

Report Kellen Fellowship 2015

«Reflecting on Ferguson»

October 2nd – October 23rd 2016

Reflecting on Ferguson

When I applied for the Kellen Fellowship 2015 my focus was on police violence – a topic that of course is not an American phenomenon but in its intensity in the USA still a very striking fact. Until now (November 22th, 2016) there have been 844 people shot by the police this year in the United States – a number that can be found in a data base run by the Washington Post based on news reports, public records and social media. Around one quarter of the 844 were African-Americans although the population share of African-Americans is only 13 %. Black citizens in the USA are in average much more likely to be killed by the police than white people (and it is the same with jails: If there was parity there should be 13 % of people in jail African-Americans, but this is not the case at all. 40% of prison inmates are black. There are also much less than 13 % of people in high political or social functions African-American).

The focus on racially biased police violence also reflected my travel itinerary. I planned to visit three places of so many in the USA where Black people have been killed by the police: New York City where Eric Garner was killed in summer 2014; Baltimore where Freddie Gray died in April 2015 due to injuries of his spinal cord which he suffered while being transported in a police van; Ferguson where high school student Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer in summer 2014.

But already before I started the research trip, I recognized that the story starts somewhere else. Although there is this very large number of Black people who get killed by the police, one must recognize that most of the African-American citizens do not die at the hands of police (they might experience some other kind of hostile behavior through police though). But probably a majority of African-Americans experience from very small that they do not have the same opportunities white people have. Not by law of course, but still in daily life.

Starting from kindergarten to school, going from income to housing to representation in institutions.

An interview I did with psychologist Bernd Wittenbrink from University of Chicago before starting my trip also gave me insights about the role of unconscious biases and how also implicit prejudices form our minds. Also in the case of racism this applies for people who discriminate other persons as well as for people who experience racism personally.

This is why I broadened my focus. Of course I talked to people about the police violence, I spent days in Ferguson and in West Baltimore where Freddie Gray was killed. I met people who experienced police violence themselves or feel the influence of the events even if they only heard about it. Who stay at home just not to get involved in anything. Who fear for their teenage kids just because they are black.

But I also tried to understand where structural discrimination is less obvious although even more present. So besides police violence I focused on the three topics health, school system and housing. All topics cannot be strictly separated from each other. In the contrary things are in different ways closely connected. The whole story is – as usual — much more complex than one would think in the first place. There are so many factors you have to take into account that of course three weeks are not enough to understand all of the underlying structure. But I think I had a quite good variety of interview partner (listed below) to get an insight as deep as possible in this period of travel time. Also for my work in Germany this intense time in the USA was very valuable.

Consequences of daily experienced racism for health

There are many studies which suggest a strong connection between racism and mental illnesses like depression. I talked to two researchers about this, with psychologist Elizabeth Brondolo and Naa Oyo Kwate, Prof. for Africana Studies.

Brondolo started her research on the psychophysiology of interpersonal conflict investigating the interactions of traffic agents with motorists who were angry about getting

parking tickets. In the study participants wore ambulatory blood pressure monitors, and Brondolo examined changes in their blood pressure and heart rate as they interacted with others. As many of the traffic agents were African-American or Latinos and the insults by the motorists were in these cases often racist insults, Brondolo and her colleagues later focused on racism and ethnic discrimination, specifically examining interpersonal racism. They found that daily life discrimination leads to hypertension.

Also depression is closely connected to the experience of racism. Brondolo said for depression it is even harder to break the circle: You get discriminated, you are depressed, you do not have the power or energy to keep your self-esteem up, you are even more vulnerable and the reactivity to encounter discrimination decreases. Here again you find a relation to Bernd Wittenbrinks research on unconscious biases. While we develop schemas about ourselves, about the world and others, we are affected by what we experience direct or indirect every day, by personal experience, by media, by family, friends or colleagues. If you experience lots of discrimination, Brondolo says, you develop negative schemas which get activated again when you experience another discrimination and which can affect mental health.

Consequences of daily life racism is of course not a problem of lower classes. It is to some extent present in many environments. Related to the academic field Brondolo said, institutional racism can create gaps in social and cultural access that undermine conscious and unconscious knowledge of the rituals and norms of elite society. The perception or misperception of these gaps can drive avoidance – intended or not, everywhere.

