Racism and Culture

Ever since the beginning of settlement in America, several cultures have been in existence. While the culture of white settlers predominates the literature and the majority of the ideas passed on through history, there has always been a Black culture as well. Blacks were forced to create their own culture for several reasons. As slaves, their skin color, heritage, and bondage united them while dividing them from the culture of the whites. Following emancipation, segregation and racism forced African Americans into separate neighborhoods, separate jobs, and, as a result, forced them to develop their own forms of entertainment (see Takaki, *A Different Mirror*). Much of what has entered the mainstream culture today arose from Black culture, such as jazz and rock and roll. However, these examples, while mainstream now were controversial at best when first introduced. In fact, anytime some aspect of Black culture has threatened to enter the mainstream, it has been met with much resistance.

The culture of African Americans is tied in with the stereotypes of crime and deviance by whites, which is shown in the stories that Blacks have to tell. Some of the profiling stops discussed earlier were not based solely on the driver's appearance. As Participant #8 stated, he has a Monte Carlo, a car used in rap videos, a car that represents the Black culture. Subsequently it is a car that was pulled over three times in one night without cause. Or take for another example, Participant #3's brother, who was pulled

over in his truck without breaking any laws. He was pulled over in his truck “because it was nice and it had rims and it was lower. They automatically associated him as being a drug dealer.” For some reason, our society has grown to believe that for a Black person to exhibit Black culture, that person must be a drug dealer. As a result, “they ripped out the seats, they ripped out the dash, they ripped out everything searchin for drugs... that was blatant racism discrimination you know this is a man married with kids and tryin to make a living but they ripped out everything. They even damaged stuff.” It has become a crime for African Americans to have their own culture and to live in their own style, without breaking any laws. Storyteller #8 describes how it has become illegal to act Black: “that’s why I got rid of my chain. I got rid of all that man I got cause I was racial profiled. Like I was as a thug that sell drugs. You don’t see I just work 50 hour a week you know what I’m sayin of over time (laughter). See me rolling around clean, this hard work right here.”

During the discussion following the first set of stories in Circle Number Two, one member of the group recalled her feelings when she read about a horrific crime and witnessed the reactions by community members to the crime. The crime occurred when a white male with a nice car pulled in front of his house and was confronted by an armed robber. The man told the other one to just take the car and not to kill him, but the robber killed him anyways in front of his girlfriend and baby, who were in the house. The issues that came to be important were issues that were totally irrelevant to the crime, according to the narrator: “the bloggers were saying um pretty much when you act like a black person and cuz he was a rapper, and he the clothes he wore, he had jewelry, that’s why he got shot, and that just pisses me off, because if he if he didn’t associate himself with the blacks and if he didn’t hang around and act like them and didn’t like rap music, maybe this wouldn’t have happened to him” (Participant #3). Not only do these blog posts imply that the victim was murdered because the Black culture in which he participated was a culture of crime and murder, but there is even a sense that these bloggers accept such crime. It is as though the only reason this was news was because the victim was white, and had he been an African American, it would not have been as tragic or newsworthy. In the words of Participant #3, “And because I like rap music, do I deserve to get killed, you know? And that’s what they were relating it to. And I just didn’t think that...that’s not right.”

The ties between rap music and murder are clear through the music. For many African Americans, life on the street can be a brutal struggle to stay alive, and this is a theme that is reflected in much of modern rap. However, the idea that listeners of rap in any way deserve to be the subject of violence or police surveillance is unsubstantiated, especially given the content of other music types as well. The idea that it is unfair to target one group based on music content that is common among several other groups was one that did not escape the members of this circle. It was briefly addressed when Participant #4 said, in response to the assertion that it’s not right to relate the crime mentioned above to rap music, “Just like the kids that listen to Marilyn Manson, like what is the difference then? Why is it ok? Because he’s white?” Perhaps this storyteller identified the exact reason for the distinction between the two music types with similar themes of violence, drug use, and sex, but which differ most drastically in the races of the artists and the races of the listeners.

