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The Grand Rapids Civil Rights Movement From 1954-1969: A Sociological Study



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ABSTRACT

*Although advancements have been achieved over the past 30 years, many experts would argue that the problems that plague the African-American community have not changed much. The American Civil Rights Movement has been credited with improving the quality of life of under-represented minorities. The purpose of this study is to examine whether or not the Civil Rights Movement helped to improve the status of the African-American community in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A thorough analysis of the local newspaper, the **Grand Rapids Press**, from 1954-1969, supplies the empirical data utilized as the foundation of this research. The local data was applied to Doug McAdam's political process model and this study focuses on political opportunities, indigenous organizational strength, cognitive liberation, and support from liberal external groups. The interplay of these factors helps to evaluate the Civil Rights Movement's success in Grand Rapids. The research determined that the local African-American community was unable to utilize the opportunities due to internal conflict and the political hegemony's refusal to acknowledge the existence of such a movement.*



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Introduction

Studies of social movements have taken various forms over the past 30 years, especially explanations for the genesis and eventual decline of the American Civil Rights Movement. Currently, there are three social movement models that dominate the field. First, there is the classical model of social movements, which argues that social change is the result of a systematic "strain" on the social infrastructure of the political system. Hence, the commotion associated with the "strain" is transformed into feelings of anxiety, frustration, and hostility that lead to the emergence of a social movement (McAdam, 1982: 9). Secondly, the resource mobilization model argues that social movements are the result of the quantity of "social resources" that are accessible to "unorganized but aggrieved groups, thus making it possible to launch an organized demand for change" (McAdam, 1982: 211). Although both models offer valid points to the causation of social movements, neither one offers a complete analysis that explains the factors that precede the insurgency or the political processes that afforded the aggrieved groups the possibilities to forge a successful movement.

The third model is Doug McAdam's political process model of the American Civil Rights Movement. McAdam aims to address the political and the sociological factors that neither the classical nor resource mobilization models focus on. Nevertheless, the political process model is based on the assumption that political members reflect an abiding "conservatism" in order to substantiate political power. This conservatism, according to McAdam, encourages political members to "resist changes that would threaten their current realization of their interests even more than they seek changes which would enhance their interests"

(McAdam, 1982: 38). Unlike the classical model, the political process model relies on the notion that social movement is a continuous phenomenon that thrives on the interplay of four factors. The first factor is the emergence of broad socioeconomic processes that expand the capacity for more political opportunities over an extending period of time. The second is the “readiness” of the indigenous organizations when the political opportunities become available. The third is the emergence of a collective consciousness among the challenging groups that encourages the belief that the movement is leading in a successful direction. The final element is the ability to win the support of external groups in order to broaden the opposition against the conservative political structure (McAdam, 1982: 40).

The goal of this research is to examine how effective the Civil Rights Movement was in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The research is based on an examination of the *Grand Rapids Press* from 1954 to 1969. In addition, historian Randal M. Jelks’ historical narrative of the African-American population in Grand Rapids from 1870 to 1954 has been used. Analysis will examine the indigenous organizations established within Grand Rapids, the social consciousness within the African-American community, and the extent of the local whites involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in Grand Rapids. The application of the empirical evidence to McAdam’s political process model of the American Civil Rights Movement will reveal how effective the indigenous organizations were in preparing the African-American community in Grand Rapids and the ability of the African-American community to capitalize on political opportunities after the Civil Rights Movement began.

Methods

I conducted a thorough analysis of the *Grand Rapids Press* from 1954 to 1969 to analyze how effective the American Civil Rights Movement was in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Three different procedures were practiced. First, newspaper articles were researched by significant historical dates during the Civil Rights Movement. Secondly, the library index catalogue was used to retrieve newspaper. Finally, the newspaper archives were then surveyed for all issues concerning African-Americans.