Prof. Naa Oyo Kwate whom I met in Washington where she works for fall semester told me about the way many people deal with structural inequity, and she said it was deeply connected to the American culture which promotes the idea that individuals are responsible for their life station. This, she says, leads to the fact that many people believe that inequalities are justified by individual expenditures of effort. Therefore, Kwate says, the populace perceives white privilege as the natural order of things and overlooked the social arrangements that confer unfair advantages to white people. Kwate also did really interesting work on housing discrimination by looking at the “other” side – not at the house seekers but the real estate brokers and which role their skin color plays in this context. I will come to this a little later.

Segregated school system

As already mentioned, the story of institutional racism starts very early. Not only historically but also in age of people involved. Even the smallest kids already experience forms of discrimination even if they might not recognize it as what it is in this age since it is “normal” to them.

There are many studies which show that the best way of equal learning opportunities is integration – it is one of the most effective and inexpensive ways to improve academic achievement for poor children. But there are many places where school segregation is still a huge topic. Also in New York City, probably one of the most diverse, multi-ethnic cities there are still many schools segregated by race and class.

Often researchers have assumed that school segregation reflects segregated housing patterns. But now research by the New School’s Center for New York City Affairs shows that there might be integrated neighborhoods in which still schools remain segregated.

I met with New School researcher Clara Hemphill who runs the website insideschools.org and who, together with Nicole Mader, developed interactive maps of over 700 New York City’s elementary schools to show this result. One map is based on incomes: The median income of kids’ parents is compared to the median income of the attendance zone. The second map shows the racial mixture of schools compared to the racial mixture of the neighborhood. By clicking on the single schools on the maps you see that schools are even more economically and racially segregated than the neighborhoods. And this, says Clara Hemphill, usually translates to inferior education. To me it sounded like a vicious circle: The average income of African-American families in NYC is lower than the average income of white New Yorkers. Historically black neighborhoods have lower incomes than white neighborhoods. Schools with a disproportional amount of black students tend to be in poorer neighborhoods. Parents who might have to have different jobs probably have less time to care for their children’s school needs. Also, says Clara Hemphill, high-poverty schools tend to have fewer resources. They have trouble attracting and retaining qualified teachers. Moreover, teachers in high-poverty schools are more likely to have low expectations of their pupils. All this might result in a worse education in average compared to white or richer students. Low education then results again in lower income. Clara Hemphill: “An analysis of these maps suggests that many parents, dissatisfied with their neighborhood schools, vote

with their feet and send their children to public gifted programs, schools of choice, charter schools, or private schools. It follows that some racial and economic integration can be achieved without changing zone lines or assigning kids to schools outside their neighborhoods. The key is to find ways to encourage more middle-class parents who live in economically mixed to send their children to the neighborhood schools—while ensuring that lower income children also receive the education they deserve.”

In the end of the interview, Clara Hemphill told me a little story which demonstrated to me very well how historic inequality affects until today people of different skin color: After World War II Clara's mother-in-law (a white lady) bought a small house in the suburbs of New York. Only some people were allowed to do so, many workers were not, and workers were mainly Black or Latino. Also, investments were made in neighborhoods which seemed promising – which meant they were predominantly white neighborhoods. When Clara's mother-in-law died two years ago, she and her husband sold the house. With this money they sent their kids to college who get a good education now – with money that is the result of possibilities some people never had.

In St. Louis, I also talked about this with Shaterra Lee from Teach for America. She told me that one could see the inequity in the St. Louis area very well. The area is one of the most racially segregated areas in the whole country and you can see this in the schools as well. And while there are some of the best free and public institutions like the museums in St. Louis and also the zoo, the parks, one of the biggest and most important free institution is never ranked among the country's best, it is the public school system. One example is Normandy Highschool, the school Michael Brown attended. It is almost entirely black, many of the students come from poor families, and it performed so badly on so many levels – in quality of lessons, of material, of teachers – that it even lost its accreditation. Michael Brown was one of the rare black young men in this high school who finished it. Only days after receiving his diploma, he was killed. If he had not been killed, he still would have faced another future than richer or also many white kids face. In this case you can see it quite obviously: Only five miles away from his school, in Clayton, there is a totally different situation. Schools perform so much better, students perform so much better, many more of them than in Normandy finish high school and go to college – and most of the students in

Clayton are white. Of course there is no law anymore which is responsible for this. But still it has grown because of an inequity that has been cemented for decades.