Story Circle Themes in a Scholarly Context

The best way to determine if racism affects society today is to talk to the people that may be affected by it. Story circles provide conclusive evidence that racism is a problem in the U.S. today. The themes extracted from the two story circles examined above are not new themes. In fact, much research has been done regarding race issues in America, and there is much data to support the claims of the participants that race as a social construct today is a factor that causes a lot of harm to different groups of people, most notably the millions of African Americans who face discrimination and hatred daily. The idea of racial discrimination in policing and the criminal justice system is a theme that is most prevalent in both story circles. In addition, it is one of the more heavily debated racial issues in the U.S. today. This paper is going to tie research on the practices of racial profiling, sentencing discrimination, and incarceration rates into the stories above. Then we will examine other aspects of race that have been exposed through the circles and provide scholarly support for these findings regarding: the prevalence of racism and idea of a “post-racial” society, arguments about white privilege, and the impact of Black culture and the media on society’s portrayal of African Americans.

I. Racial Profiling and Bias in the Criminal Justice System

Throughout the twenty-eight stories and subsequent discussions explored in this study, the subject most repeated, widespread, and emotional was the criminal justice system, including the police, courts, and prisons. These complaints are not unsubstantiated. The fact is that despite virtually no increase in racial or ethnic rates of criminality, the inmate population in the U.S. since has gone from “70 percent white at mid-century to nearly 70 percent black and Latino today” (Wacquant, 2001, p. 96). This switch coincides with recent changes in police practices, political objectives, and is a result of a court system that is failing for Black Americans. Wacquant (2001) identifies the War on Drugs started by President Reagan and waged by subsequent Presidents as one practice that resulted in such an increase (p. 96). However, the problem is one that infiltrates all portions of the justice system. From the initial suspicion exhibited by police officers in their increased surveillance of African Americans to the arbitrariness of courtroom proceedings to federal policies aimed at criminalizing being Black, it is clear that there is a belief that being black is correlated with a predisposition to criminal activity.

Racial Profiling

Most stories about racial profiling by police officers in this study occurred when no laws were being broken by the “suspects.” Fagan and Davies (2000), in their study of racial profiling in New York City, found that the implementation of Order Maintenance Policing (OMP), which was designed to increase policing of areas showing signs of physical disorder actually evolved into “policing of poor people in poor places” (p. 496). They argued that the “Broken Windows” theory upon which OMP was based resulted in a higher rate of stops and arrests in minority neighborhoods. Meehan and Ponder (2002) added a new dimension to this research by suggesting that police surveillance was not only enhanced in minority neighborhoods, but also that greater police attention occurred when Blacks were not in the “correct” neighborhood. In other words, “[b]eing African American and out of place is noticed” and becomes illegal (p. 426). It is not surprising therefore, when a Black male, such as Participant #8 in the second circle is stopped three times in one night: there is evidence that there is

more police presence and suspicion in his own neighborhood, but his presence in a white neighborhood is even more likely to gain the attention of authorities.

Fagan and Davies (2000) hypothesize that profiling is a result of the misperception that minorities are more criminally active than whites (p. 458). Meehan and Ponder (2002) address the very question of criminality among minorities versus whites. In their study, they acknowledge statistical proof that there is no evidence of higher crime rates among minorities (p. 417), but digress that regardless of statistics, many police officers “believe that querying vehicles with African Americans produces more ‘hits’” (p. 418). As some of our storytellers shared, they were victims of such stereotypical beliefs which led to a waste of police resources and no arrests, or in one case (Story Circle #1, Participant #2) there was even a claim of evidence being planted in order to substantiate the arrest. Despite the fact that minorities are not any more likely to be breaking the law than whites, they are far more likely to be accused of breaking the law. In Fagan and Davies’ (2000) report, they found that in certain New York City police precincts, Blacks were nearly ten times as likely to be stopped by police in proportion to their population, while whites, who made up 80% of the population, made up just 41% of the stops (p. 477). Further proof by Meehan and Ponder (2002) shows that in the areas of their study considered “border areas,” or areas between white and Black sections of town, despite a higher stop rate among Blacks, there was a greater likelihood of an arrest when a white driver was stopped (p. 422).