Political Opportunities

McAdam’s model defines a political system that consists of members and challengers. The members of the Grand Rapids political infrastructure consisted of white people who had a vested organ of information, the *Grand Rapids Press*, to reflect their political perceptiveness. The challengers are the people who lack routine access to decisions that affect them. For the purpose of this discussion the challengers were the people in Grand Rapids. According to McAdam, the challengers are excluded from routine decision making processes because they had a weak bargaining position compared to the established political members (McAdam, 1982: 38).

The political process model contends that a long-term transformation of the structures of power and collective action contribute to the expanding political opportunities for challenging groups (McAdam, 1982: 73). McAdam argues that there were specific broad social processes occurring from 1930 to 1954 that undermined the political and economical conditions on which the racial status quo has been based. Together these processes facilitated the development of the African-American movement by profoundly altering the shape of the political configuration confronting African-Americans (McAdam, 1982: 54).

McAdam lists factors that contributed to this political transformation including the decline of the cotton hegemony, the New Deal, the Great Migration, World War II, and the international exposés of racism in America that led to the increasing favorable governmental actions (McAdam, 1982: 45). Randal Jelks’ analysis of the African-American community in Grand Rapids supports McAdam’s argument that these factors expanded the political and economic opportunities for the African-Americans in Grand Rapids (Jelks, 1999: 249). From the turn of the twentieth century, the African-American community in Grand Rapids sought to end “Jim Crowism” in Grand Rapids. WEB DuBois and the National Association for Advancement of Colored Peoples’ (NAACP) approach in seeking integration through legal means heavily influenced the African-Americans middle class in Grand Rapids. “These men and women believed by attacking the legal basis of the racial caste system they would then be able to put an end to dishonor imposed on them by racist custom” (Jelks, 1999: 140).

In relation to Doug McAdam’s political process model, the fear of the communist threat weighed heavily on the public after World War II. The Cold War revealed the racist practices in the United States. As a result, the United States government was forced to respond to the problem of segregation in order to counter the anti-American sentiments led by the Soviet Union. For instance, during the McCarthy hearings, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional. In the *Grand Rapids Press* on May 19, 1954, the day after the Supreme Court decision, the headline “Ike Urges Continuance of McCarthy Hearings” (Segregation, 1954: 2) surfaced on the front page, while on the second page an article regarding the decision read “Segregation Ruling Means Headache to South” (School, 1954: 2). It

is apparent the *Grand Rapids Press* and the members of the political establishment did not view the ruling as a local issue, but rather a Southern issue. For example, the following day, an article titled "Supreme Court's School Segregation Decision Will Not Help Republicans in Dixieland in November Elections" (Supreme Court, 1954: 7) continued this view.

From the beginning, the white establishment viewed the ruling as a political issue not a social issue. The *Grand Rapids Press'* coverage of the historic decision covered two concerns: increasing school aid funding and whether the process of integration would be immediate or gradual (Issue, 1954: 21). However, the argument over immediate action versus gradualism was clearly a major issue for the African-American leadership in Grand Rapids. In a speech given in 1958 by the president of the Grand Rapids NAACP, William Plummer expressed his concern:

We can believe in a gradual program, providing the delay is necessary to plow a Constitutional program working toward the end of segregation and discrimination within a reasonable length of time. We do not believe in gradualism if it represents the steal and denial of Civil Rights because of the violence directed toward Negro-Americans by those that believe in racial superiority (Jelks, 1999: 299).

In a letter to the editor, on May 19, 1954, a Grand Rapids resident claimed that "despite great migrations of Negro workers, assimilation into regular public school system without segregation has taken place with comparatively few problems" (No Separate, 1954: 10).

Contrary to the previous claim, in an article prior to the Supreme Court decision, the NAACP urged for better integration by advocating for the

relocation of the new Hall School to include the Franklin School District, which consisted of the African-American residential area in Grand Rapids. (Hall School, 1954: 1) Dr. Randal Jelks concurs:

By the mid 1950's Grand Rapids was a far less integrated city than it had been in its early history... As the number of Negro Migrants increased in the city the racial composition of a few of the neighborhoods school changed... the Negroes were Restricted to where they could live. 99.8 percent of the African-Americans lived in a tightly restricted segregated area bounded by Eastern, Grandville, Wealthy, and Franklin streets, an area of about 30 blocks (Jelks, 1999: 267, 295).

