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## "The Whole Damn System is Guilty as Hell": An Analysis of Social Movements, Social Media, and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice in America

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“The Whole Damn System is Guilty as Hell”:  
An Analysis of Social Movements, Social Media,  
and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice in America

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## **Introduction**

It is an unfortunate reality that in many democratic societies there are countless daily civil and human rights violations. Although the people have the power to elect authority figures into office with the hopes of being accurately represented, these officials do not always have the best interests of the citizens in mind. While misrepresentation and the struggle to be heard are very difficult issues to overcome, there are many ways to promote awareness of social injustices and to fight for change and equality. These include: meeting with groups of like-minded individuals to discuss the struggle and express solidarity among members, petitions can be written up and signed by thousands of people, and individuals can mobilize together to take to the streets to protest against corrupt and unjust behavior and actions of the authority. All of these tactics and more are used to make up a social movement. Social movements are one of the primary outlets of organization and action that give voice to concerns about the rights, welfare, and well-being of an aggrieved population. Through an engagement in various forms of collective action and public protest, individuals are able to unite based on their shared experience of injustice and oppression and fight for their rights against the system of authority in place.

Protests and social movements have played a fundamental role throughout American history. While this country prides itself on its foundational tenets of liberty and justice for all, the reality is that the majority of people in the United States have experienced marginalization or oppression in some form. The groups that make up this population are people of color, specifically black Americans, and women. Any person who does not directly benefit from a system of white supremacy and patriarchy, a system



that is undeniably in place in the United States, have historically and continue to be and victims of marginalization and injustice. The power of this oppressive system has far reaching effects on the lives of individuals, impacting them economically, politically, and socially. In order to confront these oppressive authoritative structures, individuals have united based on a sense of solidarity, recognizing a shared experience of injustice and the common goal of equality.

bell hooks, a prominent African-American female writer and social activist, uses the term white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy frequently in her work. On her use of the term, hooks explains that white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy presents a language that continuously reminds us of the interlocking systems of domination that exist in our society. It is a shortcut way of saying all these things are functioning simultaneously and allows individuals to understand what they are facing in terms of their experience of oppression. "White supremacy evokes a political world in which we can all frame ourselves in relationship to" (leocine 2006). White-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy refers to an institutional structure, not individual beliefs. The system can influence individual's opinions, but it is important to make the distinction that these ideas of a rejection of difference are not inherent in us as human beings. These terms, when merged together, really complicate the questions of freedom and justice globally and force us to confront these issues in new ways (leocine 2006).

One of the largest contemporary social movements active today recognizes the detrimental effects of this system of white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy and has been working for three years to raise awareness about issues of state sanctioned violence against black people in the America. The movement is known as Black Lives Matter

[BLM] and has become internationally recognized through the use of hashtag technology and social media. The Black Lives Matter movement has provided an outlet for individuals to express their anger and frustration about the numerous acts of police brutality and killings of innocent, unarmed black Americans. The call for recognition of the state of injustice facing the black population is not a new concept; however the rhetoric and strategies employed by the movement is one that focuses on inclusivity, utilizing the power of local communities to fuel and sustain the movement. Through a black feminist perspective, Black Lives Matter is fighting for equality and justice for all framed by a focus on black lives. Echoing the words of Patricia Collins and other prominent black feminist theorists, BLM reminds us that “when Black people get free, everybody gets free” (Garza 2014).

The Black Lives Matter movement is demanding justice for a population that has been “systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza 2014). The work being done by this movement is not new. The fight for the liberation of black people in the United States is one that has been fought for centuries. In the history of the black freedom struggle, one movement that is considered to be the most impactful is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This movement was one of the most influential social movements in American history. It is recognized internationally for its revolutionary tactics used to combat racial segregation and discrimination in the United States, such as its productive use of non-violent direct action as well sit-ins, freedom rides, and mass marches. The Civil Rights movement was successful in its goals to overthrow “Jim Crow” laws, state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the

South, and established legislation protecting the rights of African-Americans in the United States.

The success of the Civil Rights movement was no small feat, however the enforcement of the Civil Rights act of 1964 took far too long and the attitudes of much of the American population remained intolerant and discriminatory. In his essay on the current state of America's racial divide Lawrence D. Bobo points out that "the achievement of basic citizenship rights in the South was a pivotal but far from exhaustive stage of the struggle" (Bobo 2011). Though the goals of government legislation for the enforcement and protection of civil rights were accomplished, these laws did not erase America's history of racial tension and violence. "The negative trend of the times was epitomized by deep and explosive inequalities and resentments of race smoldering in many Northern, urban ghettos", proving that the "race problem" was a national issue and not only prevalent in the South (Bobo 2011). The system of white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy is deeply rooted in American history and affects every aspect of American society. While government legislation is one way to tackle issues of racial oppression in the United States, a crucial focus that requires much more attention is on the attitudes and actions of individuals. One must look into the intricacies of a movement to gain a fuller understanding of why and how a movement develops and how it affects the greater population.

In an effort to understand the role the Black Lives Matter movement plays in today's society it is important to look back at the work done during the Civil Rights movement. Which tactics and strategies have remained consistent, and which practices have changed over time due to new technologies and opportunities? Through an analysis

of the work of both movements through a sociological theoretical framework this project aims to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of social movements in the United States, wondering how we might move forward in the fight for racial justice and equality and finally reach a point of true success. By using the Civil Rights movement as a historical background and basis of understanding the methods used in social movements in the United States, this project presents a discussion that traces the similarities and differences exhibited in the Black Lives Matter movement. Black Lives Matter has been compared to the Civil Rights movement for a number of reasons, primarily because BLM claims to be rebuilding the black liberation movement (Garza 2014). BLM's approach is quite different however, prioritizing inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups and avoiding any reliance on an individual leader.

Are these changes due to the introduction and utilization of social media networking technologies? Is online activism a threat to real life activism? Does online activism translate into real life activism? What is needed in order to move forward in support of the longevity of a movement? How do we truly connect in an age of information where individuals simultaneously produce and consume at such a rapid pace? Most importantly, how do we mobilize and organize the masses while maintaining a focus on the importance and value of the individual? These questions are what fuel this project and are attempted to be answered through a literature review of social movement theory, a historical analysis of the Civil Rights Movement as well as an analysis of the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, followed by an overview of the in depth interviews conducted with contemporary social activists.

The goal of the interviews is to gain an understanding about how individual's experiences may or may not have changed due to the mass use of online social networking websites. Interviews with individuals currently involved in social movements, including Black Lives Matter, will be able to provide first-hand accounts and personal insight about their experiences participating in protests and events. Depending on the individual's identity their experiences are bound to be quite different. Due to a lack of academic material written on this topic, these interviews will enable a connection between questions concerning the role of identity, community, and an individual's motivation to become involved in a social movement with the developing literature about the ways social media is changing social action. Does the inclusivity of an online community allow more people to feel inclined to become involved? If so, does this translate into an increased presence of actors when they are called to the streets? Are the voices of the marginalized and oppressed individuals being heard more today, or are there still individuals being excluded from or pushed aside in the social movements they are inherently connected to? Does the open and inclusive nature of online platforms create safe spaces for stories of those affected by issues of racial oppression to be heard, or does it simply perpetuate the white patriarchal control over the majority's understanding of these issues? The history of racial justice movements is founded on notions of community and solidarity, motivating and sustaining collective action. The addition of online communities is something extraordinarily new and provides many beneficial mobilization resources and information sharing technologies. Do these communities challenge the traditional communities founded on close relationships and collective identity? How does this affect social action in a social movement that is based on

experiences specific to a specific identity? These questions are explored through a historical overview of the Civil Rights movement, an analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement, and interviews conducted with contemporary social activists.