The majority of the research analyzing racial profiling in policing focuses on disproving the idea of higher crime rates among Blacks and proving that there is a disproportionate number of stops of African Americans by the police. There is some research that analyzes how the biased policing affects citizen perceptions of the police. In their research on perceptions of the police, Weitzer and Tuch (2002) questioned whether racial profiling shaped the views of residents who have experienced such treatment by police. Not surprisingly, of their respondents, 95% of whites claimed to have never experienced racial profiling, while “four in ten blacks report having been stopped by police because of their race” (p. 443). Not only that, but nearly three-quarters of young black males reported having been stopped based only upon their race (p. 443). These findings are confirmed by the stories of the two circles examined earlier. Out of the sixteen participants, of mixed races, five of them, all African American recalled personal experiences with racial profiling (Circle 1: Participants 2 and 6, Circle 2: Participants 4, 6, and 8), and others knew of close friends or relatives with similar experiences (Circle 2, Participant 3).

One question that these experiences suggest is, “how do these people feel about the police as a result of their experiences with racial profiling?” Weitzer and Tuch (2002) found that “Blacks are three times more likely than are whites...to have unfavorable opinions of their local police and four times more likely...to have unfavorable views of the state police in their state” (p. 443). The impact of this unfavorable opinion can largely impact the legitimacy of the police. Sunshine and Tyler (2003) found that “public evaluations of police legitimacy impact people’s compliance with law, their willingness to cooperate with and assist the police, and whether the public will empower the police” (p. 534). In other words, when a group believes the police are singling out members of their own group (a common sentiment among African Americans), not only will members of the group be less likely to cooperate with the police, they will also be less likely to comply with the law.

While the story circles reveal that the African Americans who have dealt with racial profiling may agree with this unfavorable view, they have the utmost respect for police forces. Building upon their prior findings, Weitzer and Tuch (2005) have identified police perception to now be a group sentiment. They argue that the dominant group is likely to see the police as an ally. Coinciding with the “robust support” of whites for the police, is a sentiment among whites that Blacks are more “inclined to criminal or violent behavior” (p. 1010). One thing that is certain from this information is that “[s]tops by police officers can have lasting, adverse effects on citizens, especially when the stop appears to be motivated by race” (Weitzer and Tuch, 2002, p. 452). It is not hard to believe that instances such as a person having their face stomped on and teeth knocked out during a wrongful arrest might cause a young African American to have a negative view of the police. The circles, which show a common problem, a problem supported by the research, provide qualitative examples of how profiling shapes a person’s view of the police.

After seeing all the evidence that racial profiling is a widespread problem and that there is no race-based propensity toward crime, one may wonder why racial profiling still occurs. The question is one that goes to the very root of white society and white culture. There are subtle ways in which the American population is given the idea that crime and race go hand-in-hand. One of the most pervasive outlets for the spreading of racial stereotypes has been the media. Weitzer and Tuch (2005) take their research one step further, identifying that adverse experiences with police *as well as* exposure to media reporting on police abuse help to form negative views of the police within minority groups (p. 1027). Media reporting of race is an issue that, according to Weitzer and Tuch, spreads awareness of police abuse. This view suggests that the media can work as a means of identifying injustice and spreading the word. However, it is clear that oftentimes the media can work in the opposite direction; in some cases, mass media has either intentionally or inadvertently spread negative stereotypes of minorities.

Perhaps one of the most well-known cases of race and crime being grouped together occurred during George H. W. Bush’s first Presidential campaign. Few events get more national media attention than a Presidential election, and as a result all aspects of these elections are subject to much scrutiny. Some may remember the controversy surrounding the Willie Horton advertisement. Mendelberg (1997) summarizes the story told by the candidate quite well. The story was “that of a young black man convicted of grisly first-degree murder and sentenced to life without parole in a Massachusetts prison. While on a weekend pass he escaped, and kidnapped and brutally assaulted a young white couple in their home, raping the woman and stabbing the man” (p. 137). This narrative, along with a commercial created by a group unaffiliated with the Bush Campaign resulted in a campaign strategy about race more than about crime by calling upon racial stereotypes of whites. Immediately following the racial campaign associated to the Willie Horton case there was “greater resistance to government efforts to address racial inequality, heightened perceptions of racial conflict, and greater resistance to policies perceived as illegitimately benefitting African Americans” (Mendelberg, 1997, p. 151). The Bush campaign fed off of stereotypes to illicit fear in white Americans, stereotypes that still exist today based on evidence of racial profiling and association of blackness and criminality. It is clear that these stereotypes still prevail when an African American can not make multiple trips into the mall without

being accused of stealing (Circle #1, Participant #2) or even be in a convenience store without being insulted and suspected of criminal behavior (Circle #2, Participant #8).