Hence the African-American community was severely limited to any expanding political opportunities in Grand Rapids by two factors. The African-American leadership was forced to deal with the progressing fear of the ghettoization of the African-American community, while the white establishment refused to recognize their concerns.

Indigenous Organizational Strength

According to the political process model, an integral part of a successful social movement is the readiness of the indigenous organizations. McAdam believes that a favorable political climate affords the challenging population the opportunity to advance their causes. "It is the resources of the minority community that enable the insurgent groups to exploit these opportunities. In the absence of those resources the aggrieved population is likely to lack the capacity to act even when granted the opportunity to do so" (McAdam, 1982: 43).

With respect to the organizational strength of the African-American community in Grand Rapids, there were many problems that prevented the African-American population from capitalizing on the opportunities. For one, the African-Americans were never able to agree on a specific approach on how to work with the white political establishment. Following Reconstruction, African-American pathways to equality were dominated by two traditions. One believed that racism was not just a "black problem, but an American one" and that the best way to remedy the problem of racism was to assert the rights of African-Americans through the legal system (Wintz, 1996: 1).

The second belief system focused on community development and self-help. When faced with racial hostility, African-Americans should "turn inward and concentrate energy on a black community that advocated pride, solidarity, and self" and believed that segregated institutions and communities were necessary (Wintz, 1996: 2). Despite these differences, both traditions continued. The difference in ideology was the foundation of the major problems that plagued the African-American leadership in Grand Rapids.

As Southern African-Americans migrated to Grand Rapids, they brought their Southern culture and separatist ideas, while the more conservative northern African-American middle class sought respectability and the right to assimilate into society. The newcomers did not trust the white establishment and felt that it would be easier to build their own communities, in a manner similar to the various white communities within Grand Rapids. The African-American southern migrants' negative view of whites and desire for a more self-help approach led to class conflicts with the integration-seeking African-American elite that were already established in the Grand Rapids.

According to Jelks, the African-American leadership's inability to prevent ghettoization in Grand Rapids "took a psychological toll on the efforts to organize the African-American community (Jelks, 1999: 296). For the majority of the local African-Americans, the issue was no longer gaining respectability, but the ability to gain more jobs and better housing for African-Americans.

Another issue that kept the African-American population from capitalizing on opportunities during the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement was that the white establishment failed to recognize the national issues. While at the same time, the established African-American leaders in Grand Rapids abandoned the community and formed their own socioeconomically segregated suburbs (Jelks, 1999: 215). The inability of the local African-American leadership to coherently mobilize between 1961-1965 (which McAdam insists was the peak of the national Civil Rights Movement) prevented the indigenous organizations from exploiting the expanded political opportunities.

African-Americans were forced to deal with two problems. First of all, the local media failed to acknowledge that racism was a problem outside of the South. Also, the *Grand Rapids Press*' decision to not recognize the local African-American leadership subdued any chance of advancing their cause. Based on the assumption that the *Grand Rapids Press* reflected the views of the white majority, this speaks to the manner in which the political establishment would have preferred to handle the problem within the city. Rather than report on the uncomfortable topic of racism, the local media reported heavily on the actions of the federal government, diverting the attention from local ills.

For instance, on August 29, 1957, the *Grand Rapids Press* reviews the impact of the Supreme Court decision four years

after ruling against racial segregation. The emphasis was still focused on the Southern segregation practices and failed to discuss the Grand Rapids NAACP's efforts to desegregate the schools and hire more African-Americans teachers (Integration, 1957: 26). In addition, the reporting of the 1963 March on Washington mentions Dr. Martin L. King only once, and that was to reveal that Dr. King welcomed Marlon Brando and Harry Bellefonte to the stage. The article neither mentioned Dr. King's powerful "I Have A Dream Speech" nor the impact of the March on Washington across the country (Huge, 1963: 1).