## Literature Review

In order to understand the ways in which social movements ignite and evolve one may turn to the major theories regarding resource mobilization, political opportunity, and framing processes. New social movement theory emerged as a response to an wave of new forms of collective action in advanced industrial societies in the late 20th century. New social movements are complex and “exhibit a pluralism of ideas and values, and they tend to have pragmatic orientations and search for institutional reforms that enlarge the systems of members’ participation in decision making” (Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield 1994:7). New social movements are most often identity based with a connection to a set of beliefs and values that challenges institutional structures, focusing on an understanding the relationship between individual, collective, and public identity (Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield 1994:7). Additionally, new social movements work to practice tactics of nonviolence and civil disobedience and are organized through decentralized non-hierarchical practices (Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield 1994:9).

Social movement theory provides categories through which social movements can be analyzed and understood. Before the Civil Rights Movement occurred, academic theories of social movements were based on the conception that collective action and social movements evolved as spontaneous and largely unstructured organizations, disregarding human agency. Theorists assumed that individuals were motivated by reactions to personal strain and instability (Morris 1999). In his analysis of the Civil Rights movement, Aldon D. Morris explains how the Civil Rights movement was “pivotal in the reconstruction of social movement theory” (Morris 1999:531). The grievances being fought against were not specific to one aspect of social life. The Civil

Rights movement brought attention to the interconnection of the systems of domination that were in place. As social movements became more complex, the theory used to analyze these movements needed to adapt to stay relevant. An understanding of new social movement theory is crucial in any study of contemporary social movements. This set of theories is important and helpful to consider, but it should be noted that there are blind spots in within each theory that stem from the narrow focus of social movements that are predominantly western, white, and middle class (Gamson 1990:58). At this point in the study of social movements we must consider parts of each theory, but not rely on any one specifically, for “social movements are an ongoing product of the favorable interplay of *both* sets of factors” (McAdam 1982:40), these factors being both environmental and internal to the movement. The complexities of social movements are far too vast for one theory to tackle. This literature review provides an overview of the main social movement theories to provide a reference for the analysis of the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement presented in the following two chapters.

### **Social Movement Structures**

Before discussing social movements within a theoretical framework, it is necessary to have an understanding of what social movements actually are. McCarthy and Zald describe multiple levels of social movements, defining social movements as being based upon “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society ... We view social movements as nothing more than preference structures directed toward social change” (1977:1217- 1218). They note that social movements



usually exist within a larger “social movement organization” [SMO] which is a “complex or formal organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals” (1977:1218). They explain that “all SMOs that have as their goal the attainment of the broadest preferences of a social movement constitute a social movement industry” [SMI] , and all SMIs in a society, no matter to which social movement they are attached, exist within the social movement sector (1977:1219). While these definitions of social movement structures are relatively simple, they do a good job of leaving room for variation within this somewhat broad categorization. Countless components are involved in the development and sustainment of a social movement. Structures are not always constant and it is true that “any system contains within itself the possibility of a power strong enough to alter it” (Schwartz 1976:172-73). The following review of social movement theory provides a discourse through which the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement will be analyzed. Social movements are a complex phenomenon with many influential factors to consider, including the role played by emotions, identity politics, the socio-political climate of the time, as well as the available resources mobilized by social organizations. In addition, contemporary recruitment and mobilization tactics will be discussed in relation to the new technological tools that have been introduced through the existence of the internet and social media.

### **Emotions in Social Movements**

Emotions are an undeniably influential force in the behaviors and actions of individuals. Human beings experience an emotional response to events on a daily basis. Individuals may not always be conscious of these emotions; however they often play a

large role in one's decision making process. Until the 1960's, social movement theory was dominated by the field of collective behavior. This theory placed an emphasis on emotions, labeling them as a force behind mobs and crowds. Collective behavior saw individuals as impressionable, angry, and violent when gathered in large numbers (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2008). Resource mobilization theory, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section, opposed the theory of collective behavior by claiming emotions to be too personal and irrational to be properly modeled as social-scientific theory (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2008). However, in the rejection of emotion as a considerable influential force, resource mobilization ignored emotions all together.

The assumption that emotion and rationality are incompatible is a very narrow perspective of human thought and no longer informs most research on the subject (Aminzade & McAdam 2002). Until recently, the study of emotions has been linked to biological reasoning. The social-scientific studies conducted in regards to the relation between emotions and collective behavior has since worked to expand this understanding and focus on a more cultural-based approach (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2008). Contemporary analysis focuses on "the role of emotions in sustaining movements over time, the complex and often contradictory nature of emotion work within movements, and the activities that produce the emotional energy needed to forge and maintain collective political identities" (Aminzade & McAdam 2002:107). Emotions operate within protests in multiple ways, from microlevel processes that affect individual bystanders to "macrostructural shifts responsible for making certain emotions legitimate motivations for protest" (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta 2008:414).

It is important to differentiate the various types of emotions humans experience due to the various ways individuals can be affected. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, authors of “Emotional Dimensions of Social Movements”, “distinguish between immediate reflex emotions, longer-term affective commitments, moods, and emotions based on complex moral and cognitive understandings” (2008:413). These categories reject the notion that all emotions are linked with irrational behavior, for most emotional categories do not especially encourage irrational acts. Instead, there is a suspected correlation between strategic errors and cognitive mistakes and missing information (2008:413).

### **Resource Mobilization**

The theory of resource mobilization analyzes social movements from a rational, economic standpoint. It bases the success of a movement on its ability to mobilize resources such as money, media attention, and support from high powered individuals (McCarthy and Zald 1977:1215). These resources provide a way for individual’s grievances with the system of domination they are a part of to transform into productive action. Resource mobilization became the dominant model for studying social movements in the 1970s because it was better able to account for the 1960’s cycle of protest than previous theories of collective behavior (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The theory of collective behavior focussed on individual’s state of deprivation and an acknowledgement of their grievances. In their article titled “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory”, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald argue that collective behavior places too much consideration on these grievances and fail to provide an accurate explanation for the motivations of groups outside of the oppressed

collectivity (1977:1215). McCarthy and Zald discuss resource mobilization theory in an attempt to offer a theory that accounts for all social movement activity and individual involvement. Emphasis is placed on the “interaction between resource availability, the preexisting organization of preference structures, and entrepreneurial attempts to meet preference demand” (1977:1236). This theory attempts to explain why actors decide to become involved in a movement and how they enable that movement to be successful. Analysis is based on an understanding of collective behavior motivated by economic factors including “incentives, cost-reducing mechanisms or structures, and career benefits” (1977:1216).

### **Collective Identity and Action**

A direct response to resource mobilization theory is presented in an essay by William A. Gamson on “Social Psychology of Collective Action” (1990), featured in the collection of theories titled *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*. Gamson points out the multitude of shortcomings resulting from a limited view of social movement theory, specifically focussing on resource mobilization theory. He notes that this theory practically ignores the implication that a consideration of social psychology has on the topic of understanding social movements. Gamson does not disregard resource mobilization completely, for he acknowledges the importance of organizational structures. However, he quotes Ferree and Miller (1985) who state, “Costs and benefits play a role in generating movement support, but the translation of objective social relationships into subjectively experienced group interests is also critical in building movements, as in political activity generally” (Ferree and Miller 1985:39) (Gamson 1990:54).

The main points of concern stem from a lack of attention to such concepts as collective identity, solidarity, and consciousness (Gamson 1990). All play a major role in understanding the motivations and behaviors of social movement participants. Relating these concepts to resource mobilization theory, Gamson references Alberto Melucci's understanding of collective identity as an integral part of social movements. He explains how "the process of constructing, maintaining, and altering a collective identity provides the basis for actors to shape their expectations and calculate the costs and benefits of their action" (Melucci 1989:32 and 34) (Gamson 1990:58).

Human behavior is extremely complex and cannot be reduced to rational decisions based solely upon costs and benefits. Individuals are often motivated to act based on the social and cultural systems of which they are a part. Such motivation may result from experiencing solidarity and group consciousness. Solidarity, as Gamson explains, is the link between the individual and their social system, leading to the development and maintenance of loyalty and commitment to collective actors (1990:58). Consciousness itself can and often leads to solidarity, acting as a link between cognition and culture. Consciousness leads to an understanding that the meaning one gives to a social situation becomes a shared definition. This in turn implies collective action within a social group or system (1990:58).