Race and the Courts

While the first step toward the inequality of blacks in the criminal justice system is racial profiling by police, the disadvantages of being Black are not limited to greater police surveillance. The functioning of the courts and even the statutes that set the laws fundamentally contain racial biases. Regarding the courts, Participant #5, in the first story circle had this to say: “ I just feel like that’s a racial prejudice, how they’re keeping back black people down with this felony thing and how they’re just not, they do everything in their power not to let people, white people get felonies.” The speaker had received a felony nearly twenty years before, while a teenager, and still fought the stigma attached to the criminal record. Her complaint about the system was that she was only informed that pleading to a felony would prevent her from going to prison, and she was unaware that the record could not be expunged, while she witnesses whites who face lesser punishments. After witnessing a similar failure of the system, another participant in Circle 1, Participant #3 blames “the white judges, the white prosecutors, the white public defenders who work for the system rather than for this young man.” It appears that there is evidence to support these claims that Blacks face an inherent disadvantage within American courts.

One of the sources of disadvantages for Blacks is in the written law itself. Since Ronald Reagan began the war on drugs, more and more African Americans have been going to prison for non-violent offenses. Although statistics show that drug use is greater among whites than African Americans (Felson, 2008, p. 634), drugs used by Blacks are the target of stricter sentencing guidelines in most of the United States. In fact, Mitchell, et al. (2005) found that “Black male drug users are 13 times more likely than White male drug users to be sentenced to jail, even though the estimated drug usage rates are equivalent for the two groups” (p. 621). This trend was called out by one member of Story Circle 1:

[T]he young black man will get 5 years in prison for having a piece of crack cocaine as big as his fingernail. They’ll give you 5 years. But to get that same 5 years time, a white guy got to have a baggie full of powder cocaine, drug of choice for whites is powder cocaine. You could have a gallon bag full! You got a gallon bag full, “ooh, we’re going to give you 5 years.” But if you got a piece of crack cocaine as big as your fingernail, they’re going to give you 5 years.

--Participant #8

Participant #8’s assertions, though intended as exaggeration, are not far from the truth. Despite similarities between the effects of crack cocaine and powder cocaine and no apparent link between the form of the cocaine and its addictive qualities, Hatsukami (1997) describes the federal sentencing guidelines that allow one-hundred times more powder cocaine to be in possession than crack cocaine in order to require the minimum mandatory sentence (p. 614). This policy results in “22 times more convictions...among African Americans than among whites” (Hatsukami, 1997, p. 614). This comparison of penalties for crack cocaine, a lower class drug and one used by many African Americans, and powder cocaine, which is considered mainly a middle- or upper-class white man’s drug, adds to the stigma of more crime among Blacks, and leads to a disproportionate amount of incarcerated African Americans.

In addition to mandatory sentencing guidelines that often work to the detriment of African Americans, the arbitrariness of the court system also poses many problems. There is evidence to support that the pervasive stereotypes linking Blacks to crime interfere with the fairness of a trial by jury. Just as race is a factor in police stops, suspicion of shoplifting, and discrimination in the story circles, the bias is present in what is supposedly one of our most essential rights of justice: the jury trial. In his study of juror attribution of guilt, Ugwuegbu (1979) found that in a mock jury situation, whites were far more likely to believe that a Black defendant is culpable, or guilty, given marginal evidence that a white defendant. In addition, the study found that Blacks who committed crimes against whites were most often to be found culpable, followed by white on white crime, then black on black crime, and finally white on black crime (p. 282-283). One may argue that this study was done thirty years ago, in a time of more discrimination, but newer research confirms similar themes. Mitchell, et al. (2005) provides a more modern study of mock-jury racial bias. In this analysis, the authors found that “the effect of racial bias in juror decision-making is small, yet reliable” (p. 633). In addition, in 1972, the Supreme Court held that current death-penalty statutes resulted in discrimination and arbitrariness, and demanded that the system be reformed. Following the capital punishment reforms, many sources still show that the system discriminates against Black defendants, despite safeguards put in place to prevent such racial differences. Bowers and Pierce (1980) found that five years after the *Furman* decision, in states with the most death sentences, “race of both offender and victim had a tremendous impact on the chances that a death sentence would be handed down” (p. 51). As a result of the increased likelihood of a death sentence for a Black in the case of a white victim, Brewer (2004) showed that Black jurors are more likely to give the benefit of the doubt to a Black defendant in the case of a white victim, because these situations have been “bastions of racially discriminative sentencing practices in the past” (p. 542).