I also heard about many attempts to overcome segregated schools in the United States. One of the most promising attempts was probably busing black students from the — often poorer — city schools to the county schools where students were predominantly white, and vice versa. Despite the fears and problems which came along with this idea, people told me that many students related to it as an opportunity for all.

But in this context I also met a lady whose story shows that even officially there are situations in which skin color is still the deciding factor for school attendance or not:

LaShieka White, a black mother with three children, moved from St. Louis city to the county. Her family had lived in a neighborhood with lots of gang violence and she and her husband did not want to let their children grow up there. The oldest son, Edmond, was in the third grade by then, and the parents wanted to let him finish elementary school in his old school, a charter school in St. Louis. But they had to learn that he was not allowed to attend his old school anymore although the district was part of a transfer program – since he is black. A 30 years old law initially created to desegregate schools was the reason. This law should provide that black kids could attend the (mostly better performing) county schools, while white students were allowed to attend magnet schools in the city – a law with good intents, but in this case just wrong. Edmonds school where he was all his school career since kindergarten is 85% white. If he was of any other race he would have been able to attend his old school in spite of the moving away. “But they messed with the wrong Mom...!” says LaShieka White and filed a lawsuit targeting the desegregation plan in the way it is used today. She said there is no way a mother should have to tell her child that he or she is not allowed to attend a special school because of the skin color. The lawsuit is still going on.

Also in another way school kids experience unequal treatment due to race or class, at least in New York City as again research by Naa Oyo Kwate shows. Given the high prevalence of obesity among Black and Latino children, she told me, some research has begun to investigate disparities in healthy food environments, an important constituent of opportunity neighborhoods. She made some very interesting research on the question how fast food restaurants in New York cluster around different kinds of schools (public, private, charter schools) and which role the mixture of people and students of the neighborhood

play. As a rule of thumb Kwate and her colleagues found that the higher the percentage of black people in a neighborhood is the higher is the amount of fast food restaurants. The reasons for this finding can be different ones. Fast food companies may focus on black costumers; rents for restaurant spaces may be cheaper in black neighborhoods; unemployment is higher so it might be more likely to find employees. But in any case the black kids in New York are in average closer to the everyday seducement of fast food restaurants.

Here again one can see a strong connection between segregated schools and the fewer opportunities for minority students, and between a historically rooted housing discrimination which lasts until today, although some people —as Naa Oyo Kwate pointed out — would like to describe a segregated housing market as a social ill from a bygone era.

Housing and segregated neighborhoods

During my trip I tried to see many different neighborhoods in the different cities I stayed in. In Baltimore I met with Antero Pientila, a former journalist for the *Baltimore Sun*. He wrote the book “Not in my neighborhood” which tells the story of 130 years of housing in Baltimore and how housing patterns have been formed along racial and religious lines which can be seen until today. In this sense he said, Baltimore can be seen as a “role model” for many other cities in America. In Baltimore for example he told me, real estate brokers often raised panic in white neighborhoods about „negroes“ who would move to the neighborhood. The “white flight” was the consequence. White people sold their houses for small money and moved into other areas and the suburbs. Black people who might have seen it as a social climb bought the houses for too high prices. The winners were the real estate brokers. The neighborhoods stayed segregated.

Today there are many integrated neighborhoods in Baltimore, but still there are areas which are totally segregated by race and class. Antero Pientila showed me around in West Baltimore, a neighborhood not far from the tourist area at Inner Harbor which could not be

furthermore away in the way life looks there. West Baltimore to me was one of the most depressing experiences during my traveling. Later I had an interview appointment with one of the protest leaders from spring 2015, Cortly Witherspoon, and we met at one of the big intersections in West Baltimore since it was around the corner where Freddie Gray had been arrested and where the uprising later started. I have been to many different places in the world, also to many poor areas, but I have never seen such an amount of poor people, alcohol or substance abusers and prostitutes in one place. Actually I could almost not believe this is America.