### **High Risk Activism**

Experiencing a sense of solidarity with one's co-participants in a movement is a key factor in the continuation of that movement. Many different obstacles confront a movement and its actors. External factors, especially in cases when the primary target of influence is the state or other system of authority, can radically threaten the solidarity and

support systems of a movement, even at a micro level. “Structural prerequisites may be conducive to collective action, but without human agency such conditions will not even be recognized, let alone exploited” (Morris 1999:523). As stated earlier, one cannot focus solely on a single theoretical aspect of a social movement. Each and every factor must be considered, especially those that encourage action in the first place. Despite the favorable political structures in place preceding the Civil Rights Movement, the risk of involvement in this fight was, and is, extraordinary. This type of movement is understood to be “high risk”, because it is fought by members of an oppressed group of marginalized individuals against the dominant system of authority, as well as against many who agree with its belief system. In this case, the risk takers are black individuals and their allies or co-conspirators fighting against the power of white supremacy in America.

In the case of movements focused on racial justice, whether the historic Civil Rights movement or today’s Black Lives Matter movement, the type of activism being practiced poses extremely high risks to its participants. High risk activism may be self-explanatory. Such activism places the individual and/or social group in a position of risking their jobs, reputations, and lives due to the political climate in which their social movement takes place and the groups it targets. Many social movement scholars have and continue to ask the question of why individuals are willing to risk so much for a social movement.

### **Framing Processes**

To further explore the motivations and reasons behind individuals involvement, the theory of framing processes may be used. As previously discussed, William Gamson views consciousness as an extremely important aspect in the development of social

movements, but also admits its vulnerability. He explains that in the process of understanding behaviors and actions of social movement participants, “It is helpful to start with the assumption that people are active processors of meaning but not if this leads us to forget that, in the political world we encounter, meaning is already organized. Information and facts are always ordered into interpretive frames, and we must understand this process as well (1990:65). The frames Gamson writes about are related to the theory on framing processes, another significant theory to consider in the study of social movements. Important sets of ideas often overlooked are the collective action frames used to construct a reality to which individual actors can connect and be motivated by within a social movement. Framing processes are useful when taking a closer look at the inner workings of a social movement. They aid understanding of ways that members sustain their active engagement (Benford & Snow 2000). In their overview and assessment of the theory, Robert Benford and David Snow discuss the importance of framing processes, noting that “frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action” (2000:614). While resource mobilization theory focuses more on the logistics of a movement, framing processes pay attention to the ideology and rhetoric used when discussing certain issues and events that influence collective action.

The verb “framing” is employed by social movement scholars to conceptualize the signifying work or meaning-construction that is performed by movement actors. Frames are used by said movement actors to simplify and condense “the world out there” by drawing attention to certain social issues and events that require a new collective understanding (Benford and Snow 1989). Benford and Snow go on to explain how,

“Activists employ collective actions frames to punctuate or single out some existing social condition or aspect of life and define it as unjust, intolerable, and deserving of corrective action” (Benford and Snow 1989:137). Collective action frames exist as “injustice frames” according to Gamson, who explains how they “face a field of combat that is already occupied by a competing legitimating frame that is established and quiescent rather than emergent and action-oriented” (Gamson 1990:68). This is a reminder of how embedded understandings of daily life and the natural order are created by sociocultural structures and pose a large obstacle for social movement actors to overcome.

For activists fighting for racial justice and equality, the frames of domination that need to be overcome are deeply embedded in American history and society. The overcoming of social stigmas and biases is one of the core goals of the movement towards equality and the main obstacle making this fight so hard to win. As Gamson reminds, “It is not through force or coercion that a regime maintains itself but through its ability to shape our worldview” (Gamson 1990:65). The socially accepted belief systems that are in place in today’s society are a result of centuries of oppression and white supremacy existing within the foundation of this nation. Contained in this seemingly endless struggle are ways that individuals have fought to maintain hope and a commitment to the movement.

### **Membership and Leadership**

In addition to creating a sense of solidarity amongst members of a cause, an established leader can act as a motivating and inspiring presence in a movement. Concepts of membership and leadership are pivotal in understanding some of the main



differences between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter movement.

An additional definition of social movements that focusses attention on its members comes from the book *Collective Behavior* by Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian.

They write,

A social movement is a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or organization of which it is a part. As a collectivity a movement is a group with indefinite and shifting membership and with leadership whose position is determined more by informal response of the members than by formal procedures for legitimating authority. (1987:223)

This point about shifting membership and informal leadership is an important distinction between social and political organizations. While some social organizations may work within the legislative system to enact policy change, the ways in which they are run are very different than the bureaucratic governmental structures in place in our society.

Representatives are a crucial part of either system, but the power of representatives in a social movement is much more vulnerable. Leaders of social movements are not voted in and do not have terms to fulfill or selfish agendas to push. They are members of the very movement which they lead. It is important to recognize that personal experience with the issues faced by a social group is a qualifier for the ability to represent the members of said group.

### **Political Opportunity**

With the basic structures of social movements explicated through an understanding of resource mobilization theory, framing processes, and emotional factors, one might step back and place attention on the context of a movement to explain the potential for its development and impact. Here, the focus in research shifts from *why* movements emerge to *how* (Meyer 2004:127; emphasis in original). Political opportunity does just this by

considering both the motivations for individual actors and the influence of a particular social cultural climate on a movement. Though the scholarship feeding into political opportunity theory is somewhat limited and often contradictory, the key recognition of the perspective is undeniable in noting that, “activists’ prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilizing supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent” (Meyer 2004:126).

The two main points of consideration discussed in political opportunity theory are structure and agency (Meyer 2004). Structure is comprised of “the political context and the rules of the games in which those choices are made,” while agency is understood as “the wisdom, creativity, and outcomes of activists’ choices” (Meyer 2004:128). Another assessment of this model comes from Doug McAdam in his explanation of the three crucial sets of factors involved in the political process, “first is the level of organization within an aggrieved population; the second, the collective assessment of the prospects for successful insurgency within that same population; and third, the political alignment of groups within the larger political environment” (McAdam 1982:40).

This theory is often applied to specific case studies, because no generalized application has yet proven to be accurate. Due to the “large variety in the numbers of names and dimensions of opportunity,” many scholars tend to avoid generalized conceptual statements and focus more closely on specific variables that are particularly relevant to the case at hand (Meyer 2004:134). This, however, does not reduce the validity and usefulness of this theory. It is worth noting that the “general orientation toward the costs, possibilities, and likely payoffs of collective action is consistent across major conceptual statements” (Meyer 2004:134).

If there is an oppressive and dangerous authority in place, protests might not always be a possibility, or at least not the first choice. Additionally, in her book *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia Collins writes,

Because the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power work together to produce particular patterns of domination, Black women's activism demonstrates a comparable complexity. It may be more useful to assess Black women's activism less by the ideological content of individual Black women's belief systems — whether they hold conservative, reformist, progressive, or radical ideologies based on some predetermined criteria — and more by Black women's collective actions within everyday life that challenge domination in these multifaceted domains. (Collins 2000:203)

This is a key point to make about the political opportunities that certain groups can utilize and the importance of understanding social activism to mean more than marching in the streets or fighting for legislative change. Sometimes it is not that simple, and the first step towards bringing change to a systematically oppressive structure is through dialogue and the raising of awareness through daily experiences. In regard to the Civil Rights Movement, political opportunity played a major role in the development of tactics used to achieve particular goals. Many social movement scholars have pointed out the fairly evident assertion that the likelihood of social protest to occur is much higher when there are favorable political opportunity structures in place (Morris 1999). Morris points out multiple structural prerequisites of the Civil Rights Movement. These included the power that came from the Northern black vote and the influential political climate of the Cold War. This war revealed the hypocrisy of America fighting to co-opt newly independent Third World countries while hosting the radically opposed ideologies of racism and democracy (1999). In addition, the power of emerging technologies such as the television and communication satellites held great power in their ability to spread

information nationally and globally (1999). Lastly, the mass migration of the black population that took place throughout the 1950's, led to the establishment and increased numbers of institutions including the black church, local community organizations, and dense social networks. All promoted the organization and support of protest (1999). These examples exhibit the political opportunity structures that set the pathway for the Civil Rights Movement to march down.

