

Transforming Racism in Ohio
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Introduction

Racism encompasses a wide range of emotions including hatred, fear, embarrassment and denial. Individual experiences with racism have led to a separation of our great nation. On one warm summer evening strangers of different races sit down in a room and share their individual experiences with racism and racial conflict. This experience is provided by the Color Line Project 2012 organized by the University of Akron. The Color Line Project provides a means for individuals to sit down and tell their personal stories of either past or present experiences with race and racial conflict.

On June 14, 2012 a group of students from the Law, Violence and Mediation course taught by Dr. William Lyons were given the opportunity to take part in Story Circles held at Akron Summit Community Action. The evening consisted of six story circles, each containing two student facilitators and four to five black residents from Akron, Ohio. During the story circles, each participant was able to share one or two personal experiences he or she had involving race and racial conflict and these stories were recorded and later transcribed.

This experience and the experiences of our storytellers have been incorporated into this paper to bring light to the problems of race and racial conflict still being experienced today. In this paper, through the analysis of each story and the use of scholarly articles, the themes of racial profiling and “race and place” will be identified including links to the concepts of nihilism and white privilege.

Doing Justice to the Storytellers and Their Stories

This story circle provided a clear example on how each one of our lives is touched so differently by race. Each of us live in Ohio; however, we live in a very different Ohio and where we live has shaped our views, our beliefs and our experience with racism. The members of the story circle who lived within urban Ohio, where there are concentrated levels of lower income, unemployment, and residential instability had more experiences with racial conflict than those who lived in suburban Ohio where there is a concentration of higher incomes, employment and residential stability. Sampson and Bartusch describe this phenomenon as the concept of concentrated disadvantage. Concentrated disadvantage is the economic factors in racially segregated urban neighborhoods to the predominately white suburban neighborhoods. Listening to these stories provides a deeper understanding to issues of racial profiling and race and place which are affecting our society.

“The American Dream is for Whites Only”

In one story we hear that the Ku Klux Klan forced a young family to move out of their newly purchased home because of the color of their skin.

But this is what I wanted to say this happened a year ago to my son and his wife. They moved out to Barberton. Moved out in Barberton a real nice area, real nice and I went back to the old neighborhood as the week went by the garbage cans and stuff would be turned around and thrown out in front of the house. S...so they thought it was the kids in the neighborhood. So one day my daughter-in-law was sitting out on the swing, beautiful place. The people came down, they said it was the KKK. They said it was the clan or

something and they came down the street and told her “Nigger we want you off the street, we don’t want no niggas in this neighborhood.”¹

Here the storyteller is angry and upset that her son worked so hard to purchase a really nice home for his family and due to the color of his skin is being forced out of the neighborhood. It is not the White American Dream, it is the American Dream. Property law does not discriminate by the color of someone’s skin, however, it is the communities that have continued to segregate, creating white and black neighborhoods. This family is forced to fight for their right not only to achieve the American Dream, but to break through the paradigm of Meehan and Ponder’s race and place to live in the neighborhood of their choice regardless of the color of their skin.

The race and place phenomena creates a type of racial profiling, not the profiling used by police in order to solve a crime, but a type of racial profiling that happens in other parts of society. These neighbors, like real estate agents using racial covenants and police officers targeting African American drivers who appear out of place, are enforcing one communities understanding of the boundaries between places that appears to confuse race and place.

Meehan and Ponder explain the phenomena of confusing “race and place” as the significant increase in profiling as African Americans move farther from stereotypical “black” communities and into wealthier, “whiter” communities (Meehan & Ponder, September 2002, p. 401). Being the only black family on the street does not mean that they do not have the right to live there, but their neighbors are clearly saying that they are out of place because of their race. Nor does it mean that they do not have the right to want the things other Americans want: a stable community and strong schools for their children to be raised in, a nice home in a safe neighborhood where their children run and play with friends and the ability to become friends with others in the neighborhood. These neighbors are a living example of the gate keeping practices described by Meehan and Ponder which continue to produce segregated communities throughout the United States (Meehan & Ponder, p. 402).