The city created these neighborhoods, told me Cortly CD Witherspoon who also fights for a minimum wage of fifteen Dollars in Baltimore – an attempt that has just been rejected. Because on the one hand, he told me, there have been new and promising neighborhoods created, officially open for everybody, but you have to earn around 75.000 Dollars per year to be able to live there – a price which is just not affordable for many people, he said. On the other hand, Witherspoon told me while standing at the intersection, the supermarket around the corner had been shut down. The next one is a bit away, you have to catch a bus. If the bus does not go you have to do the grocery shopping in one of the corner shops. There you do not find fresh fruits or vegetables. Here again you find connections between simple structural inequality that puts barriers to live a healthy life to at least some extent. Antero Pientila said in this context, it was not about getting the neighborhood done, rebuild the rotten houses or get rid of the drug dealers. It was about getting jobs for the people to make a good life possible. But he would not see any effort to do so.

As already mentioned, Naa Oyo Kwate also asked in this context how the race of the real estate brokers perpetuate segregated neighborhoods. Despite of being an ethnically and racially very diverse city, New York remains in many parts segregated as also seen in the school system. Her results show that apart from any discrimination faced by home seekers, black and white brokers occupy separate spaces in the real estate profession — which is therefore a key component in the persistence of residential segregation.

One reason is that black brokers do not have the same access to predominantly white neighborhoods. But also, Kwate says, because of the often highly segregated neighborhoods, it is quite likely that black real estate brokers grew up in a black neighborhood which gives them expertise about black neighborhoods and let them actively use that experience to

guide market activity. Also networking is one of the key points when you are about to buy a house – and the researchers found that it is more likely that white clients ask their white friends who probably had a white real estate broker, as black clients look for black brokers.

Police violence

I talked to many different people about police violence – to activists, to people on the street, to police officers and scientists. In one way, things are even worse than I had imagined.

Many people told me about harassments by the police and racial profiling. In another way I learned that many police officers are much more aware of this problem than probably in Germany where police violence and racial profiling as also a topic.

Interestingly, also two black police officers told me about racial profiling they experienced – the Police Chief of Ferguson actually became a police officer because of this inequality in the first place. In the end of the day, both told me, when you take off your uniform you are just a black man and as long as you do not disclose yourself as a colleague, you might be subject to racial profiling as well.

Since law and order of police is historically strongly connected to the suppression of black Americans who had to serve as slaves, Kirsten John Foy from the National Action Network told me, there is still a strong mistrust against police, especially since there are so many cases of police officers whose actions do not get penalized. Most of the interview partners talked about the importance of accountability.

In this context we also talked about the possibilities of technical tools like the More Justice App of ACLU (they get transmitted dozens of video footage pieces every day, told me Tony Rothert from ACLU Missouri), body cameras and dashboard cameras for the police, and opportunities given by spreading videos via social media. Kirsten John Foy sees technical tools as a help of civil rights movement: he said slavery ended also because there were newspapers, people could read. Later in die 60s there were radio and newspapers – hundred thousands of people were mobilized for a march just by newspaper and radio. Social media and tools like the Mobile Justice App could do their job now.

But in the end, he said, it is especially important what happens to the video material - if it is processed, if it is available for the public; all the world could watch Eric Garner dying, so the question is, which consequences does it have to have the video material. And he concludes that it is all about accountability and transparency.

Also police seem to support these technical tools. Again it becomes clear that many of the police officers want to do their job correctly and with respect. Why should they mind to document it. "You cannot change a person's heart, you can only change the behavior" said Foy from NAN. If police do not harass anymore because of acceptance or comprehension or just because he or she feels observed is not so important, Foy says. Either way would be fine as long as racial profiling and police violence ended.

The new police chief of Ferguson, Delrish Moss, also talked a lot about implicit biases we all have and how important it is to be aware of those biases. I think especially in a country where so many people own guns so it is not unlikely when you are in a dangerous situation that the person in front of you is armed (you should have seen the face of James Knowles, the mayor of Ferguson, when I told him he was the first person I met in my life who owns a gun). Also talking about accountability, Moss said that it was his job and his responsibility to show his officers that he will make them held accountable for their actions. And it must be clear that if he is not able to do so, he has to be held accountable.