### **Contemporary Recruitment and Mobilization Tactics**

It is interesting to think about the ways in which social organizations and movements get the word out today as compared to the an era before the internet and smartphones. Civil Rights activists of the 1950's and 1960's did not have Twitter or Facebook as tools for social mobilization, yet hundreds of thousands of people joined together to fight against racial segregation and oppression. With our ever growing reliance on social media and electronic devices it would be foolish to think we could ignore the changes they pose to social life. It isn't enough to ask whether or not they have changed what it means to be a part of a social organization, because it is clear that they have. Their presence alone proves this to be true. The question of how these websites change our relationships to one another is, however, a question worth asking. Even looking at the rate at which these sites are used is a good place to start.

In just the past decade many changes have been developing within the world of online social networking. Websites like Facebook and Twitter have nearly reinvented what it means to be a friend, let alone what it means to be a part of a group. As of January 2014, 74% of online adults use social networking sites, and of those individuals, 71% of them use Facebook, while only 23% use Twitter, according to the PEW research center.

Since 2005 these numbers have increased dramatically, with the majority of users belonging to the younger age cohort of 18-29 year olds, with each increasing age cohort leading slightly ahead of the next (Pew Research Center 2015). With such a large increase in usage, social media has become an integral part of social movements. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and Black Lives Matter have utilized the massive outreach power that social media and hashtag technology have on the majority of social media users. The question that remains is whether or not the influence and power of social media participation equates to actual social action and eventual social change.

Many social advocacy groups have come to the realization that the utilization of these sites is beneficial to them in terms of spreading their message, mobilizing individuals and promoting a dialogue and eventually action relating to certain social issues. A recent study by Jonathan A. Obar, Paul Zube and Clifford Lamp titled “Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action” surveyed fifty-three social advocacy groups and found that many of them heavily rely on social media to increase awareness and engagement.

Others, though, do not see social media as a strengthening addition to social action and community engagement. In an article titled “Small Change”, Malcolm Gladwell explains why he sees social media as hurting the potential for social changes, not helping it. Gladwell discusses the example of the Greensboro sit-ins to present an argument against a reliance on weak ties formed through online social networking. The sit-ins, as Gladwell points out, began with a group of four friends who each shared a

common experience of racial oppression and planned to demonstrate against it together. It was not a spontaneous event but a well thought out maneuver that was expected to get a strong reaction. Each day the demonstration grew with new participants taking a stand, beginning with individuals from the same dormitory as the original four students. Within a week news of the sit-ins had spread up to fifty miles away, and in a month sit-ins themselves had spread to multiple states throughout the South. This example is important to considering when asking the questions of why and how this particular demonstration become a “civil-rights war that engulfed the South for the rest of the decade” (Gladwell 2010:1) without the use of email, texting, Facebook, or Twitter.

There are a few points that are important to note from this example, including the types of relationships shared amongst the demonstrators as well as a shared experience resulting in a collective emotional response. Without social media networking sites mobilization requires a previously established relationship amongst the participants in a movement. These relationships are often referred to as strong ties. In his article “The Strength of Weak Ties”, Mark S. Granovetter defines the strength of these ties as a “(probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (Granovetter 1973:2). Applying this to Gladwell’s example of the original members of the Greensboro sit-ins, it is clear that the link between the students characterizes their relationship as a strong tie. They live in the same building, spend a great deal of time together, confided in each other about the plans to do the sit-in, and all benefit from each other's participation in the action. Granovetter uses algebraic equations to explain the ways strong and weak ties interact. He argues that weak ties are beneficial and strong

because they have the power to connect multiple social groups that may not be linked due to the fact that strong ties usually exist within only one or two social groups.

Moving onto a discussion of the history of the Civil Rights movement, followed by an analysis of the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, these theories provide a lens through which individual's involvement can be understood. Social movements play a pivotal role in our society. The voices of the marginalized and oppressed populations rely on the power of collective action and organization to be heard.

# 1

The Civil Rights Movement is viewed as the most influential mass mobilization of individuals fighting for American justice and equality in the 20th century - certainly in American history. Historians differ in their opinion on which event ignited the action that comprised this movement, but none can deny that the Civil Rights Movement laid the groundwork for future generations to continue fighting for civil and human rights. Historian Steven F. Lawson argues that scholars “applaud the courage of its participants and marvel at their accomplishments in toppling American apartheid” (2011:10). The work of social activists is exhausting and often times discouraging, yet crucial for the survival of marginalized populations. The influence that social movements and organizations have on society are massive, however the average understanding of the complexities of these groups is often insufficient.

The way the Civil Rights movement is studied in high school history classes often presents the movement as one large event that can be identified by particular leaders or events, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and the March on Washington. This generalized discussion allows the reader to contextualize the Civil Rights Movement into a neat timeline between World War II and the Vietnam War. Two main events act as bookends of the master narrative of the movement. It begins in 1954 with the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* that ruled against school segregation and ends with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 (Lawson 2011:10). This perspective is extremely limited and does no justice to the complexities that comprised this extremely tumultuous and revolutionary time in the United States. There are of course many historians who devote their work to writing extensively about the intricacies



of the Civil Rights movement, focusing on the important details and relations that lead to the successes and shortcomings of the movement. However, this in depth perspective is not necessarily common knowledge. This chapter looks to shed light on specific organizations and the tactics and strategies they used in their work to fight for civil rights. By looking at the ways in which these prominent groups mobilized and organized mass amounts of people, this chapter provides a basis of understanding that can be used to help analyze the work of contemporary social movements like Black Lives Matter.

The Civil Rights movement, like any large social movement, was composed of many of organizations throughout the United States. The roots of the movement can be traced to the founding of the nation; the goals at the heart of the movement are inspired by the promise of freedom and the pursuit of happiness to which every American is thought to be entitled. Many historians, in their attempt to gain a fuller understanding of the intricacies of the Civil Rights movement, began to widen the lens through which they studied the movement as early as the 1970's (Lawson 2011:11). When asking the question of how the Civil Rights movement came to be, one cannot ignore the influence that the New Deal, WWII, and the Cold War had on the political climate at the time. This greatly affected the lives and minds of the American people, both black and white. Additionally, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], founded in 1909, no doubt played a large role leading up to the foundations of the Civil Rights movement (Lawson 2011:11). There is an important distinction to be made between the Civil Rights movement as a monumental event existing within the narrative of the ongoing black freedom struggle in the United States (Lawson 2011:12). "The concept of the long civil rights movement, though useful in locating antecedents,

blurs the lines of the historic changes within the black freedom struggle that gave the period from 1954 to 1968 its distinct context and character” (Lawson 2011:14). With respect to the goal of this paper, the discussion of the Civil Rights Movement will be limited to the 20th century, particularly between the 1950’s and the 1970’s. The goal here is to pay attention to the way certain events and political opportunities influenced the motivations and work of social activists during the Civil Rights movement.

It is important to exposit certain external political and social factors that played a large role in the political opportunity present during the time of the Civil Rights Movement. “Social movement scholars (McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1994) have asserted that social protest is more likely to occur if there exists a favorable political opportunity structure” (Morris 1999:522). In his discussion of the long origins of the Civil Rights Movement, Lawson explains how: “The decline in the labor intensive plantation system, which resulted from New Deal agricultural policies and increased mechanization, together with the wartime migration of African Americans from rural areas to southern and northern cities, opened up a crack in the white supremacist system of racial control” (2011:20). This “crack” is an example of the type of political opportunity that, when paired with community outrage and need for action, lead to the formation of effective organizations and political protests. Morris considers these political influences and additionally notes that “by the 1950s the Northern Black vote, the politics of the Cold War, the rise of modern communication technologies, and Black mass migration constituted favorable social conditions conducive to the rise of a massive Black movement” (Morris 1999:523). The modern communication technologies he refers to include the widespread use of television and the introduction of communication satellites

(Morris 1999:522). This aided in the development of the Civil Rights movement by increasing the amount of information available to the public, drawing more attention to the movement, as well as the discussion of civil rights in general.