The first significant national coverage of a major civil rights leader in the *Grand Rapids Press* was the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. Ironically, the article recalls a visit by Malcolm X earlier in 1965, but mentions that he only attracted 300 people at a local church that did not sponsor his lecture but made the facilities available for rental (Recall, 1965: 9). The article clearly downplayed Malcolm's influence in the local African-American community and purposely distanced the national leader from Grand Rapids.

Dr. Jelks' summation of the African-American community differs significantly from the *Grand Rapids Press*' portrayal of the "New Black Separatist Movement" in Grand Rapids during the late 1950's and 1960's. In a speech given by Malcolm X at Adam Clayton Powell's New York Abyssinian Baptist Church in June, 1963, Malcolm X articulated the sentiments of many African-American radicals of that time, including Grand Rapids African-Americans, that "The only progress we have made is as consumers. We still don't manufacture anything; we still don't legislate for ourselves. Our politics is still controlled by white people, our economy is still controlled by white people therefore we have no real say about our future" (Karim, 1971: 15). Malcolm X's views

and remarks symbolized the changing of the guard in many northern cities. African-Americans no longer wanted to wait for the legal acts to create change. Instead, many communities began to take action into their own hands by the mid 1960's.

Cognitive Liberation

According to the political process model, a social movement must grow along with expanding political opportunities and indigenous organizations. The development of a social consciousness that encourages an enthusiasm and an opportunistic view of the movement must emerge. McAdam calls this social opportunity "cognitive liberation." McAdam argues that the favorable shifts in political opportunities decrease the power disparity between challengers and members of the established hierarchy. Although these opportunities are important, the structural changes are objective by nature. These changes still have a subjective affect on the insurgent population as well. The challengers are then able to believe that their efforts are not in vain. The newfound opportunities begin to form a set of meaningful events that perpetrate the idea that improvements from the movement will continue (McAdam, 1982: 48). Thus the challengers will begin to view the system as illegitimate. Subsequently, the people will begin to embark on the opportunities, demand change, and start to envision the demands to come (McAdam, 1982: 48-50).

Between 1954 and 1967, there was little or no indication in the *Grand Rapids Press* that there was a significant social movement that encouraged African-Americans to have anything to be optimistic about. Many in the African-American community read local African-American publications like *Grand Rapids Times* and Carl Smith's *Organizer* to keep aware of local African-Americans issues.

Even though the NAACP and Grand Rapids Urban League were present and advocating the integration of schools and improving the housing problems, the African-American middle class leadership was unable to tap into the social consciousness of the African-American working class during the 1950s and 1960s. In Randal Jelks' PhD dissertation *Race, Respectability, and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Jelks quotes Paul Phillips (the former president of the Grand Rapids Urban League), "Attitudes of the African-Americans have also changed, before the 1950s the black man's hand was open, but the white man wouldn't grasp it. In the 1960s the outstretched hand changed to a clenched fist" (Jelks, 1999: 301). Nevertheless, the African-American community in Grand Rapids possessed cognitive liberation. But in contrast to the reason that McAdam suggests, the people were frustrated, agitated, and disappointed in the lack of progress in their community. African-Americans were still forced to deal with pressing socioeconomic concerns, housing restrictions, police brutality, and the white political establishment's refusal to address the African-American community's demands.

Liberal White Support

According to McAdam the support of the external groups is integral to a social movement. After gaining momentum internally the insurgency needs to be able to broaden its appeal. Doug McAdam argues that there are two deciding factors that determine this external response to the movement. The movement must be strong enough to outweigh the risks that are associated with supporting the challenger ranks. Secondly, the external groups must determine to what extent the movement poses a threat or opportunity to persons outside of the African-American community. In the Grand Rapids Civil

Rights Movement the insurgent forces were able to articulate formally a viable platform that generated a large number of liberal whites, but the liberal support gained momentum after the Civil Rights Movement began to decline.