However, this family was stripped of this right and denied access to this place and the storyteller further goes on to explain how one of the witnesses to this racism was her six year old granddaughter:

. . . what happened to my son and his wife is that the granddaughter was, the granddaughter was there. She saw that, she was six years old. That is what I look at because if you see this, she is gonna remember that as she get older.²

Prejudice and hatred are not genetic traits, they are learned traits, yet with the ignorance of society due to weak minds, many people believe what they hear on the radios, watch on TV and read in the newspapers regarding race. In an article by Tali Mendelberg, “Executing Hortons,” the effects the media have on viewers was studied in a presidential campaign. It was shown that even though a campaign ad was supposed to address the concept of crime reduction, since it included a story of a black convicted felon, racial prejudice was increased at a rate of 132% in those who were exposed to the Horton ads (Mendelberg, 1997). Based on the findings of this article, it supports the theory that much of what society knows about race and the characteristics of specific races is learned from what they observe, not first-hand (since we live in highly segregated neighborhoods), but from our leaders

¹ Storyteller #3

² Storyteller#3

and through the media. Pondering the findings of the Horton study which proves that adults' perceptions of race can be misled by elected officials through the amplification of media, combined with the knowledge that hatred is a learned trait; awareness must be raised on how this pedagogical prejudice is being taught to our children.

"Innocence Meets Prejudice"

Another storyteller shared a story about experiencing racism as a young child. It was her first experience with race and she was confused and did not understand why she, as a four year old little girl, was not allowed to watch a movie that she had been looking forward to all week.

When I was 4 years old I partially grew up in Barberton, Ohio and me and my cousins and I. I'll never forget, I'll die remembering this. I was 4. . . . We went to see this monster movie we had been talking about it all week, "we are going to see the monster movie this week." So back then it only cost a quarter to see a movie. My father had given us all some change to see this movie. So we get up there on Wooster Road at the theater. We was ready to go and got our little candy and popcorn and, I don't know if he was the owner or who he was, but he told us; "We, I can't let you come in here, we don't allow niggers in here." I cried, only 4 years old I didn't understand. I didn't have any understanding, I cried all the way home.³

This storyteller goes on to describe how, as a result of this experience, for a long period of time she hated white people and was unable to forgive the owner of the theater for taking away her innocence, an innocence that did not see black or white. Another storyteller also told a story about a recent experience she had with her granddaughter.

I picked [my granddaughter] up from school . . . she was so hurt; she said "I wanted to play with this little girl on the playground, so I went up to her and said come on let's play my name is Riley⁴ and the little girl said "My daddy say I can't look at black people in the face." It hurt her so bad that she cried.⁵

With eyes filled with deep sadness and despair, the storyteller explained her pain and heartbreak to the group. As if reliving the moment she continued to shrug her shoulders and shake her head searching for an explanation for her granddaughter. She struggled to find the words to console her granddaughter and explain why this little girl wouldn't play with her. She finally answered her in an air of innocent lightheartedness suited to not teach her granddaughter the same racism her little classmate was taught.

[M]y granddaughter came come up and ask me "Why her daddy tell me, I can't look at black people in the face." I said well I guess she gonna be blind because everywhere you go – whoop there we are. [laughter within the group]⁶

Children do not understand the difference between races; they are merely innocent children, yet an act as described by our two storytellers can make all of the difference in the world on how children see and judge people. Events such as these can continue to breed racism within both races. As Dr. King so eloquently stated "Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction" (Martin Luther King, 2010, p. 47).

³ Storyteller #2

⁴ Name changed to protect identity

⁵ Storyteller #1

⁶ Storyteller #1

“Braids are to Blame”

Other stories within our story circle included examples of various actions which continue to breed racism in our society, even into the adult years. These included different experiences of racial profiling and race and place; two of our storytellers experienced the common phenomenon known as “driving while black.” Meehan and Ponder show that this phenomenon results in black drivers being 383% more likely to be stopped in whiter communities due to the color of their skin. (Meehan & Ponder, p. 417) One storyteller shares their story about how, while driving a friend home late at night, he was pulled over by the police.

I was pulling uh down the street just, I was doin the right thing I wasn't wasn't doin the wrong thing or nothing. And I seen the police right there and I told him, my friend, whenever me and him turn I said he gon turn. He's a white cop. I'm like he gon turn on right behind me because he sees both of us in this car, cuz you know both of us got braids and you know I had my windows up but uh they was kind of um they weren't tinted So uh as I'm about to get to Snow Village he pulled me over. I kept my hands on the steering wheel and stuff and he came up. When he came up he had his gun drawn already. He already had his gun draw. And when he came up to the car he was like “Slowly put your hands out of the car.”