In this time frame, attention to the role of local organizations is integral in understanding the roots and social networks that ignited and sustained the work of the movement (Lawson 2011:11). While the political and social factors mentioned above undoubtedly played a significant role in establishing a political climate conducive to social action, “agency is required for such action to occur” (Morris 1999:523). While social movement theory focuses its attention on political opportunity and resource mobilization, an equally important factor to consider is the emotional aspect that develops and evolves within the collective consciousness of a movement. Morris does an excellent job of paying attention to both external and internal forces that are necessary for collective action. He explains: “People must develop an oppositional consciousness that provides them with a critique of the status quo and reasons to believe that acting collectively will lead to change” (Morris 1999:523). He notes that human agency, creativity, and a willingness to make sacrifices are all requirements for action. There are many examples of local organizations that exemplify and utilize these qualities to create moments of social change.

It is important to understand these organizations as catalysts for change, inventing tactics and strategies that were very successful in the Civil Rights movement as well as today. The actions taken by many local organizations during the 1950’s and 1960’s left a lasting impact on the way we understand social movements and the potential for mass collective action. How these organizations mobilize their members is a key factor in

understanding their impact and successes. The relationship between a social organization and the collective action it develops can be understood through the mobilizing structures in place, which include “formal and informal organizations, communication networks, local movement centers, social movement organizations and leadership structures” (Morris 1999:532). In the case of the Civil Rights movement, examples of these structures can be seen in the role played by black churches, colleges and informal social networks (Morris 1999:532). All action must begin locally and this is exactly the way many national organizations began their work. Morris describes this point through his development of the idea of a “local movement center”, defined as “the social organization within local communities of a subordinate group, which mobilizes, organizes, and coordinates collective action aimed at attaining the common ends of that subordinate group” (1999:532). Through the work of various local movement centers, the Civil Rights movement was able to capitalize on this massive increase of collective action, expanding upon the efforts that had been continuously worked on for years to create the mass movement we know today. While there were numerous local organizations that undoubtedly played a role in the work of desegregation, there are a few main organizations that can be looked at to frame the movement. Lawson explains how, “A division of labor existed that provided opportunities for groups to focus on what they did best: the NAACP as litigator and lobbyist; the Urban League as agent to the business community; the SNCC, CORE, and the SCLC as vanguards of direct action protest” (2011:21). Organizational and mobilizing tactics and strategies will be the primary focus of this chapter, asking which of these resulted in successes and how many, if any, are still used today? These will be discussed through the framework of the four main

organizations mentioned above. The ways in which each organization acted as an outlet for individual's emotional response to the time is also a focus here. In what ways did having multiple organizations benefit the overall movement, and at what point did this become problematic? Looking at the development and disintegration of these organizations can be helpful when analyzing contemporary social movements and help determine what work is necessary to continue the fight for equal rights.

### **NAACP**

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] was founded in 1909 (Morris 1984, Fairclough 2001). Until the outbreak of the Civil Rights movement, the NAACP was definitely the dominant black protest group; a bureaucratic, hierarchical organization working tirelessly for equal rights for black Americans, primarily through education, persuasion, and legal action (Morris 1984). It is important to note that unlike many other black protest organizations, the NAACP "did not emerge within the black community, nor were black masses involved in shaping the organization at the outset" (Morris 1984:13). Due to the lack of interracial organizations preceding the founding of the NAACP, there was an initial danger of the organization being dominated by white people (Fairclough 2001:71). The organization was founded by both white and black intellectuals, with the top positions held by whites in New York (Morris 1984). However, as the organization grew, the membership base became increasingly composed of black Americans (Fairclough 2001), likely due to the participation of W.E.B. DuBois, a black writer and social activist, who gave the NAACP visibility and credibility as an interracial organization that was genuinely committed to racial equality (Fairclough 2001:73).

The communication and organizational structures in place were highly centralized, making the decision-making process extremely formal, regulated by rules, standard operating procedures, and official policies (Morris 1984). The flow of information itself had to pass through many levels of hierarchical channels, making organizational protocol an enduring feature of the NAACP's framework (Morris 1984). Moreover, the original agenda set forth by the NAACP focused on the enforcement of rights proposed in the Constitution, as well as the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments (Fairclough 2001:71), making the goals of the NAACP undeniably justified. Much of the work faced by the NAACP involved attempts to change the public opinion of blacks in the United States. The mass media, including white newspapers and films, depicted African Americans in an extremely demeaning light by perpetuating negative stereotypes and providing, for example, very limited roles for black actors (Morris 1984, Lorts 2011). "NAACP officials attempted to enlighten white America through massive educational efforts aimed at depicting blacks in a realistic and non stereotypical manner" (Morris 1984:13) The organization sought to change the public opinion of blacks through press releases, speeches, lobbying, pamphlets and their magazine *Crisis* (Morris 1984:14).

W.E.B. DuBois directed the NAACP's Publicity and Research Department and was the founder of *Crisis* in 1910, a monthly magazine that is "arguably the most widely read and influential periodical about race and social injustice in U.S. history" ("The Crisis: A Record," n.d.). The first issue of *Crisis*, with only 1,000 copies printed originally, was an overnight success. Within one year it was selling 16,000 copies per month, and by the end of the decade it had reached a circulation of 100,000 (Fairclough

2001:79). With often quite controversial content, DuBois managed to use the publication to spread the message of the NAACP to a massive audience, specifically “battling for the hearts, minds, and allegiance of black America” (Fairclough 2001:79). DuBois refused to play it safe and was determined to speak the truth. “Through reports, statistics, cartoons, and gruesome pictures”, the *Crisis* acted as a reliable source for information on all things regarding the black freedom struggle in the U.S., stimulating the complex emotions of the black community throughout the country (Fairclough 2001:81). The *Crisis* not only played to negative emotions such as fear, shame, and anger by shedding light on the atrocities of racial prejudice and discrimination, it also “instilled pride of race, extolling black’s accomplishments, showcasing black history, art, scholarship, and literature. It places the struggle of blacks in the context of world events and broad social currents” (Fairclough 2001:82). As one of the first publications of its kind, the *Crisis* played a major role in educating individuals about the realities of life as a black American and motivated many people to believe in the fight for civil rights. The magazine platform was a very smart way to spread information and establish a community of individuals paying attention to and getting involved in the fight for equal rights.

The NAACP was an active organization as well as informative. Their work in the courts garnered many victories for the black population. They worked to gain and protect voting rights of African American citizens, defeated segregation within private businesses, worked to rule residential discrimination as unconstitutional, and even defended individuals in court (Fairclough 2001:82). While certain victories were undeniable due to the Supreme Court ruling in their favor, the NAACP was not able to eliminate housing discrimination that came from builders, realtors, and private owners

(Fairclough 2001:82). Additionally, the NAACP failed to stop segregation from infecting the federal government's bureaucracy that spread quickly and severely affected many black federal employees who, until this time, had shared spaces with their white coworkers (Fairclough 2001:83). The goal of the NAACP was far too great to be championed alone. The fight for civil rights for African Americans in the U.S. would need much more support from local organizations to spread the message of racial equality to as many individuals as possible. The work of the NAACP inspired the foundation of a number of local organizations throughout the country, providing a necessary system of local networks and institutional structures.

### **Local Southern Communities and the Formation of the SCLC**

The NAACP was rooted in New York which allowed it to easily spread throughout the Northeast. However, the organization had some trouble extending throughout the South, an area comprised of the majority of the black population. But invigorating the Southern states in the fight for civil rights was essential. The history of slavery and ever-present racial tension in the South had supported lawful segregation throughout the region through "Jim Crow" laws. Even when the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in certain cases, white communities found other ways to maintain domination over African Americans. Though the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional, the following decade saw only a very limited amount of racial integration in southern schools (Lawson 2011:22). Experiencing a constant lack of integration and acceptance, many individuals in the black population were becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the government did not



have their best interests in mind and could not be relied on to pass and/or enforce civil rights legislation.