But still, one of the encounters I had in Ferguson touched me particularly. In Canfield Drive where Michael Brown was shot, I spoke to a young black man, Markees. Without anger and very calm he explained to me that he tried not to be on the streets so much, just to avoid meeting the police. If he is not around — so his logical conclusion — he cannot be involved in anything. Also officials like the mayor, the city manager and the police chief seemed touched when I told them about Markees. It shows how much time is needed to overcome a mistrust, even if it is caused only by a few. Besides all the good approaches in Ferguson, the Ferguson Commission, how the city tries to improve the relation between communities and police, the way Markees thinks still makes sense. And if you stroll around in Ferguson you recognize that this place is by far not the worst place you can imagine. It could have happened probably in most communities.

The last interview I did was the one that let me go back to Germany with some kind of “hope” or at least the idea that there are many people who try hard and in different ways to change the defects that still exist. The St. Louis based group “Hands up united” hosts every two weeks the event “Books and Breakfast”. It was founded in the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown. Here people come together for a free and healthy breakfast, many kids are around. There are free books for the kids and free books on political issues for the grown-ups. Every meeting has its own topic (it was “local elections” when I visited it) and between very loud music and very good breakfast people discuss in a pragmatic way political topics of their community. One of the hosts, Tara, told me about the importance to already show the smallest kids how valuable they are. How beautiful their hair is. How important it is to make clear they should never feel inferior.

Despite a depressing resignation I believed to feel with some of my interview partners, I also met some really constructive people who seemed painfully aware of the problems, but who also found ways of getting people together and find solutions which sometimes only started on a small scale but might have the potential to really make a difference – although it will take a very long time to overcome the structures that are so deeply rooted in society.

Summary and outlook

Structural discrimination is a huge topic and I fear it will keep occupying us for a long time more. The Kellen Fellowship gave me the opportunity to get an insight into the consequences, some of the underlying structures and also approaches to overcome it. To me it was important to see that the story of structural discrimination starts much earlier than police killings and that it pervades most of the areas of social life. This might make it possible in some ways to find points to break the structures.

I am glad to have been able to meet so many interesting people who told me their story and I am looking forward to tell their story now in Germany. I plan different radio pieces, for example for *Zeitfragen* (Deutschlandradio Kultur), *Weltzeit* (Deutschlandfunk) and a podcast for the label *Viertausendhertz*.

I would like to thank the founders of the Kellen Fellowship, Anna-Maria and Stephen M. Kellen, and the American Council on Germany for this wonderful opportunity and your work and help before and during my trip. Special thanks to Robin Cammarota who was always available and a great help in every sense.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eva Raisig".

Eva Raisig

List of interview partners, site visits and events

Jean Rice

Picture the Homeless

Elizabeth Brondolo

Prof. for Psychology, St. John's College New York, The Social Stress and Health Research Unit

Clara Hemphill

Founder of insideschools.org

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Roundtable „Towards a more just NYC“

held by the “Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform”

Kirsten John Foy

National Action Network

Antero Pietila

Author of the book “Not in my neighborhood”

Cortly “C.D.” Witherspoon

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Ibram Xolani Kendi

Author of the book “Stamped from the Beginning. The definitive History of Racism in America”

Naa Oyo Kwate

Prof. for Africana Studies, Rutgers University

Many different people on the streets of Ferguson

Shaterra Lee

Chief of Staff for Teach for America, St. Louis

De'Carlon Seewood

City Manager of Ferguson

James Knowles

Mayor of Ferguson

Byron M Watson

Police officer and commissioner of the Forward through Ferguson Commission

LaShieka White

Mother who fights the strange outcomes of well intended desegregation laws

Delrish Moss

Police Chief Ferguson

Tony Rothert

Legal Director of ACLU Missouri

Tara

HandsupUnited / Books and Breakfast, St. Louis

Bernd Wittenbrink (via phone)

Prof. for Psychology, University of Chicago