II. Other Central Issues of Race

Although the legal control of race is a large part of the discussion about race issues today, the social aspect needs to be examined as well. Important themes that ran through the story circles are supported by literature from throughout the scholarly community. Specifically, claims of a “post-racial” society and issues of white privilege and Black culture have been the subject of much debate and research. While these issues are quite troubling, their impact and threat are not as powerful or obvious as discrimination within the legal system.

“Post-Racial” America

As soon as the United States elected Barack Obama to the office of President of the United States, there were those who were quick to identify the nation’s status as “post-racial.” There were claims that President Obama “transcends race” a term, when broken down, is far more derogatory than complimentary. To say that he transcends race is to say that he is Black, but does not seem to be so. Instead, he has not “transcended” anything, just merely conformed to the norm of white society to what the majority feels it should mean to be Black. Part of what made President Obama’s election possible, according to Cho (2009) was the contradiction between Obama’s “‘post-racial’ universalism” and the

“campaign trail often racialized by the mainstream media and Republican challengers” (p. 1591). To be clear, the election of Barack Obama to the Presidency was a monumental event. In the words of Participant #2 in Circle One, the election of Obama was “the culmination of breaking the cycle” of racism, and he described his feelings at the inauguration as “a religious experience as I shared a park bench with a black lady on one side, a white young lady, college student who had worked for Obama from Pennsylvania on the other side.” And Participant #1 in the same story circle said, “(Obama’s) election really represents something serious and something special, that we were able to come together as a nation and do something that people would have laughed in your face about if you told them would have happened 50 years ago.” So while the election of an African American President is a sign of progress in race relations, discrimination and racism still persist throughout society and throughout the legal system.

Cho (2009) says that post-racial rhetoric is “a twenty-first century ideology that reflects a belief that due to the significant racial progress that has been made, the state need not engage in race-based decision-making or adopt race-based remedies, and that civil society should eschew race as a central organizing principle of social action” (p. 1594). In other words, many Americans feel that the ascension of an African American to the most powerful position in the country means that there is no longer any need for protections for minorities, that all races have an equal opportunity without the legal regulations in place to assure equality and justice. Colin (2010) also addresses the idea that America today is a “post-racial” society. In a post-racial society, there would not be an issue when a Black Harvard professor tries to get into his house. Colin (2010) says part of the responsibility of confronting racism rests in higher education, and it is the responsibility of educators to “identify and challenge their racist assumptions and behavior,” but instead many chose to “look at the mirage of a post-racial society rather than reality” (p. 8). This reluctance to confront the realities of racism leaves the U.S. stuck in a system of white racism, created by whites and “perpetuated by them” (Colin, 2010, p. 8). In this view, it is the duty of whites to confront racism, created and acted upon by whites, in much the same way that it was Frankenstein’s creator who was faced with the responsibility of destroying the monster he created (Colin, 2010, p. 8).

White Privilege

When one group receives benefits because of race, as has been the case for white Americans for hundreds of years, it can often be hard to see those advantages and even more difficult to show this privilege to those who fundamentally do not wish to see. We have seen the benefits of being white in the examination of the story circles—whites did not have the stories of being profiled by police or harassed based on their skin color; there were no stories of whites being beat up for being on the wrong sidewalk; and white participants could not understand what it is like to be feared based upon how one looks. The research, too, has shown that whites are less likely to be stopped by police, more likely to receive lenient treatment by the courts, and are virtually never perceived as a group to be synonymous with violent crime. Why, then, is it so difficult to convince the white population that with whiteness comes advantages and opportunities not available to those of minority groups?