The daily experience of racial discrimination and segregation fueled the fire that would soon ignite the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950's and 1960's, including the horrific murder of 14-year old Emmett Till. While visiting his family in Money, Mississippi, Till was accused of whistling at a white woman at a grocery store. He was later kidnapped from his uncle's home in the middle of the night, on behalf of the white women, by two white men who sought to "teach him a lesson" and use him as an example to warn all African Americans of the consequences of white supremacy and "Jim Crow" (Dreier 2014). The two men were arrested and charged with murder. Five local attorneys volunteered to represent the men for free and within a month the men were acquitted by an all white, all male jury, despite the fact that Till's uncle had testified as a witness and identified both men as his nephew's kidnappers (Dreier 2014). Due to this ruling, there was nothing that could be done when, shortly after the trial, the two men confessed to the murder and made it clear they felt absolutely no remorse (Dreier 2014). The event shook the African American community, particularly youth who were similar in age to Till. "By the end of the decade, this teenage cohort would reach college age and, with the memory of Till still fresh, would add new troops and inject vital energy into the Civil Rights movement" (Lawson 2011:22). The event of Till's death affected all Americans, shocking whites and confirming fears and doubts that black Americans held about their justice system. "Till's murder became lodged in the nation's psychic memory as a font of anger and outrage that galvanized a protest movement that would eventually change the country" (Dreier 2014). An example of this occurred only months later, when

Rosa Parks refused to change her seat on a public bus, igniting the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and eventually influencing the foundation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Unlike other bus boycotts that had taken place in the past, the Montgomery Bus Boycott was able to establish an organized strategy that enable to boycott to last 381 days (Fairclough 2001:227). The boycott was initiated in response to the arrest of Rosa Parks who refused to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus. Parks once spoke to her memory of her actions on the bus in Montgomery by stating, “I thought about Emmett Till, and I could not go back. My legs and feet were not hurting, that is a stereotype. I paid the same fare as others, and I felt violated” (Dreier 2014:1). It is important to note how many levels of complexity there are to the forces behind a movement. Emmett Till was not the first innocent African American to be murdered at the hands of hateful white supremacists, and Rosa Parks was not the first person to refuse to move seats on a segregated bus. Yet, the synchronicity of these events matched with the tensions that had been rapidly building created a spark that finally lit the fire within local communities. “By the time of the Brown decision and Till’s murder, African Americans possessed the institutional structures necessary to mobilize to close the gap between the expectations of change and the brutal reality of white supremacy” (Lawson 2011:22). This structure came from the powerful support present within existing local institutions and community groups. The power of local institutions acted as an organizing force that provided a system of support and protection and helped individuals channel their emotions into productive action.

The Montgomery bus boycott is a perfect example of this, with its success due to the uncompromising dedication individuals held towards the cause matched with the support provided to actors by local organizations. “The Montgomery bus boycott could have happened virtually anywhere in the South” (Fairclough 2001:228), due to the fact that so many black Americans had experienced the issue of segregation and the humiliating treatment that came from bus drivers and white riders. “There was no more noisome symbol or manifestation of the perniciousness of Jim Crow than on public conveyances, particularly public buses, which provided the backbone of black mobility in cities and towns all across the South” (Catsam 2009:14). This sense of solidarity formed by a shared experience is another reason why action occurred so quickly after Parks’s arrest. Organizations including the Montgomery Voters League, founded by Edgar Daniel Nixon, and the Women’s Political Council, enlisted by Jo Ann Robinson, helped to spread the word of the boycott. “Working throughout the night over a mimeograph machine at Alabama State College, Robinson and a few helpers printed thousands of flyers announcing a boycott” (Fairclough 2001:229), distributing them throughout the city of Montgomery. Nixon, who also served as the president of the NAACP chapter in Montgomery for nearly five years, called a meeting between a number of black ministers to organize the the boycott. They then used the power of the church as a tool to spread information, announcing their plans from the pulpit (Fairclough 2001:229). This resulted in the formation of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), led by Martin Luther King Jr. as president (Fairclough 2001:229). The way the members of these organizations were able to act so quickly and efficiently exemplifies the important role

resource mobilization plays in planning mass action. Nonetheless, the availability of these resources was provided by the local communities and institutions in place.

### **The Black Church**

The most prominent organizing force and system of support that existed in the black community during this time was the black church. As a space established by and for African Americans, the black church provided a necessary safe space where individuals could meet, share concerns and ideas, and organize mass action. The creation/existence of these types of spaces, often referred to as “free spaces” in conversation with the notion of social support networks, is incredibly necessary and proved vital to the movement. Such “‘Free spaces’ are defined by their roots in community, the dense, rich networks of daily life; by their autonomy; and by their public or quasi-public character as participatory environments which nurture values associated with citizenship and a vision of the common good” (Evans & Boyte 1986:20) (Gamson 1990:62). Spaces of this nature fortunately did not need to be created out of thin air. The black church in the South provided a stable base that could be transformed into a protected supportive space which “proved to be capable of generating, sustaining, and culturally energizing large volumes of protest” (Morris 1999:524). The mere number of African Americans who attended these churches made it an undeniably powerful outlet for the spreading of information and mobilization of social actors.

Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech at the beginning of the bus boycott at a local church that was powerful on many levels. He discussed the importance of the protest as being an American right, guided by Christian values, motivated by love and justice, as well as prioritizing the use of both persuasive and coercive, educational and legislative

tools (Fairclough 2001:231). In the speech King also invoked the struggle of labor unions to resist being “trampled over by capitalistic power”, linking this specific issue of bus segregation to the experience of every individual faced with the struggle for racial equality and freedom. This unification of the black population sustained the longevity of the boycott even in the face of constant counteraction from white supremacists. “Unity really had brought strength; the paralysing fear of white persecution lifted [...] The spiritual and institutional strength of the black church proved to be a powerful force” (Fairclough 2001:234). The Montgomery bus boycott resulted in the Supreme Court decision ruling city and state bus segregation laws as unconstitutional (Fairclough 2001:233), a success that inspired King to establish his own organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC], to continue fighting for civil rights.

The formation of the SCLC was the first instance of an institutionalized link between the church and the Civil Rights movement. It was based completely in the South, representing a community that the NAACP had trouble connecting with in the past. Additionally, the SCLC’s emphasis on the importance of Christian values “situated the organization ‘above’ politics and appealed to the most cherished of American values” making the organization far less vulnerable to state repression (Fairclough 2001:235). Advancing on the success of the Montgomery bus boycott, the SCLC worked to promote mass action through a continuation of boycotts and protests as well as broadly opposing all forms of segregation through nonviolent direct action. “Analysis of the SCLC will make it plain that the civil rights movement grew out of the conscious and deliberate efforts of organizers who understood the organizational nature and capacity of black society” (Morris 1984:81). The SCLC played a very significant and influential role in

establishing solidarity and hope throughout the South. Through the encouragement of nonviolent direct action, the SCLC added even more reinforcement to the expanding empowerment of the black population and clearly influenced many protests to come.

