

*The Evolution of Racism*  
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*I. Introduction*

While listening to the participants in my story circle, I noticed that each story, though all about racial conflict, was different in terms of the time period in which the story was presented. Upon further reflection of this, I discovered that each participant illustrated two different forms of racism in their stories. For this paper, the two different forms will be referred to as implicit and explicit racism.

These two different forms of racism relate to two extremely different time periods. The Jim Crow Laws which lasted until the Civil Rights Movement allowed for people to discriminate against blacks in an explicit, or open, manner. These laws, simply put, made racism socially acceptable because it was written into the laws of the time. It is because of these laws that racism before 1965 was explicit racism.

However, after the Civil Rights Movement "succeeded" and Jim Crow Laws were abolished, racism did not simply disappear. Though the laws regarding race seemingly changed over night, the battle with racism still continues to this day. This movement, however successful in ending government sanctioned discrimination, did not end racism, it merely changed it. Through the stories in my circle and class readings, I realized that racism today is implicit and is much more difficult to detect. Today it is more subtle, harder to see, like a virus; and it is this definition which I will use with regards to implicit racism.

*II. Doing Justice to the 2009 Story Circles*

We did story circles at the Akron Urban League on May 27, 2009. Our circle included me and another University of Akron student of a similar age, and six members of the community. The ages of those involved in our circle ranged from early twenties to late seventies. In our group, there were three females and five males. We recorded the stories and transcribed them in the ARM Lab at the university. On the basis of my evaluation of the stories in my circle this paper will focus on the evolution of racism and what it means to those affected by it and how it changed with both political and cultural contexts, which highlights the importance of looking at racism as a socially constructed concept and set of relationships.

Explicit Racism

Explicit racism was the most common form of racism before the Civil Rights Movement. At that time, racism was a government sanctioned, socially accepted view, and acts of discrimination against blacks were legal. For this paper, explicit racism will be referred to as acts of discrimination which are open and legal. Several of the stories in our circle focused on this main theme.

One gentleman whom I will refer to as Greg<sup>1</sup> was sitting to my left, and he recalled a very disturbing event in which he went to a restaurant with his family. As he explains it,

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<sup>1</sup> On the night of the story circles, I was a part of group #2. In order to personalize each story, as was done for me, I am going to refer to each participant by a pseudonym, or false name, to protect their anonymity.









black college, but thought of that comfort as the white experience, as white privilege, a privilege he could not get in white society.

Dennis was able to study as an individual and then attend a school in which he could finally learn about his own culture in a positive light. For the first time, Dennis was taught to appreciate who he was and where he came from. But unfortunately, not everyone is able to do this. It is a tragic story to tell, but until black culture is taught in a true and culturally unbiased manner, the youth of America will continue to view black culture in a negative light; this is the essence of a Eurocentric education which I will be discussing later.

When Dennis told his story about how other students viewed him, the participant which I referred to earlier as Sarah told a second story in which she had personally experienced a form of implicit racism similar to that of Dennis. In her story, she described how there was a girl she attended school with who she felt did not see her and other blacks in their school as people. In her own words,

*But there were lik*

*ays around me  
and all the other black people that were there, and she was just so, you know, interested in  
portraying that she was such a cool person and that she had all these black friends. Like not just  
friends, she had black friends, like, it was key t*

To Sarah, the girl seemed like she had been trying too hard in order to seem like she fit in. She then went on to describe how the girl would use socially sanctioned words which are not supposed to be used because of their negative connotations.

However, when I heard these stories, the point that sticks out to me was when Sarah and Dennis were intent on expressing that they were referred to as "black friends." It was this fact that caused me to realize that the girl, though trying to portray herself as "cool" or as a non-racist, actually proves this to be incorrect. The girl in the story does not see her friends who happen to be black as simply being her friends; she sees them as her "black friends." The same is true of the story in which Dennis viewed himself as "the black friend." It is this inherent distinction in the mind of the individual which allows racism, though slightly less detectable, to continue.

Dennis then went on to conclude his story with an important point that

"ok." But this shows the distinction which is made between the races, the distinction is that blacks and whites are not biologically similar. The comment, "*do you wash your hair,*" is part of the stereotype, and the fact that Dennis had been asked that shows that the whites in his school truly believed in these stereotypes.

Just as Dennis said, these forms of racism are more common today. He said  
This comment,  
shows that racism today is not only different, he also shows that it will never end. To him,

I think that this statement is true for all members of the African American community. Since history is taught from a Eurocentric perspective, in order to develop an appreciation for their own race, it seems that the people in our story circle either had to go to a historically black college or seek higher education that is taught from an Afrocentric point of view.