Protestant work ethic is based on the idea that working hard results in success. White Americans, particularly those white Americans who are successful, such as the wealthy or even those in higher education, believe that hard work alone has led them to their accomplishments. When it is suggested that some inherent advantage of being white may have guided a white person toward success, it is only logical that this idea would be refused. Such refusal is often the case in college classrooms, when white students are forced to confront the idea of white privilege. For some teachers of privilege, this discussion can have a negative impact on their careers. Boatright-Horowitz (2009) showed that teaching white students about the unfair advantages and prestige of being white and causing them to lose “their belief in the American dream” can not only lead to unhappy students, but also leads to poor instructor evaluations (p. 575). According to Branscombe, et al. (2007), rather than accept white privilege, there is a tendency among whites to attempt to justify a racial advantage by adopted racist stereotypes (p. 203). In fact, in their research, Branscombe, et al. (2007) discovered that among whites being confronted by white privilege, the tendency to display modern racism—“denial that the existing racial inequality is due to discrimination and an assessment that Blacks are making illegitimate demands for change”—was a common theme among whites who denied having an unjustified racial advantage (p. 204).

Impact of Black Culture

Historically, Black Culture has been associated with stereotypes of African Americans, including an increase in sexuality and crime. Up until the time of Elvis Presley, rock and roll music was strictly “Black” music, and Elvis faced much criticism for playing such music and dancing “provocatively.” As time went on and hip-hop and rap music developed, white mainstream society has found more reason to attach negative stigma to African American music: themes of violence, drug use, and sex. In modern rap videos, artists are portrayed in “pimped out” rides, with large rims, loud speaker systems, and dark tinted windows. Just to show how negatively these vehicle upgrades are viewed, a quick review of the story circles shows not only the admission that having a nice car is subject to police interaction, but there is firsthand experience. In Circle Number 2, Participant #8 discusses how driving a Chevy Monte Carlo is grounds for being pulled over three times in one night, and Participant #4 replies by saying he would like to own a car like that but cannot, “cause I don’t wanna get pulled over... That’s sad I can’t get what I want just for the simple fact I’mma be harassed.”

The idea of criminalization of Black Culture is nothing new, especially when it comes to music. Jazz was the first African American dominated music to be targeted by whites as associated with drug use, sex, insanity, and “moral decay” (Heitzeg, 1997, p. 246). These same ideas are currently attributed to hip-hop and rap music, specifically because of their themes about drug use, violence, and life on the streets. But themes such as these, that challenge social norms and call into question societal problems. Heitzeg (1997) argues it is not the themes of sex, drug abuse, and violence which are present in other types of music as well that causes rap to be targeted for legal control, but rather its “fundamental criticism of the prevailing order” and position as the music of choice for young minorities that causes rap music to be so tightly scrutinized and regulated by society and legal actors (p 262).

Music is not the only part of Black Culture that is deemed unacceptable by the majority of the population. From the audio and transcripts of the story circles, there is a distinction among the dialects of English being spoken within the groups. While most participants were from the Akron area, there is a mixture of Standard English and African American Vernacular. John Baugh, a leading linguistic anthropologist uses the term “linguistic profiling” to describe the drawing of racial influences from small amounts of speech (Baugh, 2000, p. 363). In Peoples (2002), the author examines Baugh’s research, during which he found that through code-switching between Standard English, African American Vernacular, and Chicano, he could witness housing discrimination based solely on assumptions made through language. In cases where he used Standard (White) English, he was much likely to be told that there were vacancies, whereas calls to the same places at the same time with dialects meant to portray blackness or other minorities he was told, “there are no vacant apartments” (Peoples, 2002, p. 2). No aspect of Black Culture is protected from negative stereotypes, from the language and music to the style of clothes, culture is one more aspect of black life associated with deviance and criminal behavior.

Conclusions

The concept of the story circle was not something that was foreign to me prior to this project. I have participated in several circles myself and have noted the impact such experiences has had on my educational experience as well as on my development as a person. These experiences, thanks entirely to Dr. Bill Lyons of the University of Akron, were combined with a background of racial conflict education in his Law and Society class. This idea of scholarly data combined with personal exposure to race conflicts is the basis of the research done here and gives a unique perspective on race issues. As a result of that class, I had the idea for research combining the empirical data supporting issues such as racial profiling, discrimination, and white privilege with individual accounts of such occurrences. The outcome of this research is an intertwined web of legal variables and social controls, proven by statistics and witnessed through emotional personal accounts that have led to the conclusion that race is an unresolved issue that burns deep in the hearts and memories of those portrayed as inferior by society today. There is distrust and cynicism among African Americans of police forces and the court system. There is widespread explicit and implicit racism that goes unnoticed to those for whom it benefits, but is easily observed by minority groups and anyone willing to take a closer look. From the amount of research available, it is evident that many are taking a closer look at race and discrimination. The future of story circles lies in providing a face and a story to go along with the numbers provided by scholars.