### **The Congress of Racial Equality**

Establishing effective tactics and strategies was the most important work to be done by local civil rights organizations. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded in 1942 in Chicago, was an interracial pacifist organization dedicated to challenging racial discrimination through nonviolent direct action (Sharp 2006). The tactics used by CORE included sit-ins, boycotts, and freedom rides which influenced many other organizations and protests, including the Montgomery bus boycott and the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). CORE was an important organization that worked to draw attention to the interconnection between government legislation and the daily grievances experienced by the black population. With a primarily white membership, CORE's presence was predominantly northern based. Its role in the Civil Rights movement grew slowly yet steadily. Due to interracial membership, CORE needed the support of black indigenous institutions, like the black church and the SCLC, to link their work with the local organizations of the South (Morris 1999:138). While working to establish these networks, CORE focused their efforts on voter registration campaigns and offered support to the work of other organizations, as well as testing the implementation and response to certain passed legislation. The first example of this type of demonstration was the "Journey of Reconciliation" which took place in 1947 from Washington D.C. to Kentucky, testing the Supreme Court ruling that segregation on interstate buses was unconstitutional (Sharp 2006). The ride consisted of

sixteen black and white passengers who made it through the journey with little violence and few arrests (Zinn 1964:41). “The ride elicited little attention, but it boosted morale and served as the model for the Freedom Ride of 1961” (Sharp 2006). CORE was an organization that was a bit ahead of its time. The tactics used by CORE were smart and allowed the group to be successful in Northern cities including Chicago, St. Louis, and cities in New Jersey. However, their lack of connection to local organizations in the South hindered their ability to expand. CORE needed to be patient and wait until the opportunities were in place to move into the South. This was made possible by organizations with established networks of activists in the South, including local NAACP chapters, the SCLC, and SNCC.

### **The Student Nonviolent Committee**

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] was an important and unique organization within the Civil Rights movement. Founded by a group of college students, it was the only organization composed primarily of young people. The SNCC developed after a sit-in demonstration was held at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960. This was not the first time the sit-in tactic was utilized. The wide use of sit-ins was considered a movement on its own. The reasons why the Greensboro sit-ins are considered the spark that led to the formation of the SNCC, followed by a wave of sit-ins across the South, has a historical link; the work of established organizations and the feelings of frustration and solidarity that were rapidly growing created a moment of opportunity that could not be ignored. “The sit ins were the products of thought as well as feeling, of communities as well as individuals” (Fairclough 2001:241). Theoretically, this

can be understood as a moment of political opportunity and resource mobilization colliding with the palpable emotions of the black community in the South.

Four students from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, having discussed mutual frustrations with their daily experiences of racial segregation, decided to take direct action against the discriminatory system of Jim Crow. “They drew upon many influences, including their religious beliefs, their study of black history, their activity in the NAACP, their impressions of Gandhi, King, and the Montgomery bus boycott, and, of course, their personal experiences of racial discrimination” (Fairclough 2001:241). Their demonstration was spontaneous and independent of any other organizations, but was also considered to be “a dramatic extension of, rather than a departure from, traditional patterns of black activism in Greensboro” (Fairclough 2001:241). While the format of the demonstration was decided only a few days before the action, the students knew they would need to have this moment documented if it were to gain any sort of local, let alone national, attention. With a newspaper reporter present, the students simply sat at the lunch counter until it closed, utilizing the resource of media attention to get the word out. They refused to move despite being denied service. The sit-in evoked an immediate response, growing from four to twenty-nine students the next day, to sixty-three on the third day. By the fifth day the demonstration had expanded to include over 300 students taking place in additional stores and soon nearby cities. “Every Southern state, including Mississippi, witnessed these extraordinary acts of defiance” (Fairclough 2001:242). The effectiveness of this particular sit-in demonstration soon became a national news story gaining much needed attention.



The transformation of this local protest into a regional movement is due in large part to the fact that it was comprised of college students. In his analysis of the SNCC sit-ins, Howard Zinn notes how the role of college environments allows for a rapid spreading of information and excitement. In reference to the students of the SNCC he notes, “These 150 – who next year will be 250 or more, because the excitement grows daily on college campuses- are the new abolitionists” (Zinn 1964:4). While Zinn and many other historians understand the value of the role played by leaders and organizations of the older generation, the power that students held was, and is, unique. The networks that students establish within an educational institution allow for the creation of a form of solidarity that develops into non-hierarchical groups. Individuals are able to connect with a large number of like-minded people who are, for the most part, at a similar point in their lives. Students recognize the contributions they are able to offer and are often eager to learn from one another rather than follow a specific leader. Zinn viewed the SNCC as, “more of a movement than an organization, for no bureaucratized structure can contain their spirit, no printed program capture the fierce and elusive quality of their thinking” (Zinn 1964:1). This passion and energy was one of the key factors of the SNCC’s influence and success.

One of the largest difficulties faced by non-hierarchical organizations like CORE and SNCC was the question of leadership and organizational structure. Unlike the SCLC, an organization dependent on the charismatic leadership of Christian ministers and their experience as influential speakers and organizers, CORE and SNCC were determined to maintain an equal and democratic organizational structure. “CORE experienced tension between local control and national leadership... With a nonhierarchical system as the

model of leadership, a national leadership over local chapters seemed contradictory to CORE's principles" (*The History of CORE* 2014). Tension often arose between chapters due to a difference of priorities. While some focused on educational activities, others were dedicated to practicing direct action tactics, though both were rooted in nonviolence.

The SNCC faced a similar dilemma of conflicting ideologies but were able to resolve it due to the guidance of Ella Baker, the founder of the organization (Urban 2002:186). Baker suggested a division within SNCC, with one wing focusing on direct action while the other directed their efforts on political methods such as voter registration. Eventually, "SNCC's voter registration and direct action divisions began working together, and voter registration became a type of direct action, as well. For example, members set up Freedom Schools to educate African Americans so they could pass the literacy tests, prerequisites for voter registration" (Urban 2002:187). The freedom that existed within these organizations allowed for new forms of social activism to emerge. While there was no definitive system of authority in place, the presence of an organizer, such as Baker, allowed these organizations to maintain their egalitarian structure. Baker herself once explained, "I had no ambition to be in the leadership role [of SNCC]. I was only interested in seeing that leadership had the chance to develop" (Urban 2002:186). Without the threat of domination by a single leader, SNCC was able to develop its own sense of identity as a collective group.

The group continued to fight for political representation for black Americans and, in 1964, organized the Mississippi Freedom Summer (Urban 2002). "Thousands of volunteers, many of whom were white, spent their summer in Mississippi working voter

registration drives, helping at community centers, and teaching in Freedom Schools” (Urban 2002:187). The SNCC even formed their own political party called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party [MFDP] in an attempt to challenge the existing Democratic Party at their National Convention that August (Urban 2002). Unfortunately, the MFDP was denied the right to sit as Mississippi delegates. While unsuccessful in their goal of challenging the Democratic Party, the SNCC’s work in raising political awareness among the black community was extremely important (Urban 2002).

The role women played in the organization and support of the SNCC was invaluable. Ella Baker worked with Constance Curry, the director of the National Students Association in the South, as SNCC’s first official advisors (Urban 2002). These women were devoted to maintaining the unique quality of the SNCC as an egalitarian organization comprised of free thinking, passionate students. The two women worked to support the members of the SNCC in maintaining their sovereignty and agency by guiding them instead of directing (Urban 2002). Outside of the organization came support from many local elderly black women who offered food and shelter to the students of the SNCC who were volunteering in cities throughout the South. The generosity and support these women offered seriously aided in the longevity of the organization’s work (Urban 2002). Although the important role women played in the SNCC was undeniable, female members of the organization were faced with unjust treatment from their male counterparts based on their gender (Urban 2002). After the Mississippi Freedom Summer, the SNCC decided to shift their focus to its internal organizational structures. This provided an opportunity for the women of the SNCC to voice their grievances about the mistreatment they were experiencing (Urban 2002). Unfortunately, the response that

the women of the SNCC received from the men in the group was negative and disrespectful. Tensions increased and the SNCC soon developed conflicting philosophies. New male leaders promoted radical “Black Power” ideologies that resisted the SNCC’s early nonviolent strategies, and the group began to slowly disintegrate (Urban 2002).

Of all the organizations discussed here, the SNCC was the most progressive in their use of nonviolent tactics and has been extremely influential to contemporary social activism. The unfortunate reality of the power of the patriarchy is proven to be quite prevalent through the Civil Rights movement. As we shift the focus to the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, it is important to keep in mind the essential role played by local communities in the development of a strong social movement. Additionally, valuing the importance of individual identities and opinions, and focusing on inclusivity can be seen as parallels between the two movements. The incorporation of new technologies (e.g. social media) adds an entirely new element to the discussion of social movements. However, these innovations do not discount the relevance of including the discussion of the Civil Rights movement. Without an understanding of the history leading to contemporary social movements, the discussion of Black Lives Matter would be incomplete indeed.