Though Dennis was able to go to a black college and find appreciation for his own race, one participant in our circle was not as fortunate. This gentleman grew up in the era of the Civil Rights Movement. It was at that time that the education system did not allow for young black men to be educated in any other manner than the Eurocentric View. So, instead of going to a black college, John took responsibility for his own education. In his words,

*Panthers was here, the black nationals was here, you know, up in that era. And I always, you know, I listened to all the guys that was like if they were bums. And they would say*  
*wh*

Though John was not formally educated about black history, he learned through listening to others tell their stories. Just as this study is trying to do, John listened to what people had to say and he was able to learn more than any school could have taught him. He was able to develop an appreciation for his own culture by taking it upon himself to learn what the schools of America refused to teach him.

#### Racial Discrimination by Police

When our story circle was telling their first stories, one younger gentleman was very open about his experiences with the police. Once Jeff began to tell what had happened to him, the rest of the group seemed to follow his example and explain how they had been affected by the discriminatory actions of the police.

In Jeff's first story, he talked about an instance where a police officer stopped him at a bus stop in front of his school. He said,

*d some of the things that they (referencing police officers) do to me and my friends. I remember one time, matter of fact, right across the street at this bus stop, and I'm a student at this school. The officer at first he pulled up and he asked me what am I doing here and it kind got me upset a lil bit and I a little got frustrated a lil bit. I was smart with him a*





*he was on drugs you probably just his adrenaline to kill a black man, you know just to shoot like that and he said they was just mad you know right now today ever since then they still harass the*

*in broad daylight but what happening is instead of taking it out on the older ones they taking it out on the younger ones, and you now as long as the can discourage them and get them to the point where*

Once our story circle had concluded, I went home and tried to find out more about the story. According to an article in the *Plain Dealer*, a man had been shooting a gun on the streets. Stephenson's wife had called the police, but prior to the arrival of the police, Stephenson and his son went to find the man. Upon arrival, the police saw Stephenson with a gun and ordered him to the ground. Within seconds, Stephenson was shot by two officers over 22 times. According to one of the officers, Stephenson had been reaching for the gun when the officer fired at him.

After the event had taken place, reporters were interviewing the brother of the man whom was shot, he said, " *How is it justified when they say a man is pointing a gun at police officers, but then he gets shot in the back while he was on the ground? It's rough for the family, and the community is*

This event is one of the most tragic encounters with the police that I have ever heard. My emotions were only compounded when I heard this story by the fact that the man in our story circle was not talking about something he had read in the news, or seen on TV; he was talking about his family and his own life. There is nothing that one can say in a situation like this, but I will say that it is racism and deep seeded hatred that led to this man's unfortunate death.

Racism, either implicit or explicit is deadly to those affected by it and spiritually damning to those who express it. The trade-off is not fair, and in no way equivalent, but that is what we are faced with today. And until something is done, we can expect to see and hear stories similar to these for the rest of our lives.

### *III. Final Reflections*

The experience of hearing these stories was very emotional for me; in part because I have personally been a part of the problem in the past. In my high school, there were very few black people, so I had never experienced anything like what the people who shared with me had. But through the course of listening, I found out that the distinction between white and black friends is still a racist view. I am personally guilty of this act, and it is not something that I am proud to admit, but I feel it is important to share.

This experience taught me about myself, but it also helped me to see where I had been wrong and why I had been wrong. The simple fact that ignorance had led me to my distinction between friends is a small part of a much bigger picture. The ignorance that I had experienced is because of implicit racism today. Though I had no intention of offending my friend, I did not know that my actions were offensive.

It is this fact that shows how racism has evolved. Where racism was once a clear expression, by either calling someone a name, burning a cross, or by placing live maggots in



had previously learned, but sadly, this project is on a much smaller scale and has only affected those who are directly associated with the project. But the hope is that others will read these stories and a change can finally begin.

It was the inner strength of the participants which led them to come to the Urban League that night and help our class understand what racism is and where it is. After that night, it became our responsibility to make sure that we helped these peoples voices be heard. And it is in that experience that I feel I have changed the most. It is one thing to help yourself, but it is a whole new experience when you help others. I guess that this project showed me that a change is possible, you just have to be strong enough to speak out against the norms of a society, and hope that somewhere there is someone who is willing to listen.

### *References*

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Story Circle Stories, Story Circle # 2, stories collected on May 27, 2009 at the Akron Urban League for *Law, Mediation and Violence* at the University of Akron.