This storyteller is a young man, merely driving a friend home, who lives in a predominately white area. He describes how he knew, simply because of the color of his skin, he was going to get pulled over, as if the color of your skin is a stoppable offense. In Sunshine and Tyler’s “Procedural Justice and Legitimacy,” it is stated that “controversies of racial profiling lead to questions of when police have the discretion to decide whom to stop, question and ticket” (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003, p. 518). Allowing the police to have full discretion on stopping drivers just because of the color of their skin and based solely on their police intuition leads to a larger number of “unproductive” and bad stops and arrests; the victims of these types of stops continue to loose trust in the police and justice system which is put in place to protect them. Looking further at our storyteller’s experience we can see that his trust in the police and justice system has already begun to waiver when he states that “he kept his hands on the steering wheel” and later in the story describes how he had the officer take his wallet from his back pocket because he did not want to make any sudden moves to give the officer any reason to doubt him.

To add to the confusion, fear and further solidifying the lack of trust that our storyteller was feeling at the time, he further describes that he is asked to exit his vehicle at gun point and then dogs were brought in and his car searched.

He called the dogs out because he said he smelled weed in the car and I don't even smoke. And my friend don't smoke. There was no no smoke at all so he call the dogs out and when the dog get der it walk all the way around my car and all of a sudden the dog jump on my car. So the dog jump on my car and they inside rippin everything out looking through my car. They end up not finding nothing just like I told them. He said, “You sure you don't have nothing in the car.” And I said “I don't have anything in the car.” He ended up doin all that an uh so by then before he left he told me he said “uh you have a nice day. You make sure you're careful when you're around here.”⁸

Simply because of the color of his skin, he is treated like a criminal. Had the driver been white would he have been pulled out at gun point and had his vehicle searched, let alone be told to “be

⁷ Name of area changed to protected identities. Storyteller #4

⁸ Storyteller #4

careful when you're around here?" The police in this story treated the storyteller as if he did not belong in the area he was driving simply because his skin color was not white. This officer was obviously acting on the myth described by Sampson and Bartusch, wherein it is believed that African Americans have a subculture of violence, which leads to higher levels of profiling. Officers develop "cognitive landscapes" of the communities in which they patrol which leads to increased profiling when observing individuals outside the norm of place (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Although communities are beginning to see an integration of races, as Meehan and Ponder support in their article stating that 1 in 3 African Americans now live in suburbs however, suburbs are still predominately white therefore leading to continual residential segregation (p. 402).

"Token Black Scapegoat"

Another story that came out in our story circle did not deal with being pulled over in a white neighborhood but instead the storyteller became the token black scapegoat after a white motorist was unable to be caught by police.

There's a stop sign there on York Street where you make the turn, this guy ran a stop sign. This cop chased this guy so I told the lady I said "Wow if I hadn't stopped we could have been killed." . . . He ran off and the cop chased him so I run down the street to drop Mrs. A off. . . . [when] I turned around and backed out the drive way cause I seen the cop pull over and stop. I guess he couldn't catch the guy, some white guy, so I started going the way I can and he cop was behind me. . . . I pull over, he pull over behind me, another car, a white lady pull in front of me. I lock the van because I lock the van because got nervous. . . . He told me, you ran the stop sign. I said you a liar. . . . So you do what you gotta do, so he wrote me up a ticket⁹.

The storyteller was very angry about this event and further explained how they went on to fight the ticket in court and prevailed. Unfortunately, many other black motorists many not have fought this ticket because of the feeling of distrust that has been established with the police and justice system. A white officer cites a black motorist for a traffic violation that she did not commit; would a judge believe the motorist over the officer? Cornel West describes how people act and live are shaped by political and cultural circumstances, how black America is faced with political powerlessness and the incredible disregard for black human life. This is the racism which has led to psychological depression, personal worthlessness and social despair and ultimately to the nihilistic threat to black America's very existence (Nihilism in Black America, an essay from *Race Matters*). This storyteller had the courage to stand up and prove her innocence and fight this nihilistic treat that others in her race have resigned themselves to in the battle for equal treatment and fairness in our justice system.

"Twelve inches shy of a match"

However, one storyteller never had to deal with the effects of nihilism or unfair treatment by police. He was one of the co-facilitators of the group and a white man, yet he too was subjected to and a witness of racial profiling and race and place by the local police. He proceeded to describe a story where he was on foot walking to a friend's house with his black friend.