One factor that affected the relationship between the local whites and the African-Americans was demographics. By 1958, only ten percent of the city's African-American population was native born while, seventy-five percent were southern migrants (Jelks, 1999: 258). A large majority of the working class African-Americans sought a more immediate approach to the economic problems that affected their community, while a small-established African-American elite continued to seek respectability by campaigning for more integrationist policies.

The white middle class citizens that were participants of the local Movement were often members of the Grand Rapids Urban League and favored a more gradual program that seemed a lot less threatening and confrontational (Jelks, 1999: 253). There were incidents where local whites would display some form of solidarity toward local African-Americans, but those alliances were often centered on national tragedies. For instance, after the church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 where four young African-Americans girls were killed, many whites participated in a 3,000 person silent march on Division Avenue condemning the bombing. Reverend Will Patterson, pastor of True Light Baptist Church, said, "White brothers in the audience you have marched with us today, but please march with us tomorrow because we need jobs and places to live right here in Grand Rapids" (Whites, 1963: 25). But no later action was taken on the part of the whites.

Another reason why it was hard to gain support among whites is that the

local whites were also segregated. During the 1950s and 1960s, Grand Rapids was clearly divided into ethnic divisions. According to Robert Ashley, a Grand Rapids resident since 1957:

The Polish population was in the Northwest; the Irish were in the Northeast, the Dutch were in the East and the Blacks were in the Southeast. Certain areas in Grand Rapids Blacks just didn't go. Ethnic pride was major within many White communities in Grand Rapids and to be seen participating in activities with other groups, much less Black groups, was unheard of during the Civil Rights Movement (Ashley, 2002).

In 1967, Grand Rapids experienced the greatest sign that the local African-Americans were no longer willing to stand for the inequalities. During 1967, many African-Americans in northern cities rioted, including Grand Rapids' residents. According to the *Grand Rapids Press*, the local two-day riot was started by African-Americans youth throwing rocks at passing automobiles on Division Avenue. A study conducted six months later revealed that thirty percent of the rioters were white and ninety-six percent of the African-Americans population did not participate in the riot (Alt, 1967: 17).

Shortly after this riot, articles regarding housing, unemployment, and education began to appear on the local headlines. For example, city officials began to discuss a new city housing code, in particular possible programs to reduce racial imbalance in a neighborhood threatened by "panic" selling by whites and whether or not such a program would succeed (Allbaugh, 1967: 19). The newspaper did not give out any more information about the matter. Although the local media began to illuminate inner-city ills,

there was little action on the part of the political establishment to right the wrongs (Alt, 1968: 15).

The Decline of the Civil Rights Movement

According to Doug McAdam, there are two periods in the African-American insurgency; the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement between 1961 and 1965, and the decline of the Civil Rights Movement from 1966-1970. During the former period, the national African-American leadership was able to maintain organizational strength and capitalize on the political opportunities to increase the consciousness of many participants. Also, the federal government was willing to support the movement by controlling the opposition (McAdam, 1982: 180). Unfortunately, the Grand Rapids African-American leadership was unable to reconcile their differences, preventing them from making the same type of progress the national movement did during its heyday. The economic and political restrictions were intense and each side firmly believed in its agenda.

Although McAdam places the decline of African-American insurgency from 1966 to 1971, local research indicates that the Grand Rapids Civil Rights Movement began to decline much earlier. Four factors led to the decline of the movement. First the organizational structure of the movement began to weaken. This was followed by a conservative backlash to the movement, which dismantled the structure of political opportunities. Also, the social consciousness among insurgents began to deteriorate in the late 1960s after the loss of African-American leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Finally, the conservative campaign to repress the African-Americans made it unpopular for other groups to continue supporting the movement as it became far more radical (McAdam, 1982: 227-229).