Story circles present a unique style of research that not only provides a multitude of qualitative research, but it also submerses the researcher into the anecdotes of the participants. Being a participant in a story circle forces one to confront situations in his/her life that have shaped how s/he looks at race. As an outsider observing the private moments in people’s lives that have caused them pain or left them feeling inferior is a humbling and rewarding experience. By connecting the themes of each circle, it led me to question the way that I think of race, how I perceive myself and whiteness, and how society can best alleviate racial tensions that persist today. I believe that more widespread use of

story circles in adult education, as well as an introduction into other forms of education would greatly impact views on race and racism. Imagine a third grade classroom of mixed ethnicity where questions, such as, “Why do people look different than me?” can be discussed and children can be taught at an early age how painful words and stereotypes can be by witnessing the struggles that their fellow classmates go through. The story circles I examined reinforced theories that I had already accepted, such as white privilege and racial profiling, and made me feel more passionate about the pursuit of exposing biases and disproving stereotypes about race.

This study provides an outline of some of the most pervasive racial issues in America today. Racial profiling is a practice that has been around for years, and it is a practice supported by many who identify crime and race as interrelated. The same philosophy is responsible for sentencing mandates that punish crimes typically committed by minorities and for arbitrary sentencing in jury trials. This implicit idea that being Black is a precursor to being a criminal ties in with the explicit racism expressed through hate speech and racial slurs that can be heard every day. Yet whites, who are blind to the advantages they receive daily by having white skin, dressing “white” and talking in the Standard English typical of whites, say that we are living in a “post-racial” society, where every citizen has an equal shot at achieving their American dream. White society believes that if you act right and work hard, opportunities will make their way to you, but those same opportunities seem to escape the African American male who is pulled over and accused of being a drug dealer on his way home to his family after a 50-hour work week at a minimum wage job. The same opportunity to pick up a phone and call a real estate agent to ask about a home for sale is not the same opportunity when certain neighborhoods are off limits based upon racial assumptions made through a telephone.

America today is a society that is legally required to be made up of equal opportunity employers, housing companies, and legal actors. Even so, there are fewer jobs available to Blacks, neighborhoods that are off limits, and more police surveillance of the neighborhoods where they can live. Yet white Americans claim that post-racialism means that the United States has reached the point where equal opportunity is no longer a philosophy but a realization, and as such, governmental policies regarding race and safeguards put in place to limit racial bias are obsolete and should be eliminated. While research and personal stories tell us that post-racialism is an absurd fallacy, common sense says that even if society had evolved into a time where all are equal, removing policies that helped cause equality would allow for a slip toward the inequalities of the past.

The themes identified in the stories and explored through research are not isolated racial issues. Race is not a biological characteristic, but instead is a product of what society says. In the United States, race is more than just the color of a person’s skin; it is the neighborhood where a person lives, the music s/he likes, the clothes s/he chooses to wear, and the way in which s/he speaks. The themes of racism and discrimination revealed in story circles are not linked to just one characteristic of what it means to be Black or white, but rather the overall social and cultural context that make up blackness or whiteness. All of the themes are interconnected in a complex combination of legal and social control that presents white society as the norm and others as not only minority subcultures, but deviations from the norm. While racial profiling and explicit/implicit racism work together to prevent Blacks from moving up in society, the blinders of white privilege allow whites to remain oblivious to both the

advantages inherent in their race and the disadvantages of being non-white. In addition to that, the spread of the myth of “post-racialism” reinforces denial of white privilege and stereotypes that attribute the failure of Blacks to move up the socioeconomic ladder to laziness and criminal tendencies perceived to be inherent among those with dark skin. Working together, these prevalent themes of race and discrimination form walls that act as a prison which keeps African Americans (who are lucky enough to not be incarcerated) in Black neighborhoods and in the lower class. Once in awhile, an African American who is lucky enough to attend an Ivy League school, an African American who eloquently speaks White English, an African American who has a white mother, can break through the cycle of racial barriers. But to claim that because one person was able to escape from the walls of being Black proves that race is not an issue in the United States, is white denial at its very foundation.

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