

POLICE RACIAL PROFILING: IGNORANCE OR MALICE?

By Dr. Emmanuel Ngoms

Diversity and Racial Profiling Trainer/POST Approved Vendor

Educators agree that stories help learners understand concepts. I use numerous stories in my course, *Cultural Diversity Competency and Racial Profiling for Peace Officers* at the Regional Police Academy. Among many other stories, the following case helps me start discussion with the law enforcement officers.

A few years ago, I left a university library at around 11:00 p.m. I had such a tiring day that I barely knew where I was going. But, I can still remember that I was exhausted, hungry and sleepy, thinking and dreaming, driving and, well, speeding. The one thing I could not imagine was that a police officer was hidden precisely on my way home. As a result, I was pulled over. After a short explanation of why he pulled me over, the officer asked me for my driver's license. I tried to reach down to my socks, but never got there.

It took the officer just seconds to open my Chevy Caprice's door and pull me out of there. I found myself on the ground face down, a knee on my neck holding my head down. I was handcuffed. The two officers were shouting loudly, but I have no recollection of what they were saying, probably because of my poor English. I had been in the U.S. for just a few months. I was so terrified. Just about a couple minutes later, I was still on the ground when I saw four guns pointing closely at my head with one right at my left ear. I was so blessed no one pulled the trigger.

I was now surrounded by two other police cars, in the middle of indescribable colors of police lights. I remained still. I did not know what to do or what to say. With my shoes and part of my clothing off, I was fully searched from toes to hair and from front to back. Of course, they did not find any harmful device on me.

I almost started to cry but did not dare. Growing up in my rain-forest-village of Nkouansi in Cameroon, Africa, our elders repeatedly taught us that men don't cry no matter the circumstances. But, this case could have been a justifiable occasion for me to cry for the first time since my right of passage year at age thirteen. Fortunately, I still did not, and I am proud of it.

With two of the officers still pointing their weapons on me, my entire car was searched and the truck emptied. With my head hitting the ground, I did have a cut on my lip, but I was glad that was the worse injury I had that night. That cut is the reason why I always carry a permanent covering mustache. I was later released, with a speeding ticket.

During training, after I share this case with the officers, the first question I am always asked is the reason why I went to my socks. The answer is simple, because I had always kept my bill-folder in my left sock! I developed this habit since my teenage years while playing street football –I mean

soccer! – For young players at the time, the safest place to keep our valuables was in our socks. Sshhhhhh, don't reveal my secret, that is where my bill folder is right now!

The next question participants ask is about the race of the officers. They were all white males. I then ask a series of questions related to the story, among which:

Question: Why was I so brutally treated? Answer, “*the officers thought you were reaching for a weapon*”.

Why would they think that? Answer, “*That is the standard thinking and intervention here... What else could you be reaching for?*”

Question: What do you think would have been the media headlines the following day had I been killed? Answer: “*Four White Police Officers Shot and Killed an Unarmed Black Male.*” Right!

Question: Whose mistake was it that I was so mistreated? Answer: “*No one's.*”

Looking back at the scenario, I commend these officers for their restraint. They did not rush nor acted precipitately. They held their judgment, took a few seconds to check if their assumptions were correct. In fact, they got it right. As a result, I am alive today. These days, most of us would benefit from taking a deep breath before reacting to cultural situations.

I use stories like this one to show how uninformed we are of others' cultures. As a foreign worker, I did not understand the patrolling culture of the local police. They did not understand my cultural habits. Had the worse happen, no one would have guessed where the problem laid; not the officers, not the local reporters in their descriptions of the facts, not the civil rights activists who would have marched the following days, not the population at large. Someone has to understand the culture in which I grew up to figure out that I had no intention to hurt the officers. Even more importantly, it was my responsibility to learn the intricacies of my new host culture.