[T]his was going on three years ago. My freshman year, ummm, I just moved into the dorms, I think we were just a couple weeks into classes and umm a kid who was lived above me, me and him were going to go out one night and it was about 11 o'clock and um, he was a black kid and so we were walking down south of campus and um, we were just heading over to a friend's house and then all of the sudden a police officer pulls up, slows down and then we just kind of look at him and he looks at us. He drives away and then

⁹ Storyteller #3

about a minute later he must have circled around because we saw him again and he pulled up and stopped the car and he stopped us and he said "Where are you heading?" So we said we were heading to a friend's house and he got out of his car and he said "Can I see both of your IDs?" . . . I got out mine first he just grabbed it and looked at it and gave it back to me. My friend, he gave him his, he stared at it for a good minute, just looking. . . I said well you know what is the problem here are we doing something wrong? He goes, um well we are looking for us, there was a robbery around this area and we are looking for uh, a person who might match the description.¹⁰

The storyteller goes on explaining his confusion as to why he and his friend were stopped and why when he was attempting to answer the questions that the officer was directing at his friend, the officer told him "I am not talking to you." He shares feelings of unease and discomfort knowing that something was not right about the stop and how even after the officer let him and his friend go, they had no insight on what they had done wrong or why they were stopped and questioned by the police officer.

It was not until the next morning, while reading his school emails, that our storyteller realized that he had first-hand experienced a case of racial profiling. A description of the robber the officer referred to was a six five black male wearing a black hoodie and black jean. However, the friend he was with was twelve inches too short to match the description measuring in at five foot six inches and was wearing a white hoodie and blue shorts.

These six stories all have facets of racial profiling both on the personal and police levels and result in actions of racism, whether intentional or unintentional. However, they also have connotations of white privilege. Peggy McIntosh describes white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets;" these unearned assets include daily life occurrences that one may not consider to be a privilege (White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack, 1989). However, looking back on all six of these stories, white privilege can be witnessed as having the ability to live in a neighborhood without being forced to move because of the color of your skin. Having the privilege to go into any movie theatre to watch a movie and not be denied access, or having the privilege to play with any child you want to on the playground. Looking further into these white privileges, they also include the ability to drive your car without the constant concern of being pulled over because of where you are or even the uncertainty of whether or not you are going to be stopped and questioned simply for walking to a friend's house. These are privileges that the black community have been deprived of on a daily basis simply because of the color of their skin. And whites just take for granted, without even noticing the difference. McIntosh says that we have been "taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of [our] group, never in invisible systems of conferring unsought racial dominance on [our] group from birth (p. 4)." This is a form of racism which is just as damaging yet remains oblivious in the eyes of many whites.

Final Reflection

Listening to these particular stories brings up feelings of embarrassment and at times guilt for being white, along with the need to suppress the urge to apologize for the wrongs and racism that our story circle has faced. Many of their stories were recent, others were when they were children, but all were equally as painful. Following the sermons of Dr. King,¹¹ it is time to call on intelligence and use a strong mind and open heart to help resolve racism and racial conflict, even if it is only one

¹⁰ Storyteller #6

¹¹ "A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart" sermon

instance at a time. An apology may not make right the wrongs and racism these people have faced in their lives, however, we can each make a difference by no longer conforming to society's blind eye.¹²

Listening to these fellow Ohioans telling their stories takes us back to a time, a time before the Civil Rights movement, a time when race crimes were prevalent, yet date stamped it 2012. These fellow Ohioans brought about understanding and insight into their experiences with racial profiling when a family is run out of their new home by the KKK, a little girl told she is not allowed to watch a movie because of the color of her skin, a child is told by a classmate she is not allowed to look at black people. They also provide living instances of race and place when a young man is stopped while driving a friend home and his car searched simply because of the color of his skin, another woman stopped and given a ticket because she was at an intersection when a white driver ran the stop sign and finally a young man is stopped while walking to a friend's house because he "fits a description." These are no longer statistics from a study laid out in an article, but living, breathing human beings sitting in a circle telling their experiences.

We can all learn from the words spoken by the great Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his sermon "Transforming Nonconformist"

"The saving of our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority" (p 18).

The blindfold has been forever removed from a member of the complacent conforming majority and created a member of the nonconforming minority, with it one step in a journey to end racism in our nation.

¹² "Transformed Nonconformist" sermon

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