Unfortunately, cultural conflicts between the new migrants and the established African-American community, along with differences in ideology, stunted the power to pressure the local political system. As a result the African-American elite abandoned the African-American community and formed their own separate suburbs in the 1950s (Jelks, 1999: 251). This left the leadership in the hands of southern African-Americans who:

did not necessarily have an interest in living in integrated neighborhoods. They worked to build their own communities without the hindrance of racial prohibition. The problem was the Negro ghetto was structurally blocked from being able to compete fairly in the labor market and the urban industrial economy (Jelks, 1999: 224-225).

Furthermore, the shrinking of local political opportunities in Grand Rapids worsened the decline of the Civil Rights era. The African-American population consisted of only five percent of the total population in the city despite the great migration of African-Americans from the South, thus allowing the white population to continue ignoring the demands of the African-Americans and treat the Civil Rights Movement as if it were only relevant in other areas.

As a result, the African-American community in Grand Rapids was never given a reason to feel optimistic about the Civil Rights Movement on a local level. Instead, they were frustrated and determined to find another way to be heard. By the late 1960s, the African-American community in Grand Rapids was tired of reaping marginal results for their efforts. African-Americans were still dealing with the same problems that they had faced in the 1950s; unemployment, poor housing, police

brutality, healthcare and education issues. African-Americans were eager to leave the slums, while realtors were systematically preventing African-Americans from relocating even after the federal government deemed it illegal to do so (Alt, 1967: 14). This added to the already existing racial tension in the area.

Conclusion

Doug McAdam's political process model has provided a tool to question various reasons why the African-American community was unable to take advantage of the American Civil Rights Movement. The political process model's most valuable contribution to this study of Civil Rights Movement is that it helps researchers understand why the African-American community in Grand Rapids has not capitalized on their opportunities.

This study indicates that the African-American community was not in a position to maximize the opportunities of the national Civil Rights Movement. When applying the political process model to the Grand Rapids Civil Rights Movement, the internal conflict between the old African-American elite and the new southern leaders prevented reconciliation between their cultural and ideological differences that could have prepared the indigenous population for "readiness." Furthermore, the white political infrastructure refused to personalize the issues of the Civil Rights Movement and chose to refer to it only as national or southern problem until it was too late. In addition, the local African-American small population (less than five percent of Grand Rapids) contributed to the political and economical deflation. When established African-American leadership moved out of the inner city in the 1960s, there came to exist a leadership vacuum, effectively destroying the chance to challenge the political establishment.

Despite belated efforts to address the issues that plagued the African-American community, little or no action was actually taken. Today, Delta Strategy, a network of community organizations and individuals whose work is structured to improve Grand Rapids - including the inequalities that exist in Grand Rapids - argues that after the Civil Rights Movement the condition of the African-American community actually worsened. According to Delta Strategy, the average African-American male in Grand Rapids currently makes seventy-five percent of the income of their white male counterparts and African-Americans will accumulate less than ten percent of the wealth of a comparable white family (Jared, 2002:6). These disparities perpetuate the disassociation of the races by supporting hidden thoughts that one ethnicity must succeed at the expense of others (Jared, 2002: 5-6). Thus, disparities like these go on unresolved. Lou Barnes, a representative of Delta Strategy suggests:

The divide in the Grand Rapids community is a symptom of covert racism. On the surface this type of racism appears to stem from the assumption that things have improved so much since the end of the Civil Rights era that equality has been achieved. But it conveniently ignores the fact that while the situation is much improved there are still steps to be made toward complete equality (Jared, 2002: 6).

Alfredo Gonzales may have said it best, "You don't know what it's like to be different unless you're different. We've made this steady progress toward inclusion but there is still this sense of separation" (Jared, 2002: 5).

In future research, a goal should be to explore what happened to the African-American leadership that tried to lead Grand Rapids during the Civil Rights era

and how they have impacted the surrounding areas since then. The activities of the suburban African-Americans middle class leadership are also of interest, especially their political and economical influence among local white elite. Another question of importance that should be further researched is to what degree racial issues in Grand Rapids have been integrated into the mainstream media and how active the local liberal whites have been in Grand Rapids since the decline of the Civil Rights Movement.

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