A well designed cultural competency training for officers in understanding the cultures and behavioral patterns of the diversity of populations represented in the USA today would help a great deal in alleviating a good number of cultural misinterpretations that occur between Patrol Officers and the citizens. This incident like many other that occur between officers and citizens of different races would have been, unfortunately, dumped under “Racial Profiling” while it was an issue of culture understanding. Equitable and effective training modules must be designed and presented by experts in culture and training, and must include all cultural sensitivities presented with fair perspectives. Professional Police officers should not be trained by amateurs in culture awareness.

The 2009 report of Missouri Vehicles Stops released on May 31, 2010 by the Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster revealed among other information the following summarized facts:

- . African-Americans were stopped at a rate 62% greater than expected based solely on their proportion of the population sixteen and older;
- . Black drivers are nearly 50% more likely than whites to be stopped by Missouri police and twice as likely to be searched;
- . Blacks and Hispanics were twice as likely to be searched as whites;
- . Despite lower levels of successful searches among black and Hispanic drivers, they were still twice as likely to be arrested during a traffic stop as white drivers.
- . “Black motorists were nearly 88 percent more likely to be stopped by St. Louis police than white drivers, ... close to 80 percent in Kansas City, and in Independence, black drivers were more than six times as likely to be stopped as white drivers”, according to the report.

The Attorney General clearly expressed his concern which is also the concerns of all Missourians about the escalation of racial profiling in Missouri. The alarming data in the 2009 report is not due to lack of legislations intended to eradicate racial profiling. Better than most states, Missouri has set the stage to tackle the issue of racial profiling for the past ten years. Missouri was the first state to publish a report examining the racial demographics of its traffic stops in 2001. One of the most recent state statutory regulations went into effect on August 28, 2008, with the passage and signing of House Bill 2224, requiring licensed peace officers to attend three hours of Racial Profiling training.

In order to comply with these requirements, a great number of law enforcement agencies recourse to a variety of courses on racial relations, with various degrees of ineffectiveness. Most of these courses are designed with little or no foundation on intercultural communication. Worse, some officers limit themselves to take online classes to complete their requirements for Racial Profiling. It is the opinions of most experts in the field that a series of questionnaires presented on-line do not shine light in the wide range of real situations the patrol officers face daily. While attendees pass the ending test and receive a nicely printed colorful certificate, these classes serve as bandages that cover the injury but do little to prepare the officers to deal with the increasing diversity of cultures and languages currently present in Missouri.

It is my personally and deep belief that no department head gathers their staff in a room and tells them to go out and “profile.” Racial profiling increasing year after year and almost everywhere in the State is an indication that something is not being done right in educating officers on cultural issues. The state and the law enforcement departments need to take action in response to the ever growing racial gap in traffic stops, and do things differently. If much is not done to remedy the training of officers the way it has been done so far, the 2010 report -and subsequent reports of vehicles stops-will continue to show evidence of racial disparities in traffic stops.

During the discussions in racial profiling classes, officers share situations they encounter during patrol. The cases they share with the group let me believe that their job is not easy. They lack understanding of cultures different from theirs, just as the general population needs to be educated in law enforcement procedures. Culture learning is a two-way street. Most cultural blunders and situation generally labeled as “police racial profiling” occur not because of malicious intents, but because of lack of understanding of the cultures involved.

In the case that I related at the beginning of the article, I could have been killed because I was not familiar with the police reactions to reaching to my socks to get my bill folder; on the other hand, the officers had no idea that my sock would be the perfect place for me to keep it. That is why I advocate strong cultural education for police officers and for the public. We teach about racial profiling using real examples, situations and discussions to illustrate the appropriate interventions in street situations.

Emmanuel Ngomsi, Ph.D. is a cultural consultant, trainer and speaker with All World Languages and Cultures, Inc. The company specializes in intercultural communication training, cultural diversity education and training, and foreign language services. He can be reached at info@universalhighways.com or (888) 646-5656.

For our upcoming POST certified classes on *Cultural Diversity Competency and Racial Profiling for Peace Officers*, click here, <http://www.universalhighways.com/special-events-seminars.html>