## 2

There are a number of reasons why the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century is useful in analyzing and understanding the Black Lives Matter movement of today. Many similarities link the two movements within the ongoing fight for racial justice in the U.S. and to the conversation of social activism. Because the contemporary movement known as Black Lives Matter is very young, formed in 2013 through the use of a hashtag, making any comparison to the Civil Rights Movement can be unbalanced. However, there are already many evident parallels between the movements. What is it about today's socio-political climate that is inspiring individuals to get involved, regaining the momentum of the fight for civil rights? One place to look for answers is in an analysis of the influence of social media on our society.

With the addition of social media as a new tool for social action, a comparative analysis is sure to be useful in understanding the reasons why and how individuals get involved with the social movement today. These new technologies have led to mass amounts of attention to be drawn towards issues of state sanctioned violence and the unjust system of control that exists in the United States (Bobo 2011). The pace at which the Black Lives Matter movement has grown is in part due to the influence social media has had on our society. This chapter presents a chronological overview of the movement, tracing important events that ignited many important protests and organized events.

### **Contemporary Grievances**

In order to understand the goals and demands of the Black Lives Matter movement it is necessary to distinguish the ways in which anti-black racism has changed over the course of history in the U.S. This of course is an incredibly complex issue that

can and has filled entire books, from *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois (1903) to *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (2010), so for the sake of this project I will be brief. A very large issue present in the minds of many Americans is that, despite recognizing racism as a national issue, a majority of white respondents say that racism is not really an issue in their own community and don't feel empowered to act upon it (Velencia 2015). This is very far from the truth, and the reality of the situation is that anti-black racism in this country has merely become less blatant (Bobo 2011). The Civil Rights Movement succeeded in abolishing Jim Crow laws with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; however, this did not tackle the deeply rooted discriminatory system that persists in America. Despite the rising number of black Americans holding positions as business executives and managers, and even the U.S. presidency, there are many examples that prove unsettlingly slow progress regarding racial equality.

In the list of demands presented by the March on Washington campaign for racial justice in 1963, racial and economic oppression were linked as “twin evils [that] rob all people of dignity, self-respect, and equality” (Robinson & Rustin, 3). The list of ten demands were clear, beginning with the demand for comprehensive and effective civil rights legislation that guaranteed access to all public accommodations, decent housing, adequate and integrated education, and the right to vote (Robinson & Rustin, 1963). The fight for jobs and freedom remains one between the people and the State. Due to the deeply rooted nature of racial discrimination and oppression within the history of American structural institutions, the change demanded in 1963 remains to be met today, more than fifty years later. In his analysis of American history, Howard Zinn clearly explains that, “Any emphasis on ‘natural’ racism lightens the responsibility of the social

system. If racism can't be shown to be natural, then it is the result of certain conditions, and we are impelled to eliminate those conditions” (Zinn, 1980:30). The reasons for the development and indelible nature of systemic racism in the U.S. are not due to individual actions and decisions. The economic system as a whole needed to create a device for social control to allow the governmental structure to remain in power. Social institutions have played a major role in the lasting state of racial oppression in this country.

While school integration was one of the early achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, today nearly three quarters of black children attend majority non-white schools which lack the same resources available to schools serving a majority of white children (Drier, 2014). Additionally, the wealth disparity between African Americans and whites has increased over the years due to a virtually unchanged unemployment gap, which remains regardless of similar education levels between groups (Drier, 2014) (Irwin, Miller, & Sanger-Katz, 2014), as well as a minimum wage that is far below an acceptable living wage. The fight for equality is not a singular issue but instead a multifaceted one that must face the complex relationship between structural institutions and the affect they have on the lives of individuals.

### **#BlackLivesMatter**

The Black Lives Matter movement recognizes this and has stated that their goal is to rebuild the black liberation movement, centering attention on those who have been marginalized within black liberation movements while upholding the demands that have remained unmet. While the movement was ignited by instances of police brutality and the loss of innocent black lives, the goals focus on confronting all of the ways in which state violence intentionally leaves black people powerless at the hands of the state. These

include issues of poverty, mass incarceration, undocumented status, and disability. These disproportionately affect the black population in the U.S. , and all are considered issues of state sanctioned violence. Alicia Garza, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter organization, wrote a piece outlining the “herstory” of the movement. In it she writes, “Given the disproportionate impact state violence has on Black lives, we understand that when Black people in this country get free, the benefits will be wide reaching and transformative for society as a whole” (Garza, 2014). This is a crucial perspective to consider, for it frames the movement as one that benefits all people. This rhetoric caters to the system of “white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy” in place in the United States that has consistently prioritized white men in all forms of public discourse. It allows any individual who acknowledges the goals of Black Lives Matter to join in and participate. This is what makes the Black Lives Matter movement unique; in recognizing that all of our grievances are connected and explaining the ways in which everyone in the country will benefit from this fight it increases the amount of people that have, can, and will continue to get involved.

Black Lives Matter began as an emotional response to the verdict of the trial for the death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American teenage boy who was shot and killed by neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in Florida in February, 2012. The “stand your ground laws” in place in Florida allow citizens who feel threatened to take deadly action in self-defense. These laws permitted Zimmerman to get away with murder. The leniency of this law as well as Zimmerman’s license to carry a concealed weapon allowed him to be acquitted under the assertion of self-defense (Robertson & Schwartz, 2012). Alicia Garza, one of the three founders of Black Lives Matter, learned



of the verdict through Facebook. Garza has stated, “The one thing I remember from that evening, other than crying myself to sleep that night, was the way in which as a black person, I felt incredibly vulnerable, incredibly exposed and incredibly enraged... We were carrying this burden around with us every day: of racism and white supremacy. It was a verdict that said: black people are not safe in America” (Day, 2015). Garza felt emotionally connected to this death. Despite not knowing the victim, she imagined that the same horrific incident could just as easily happen to her younger brother, who is of a similar height and build to Martin. The death of Trayvon Martin lead U.S. president Barack Obama himself to state that, “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon” (Capehart, 2015), emphasizing the felt emotional connection that many African-Americans have with these tragic events. Garza channeled her emotional energy into a passionate online message to her fellow black Americans, expressing her love and support and reminding them that their lives matter despite all of the instances that have suggested otherwise.

The act of writing a letter to express one’s solidarity is a thoughtful and productive way for an individual to cope with their emotions. It is very likely that this form of reaction and reflection was commonly used during the Civil Rights Movement. The important difference here is the reaction that particular letter received and the reach it achieved. This exemplifies the power of combining emotion and social media in order to mobilize supporters across the country. Instead of a message being read only by the family of those who had been killed and maybe a small group of people connected to that community, Facebook enabled it to be read by thousands of people worldwide. The reach one individual has to connect and communicate with people has increased exponentially due to the influence of the internet and social media. Garza’s original message, which

ended with the powerful statement, “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter” (Day, 2015), was read by a friend and fellow activist, Patrisse Cullors, nearly 300 miles away. Cullors immediately shared the post through her own Facebook with the addition of a hashtag of #blacklivesmatter. The following day Garza and Cullors reached out to activist Opal Tometi and the three began to take the first steps in creating a contemporary movement; the first actions were the creation of a Facebook page and Twitter and Tumblr accounts to share stories about why black lives matter (Day, 2015).

Just one week after the acquittal of Martin’s murderer, another event took place that shocked and outraged the American public. The death of Eric Garner at the hands of a New York police officer is one of the better known cases of police brutality in contemporary American society. During an attempted arrest for the sale of untaxed cigarettes, a police officer held Garner in a chokehold, ignoring his eleven desperate pleas for breath, until he fell unconscious and then died (Baker, Goodman, & Mueller, 2015). Garner’s death was not the first case of a fatality resulting from excessive police force. However, the entire altercation was filmed on a camera phone by a bystander and was quickly uploaded to the pages of the internet. Two days after Garner’s death on July 17th, 300 people, including Garner's family, marched in Staten Island in memory of his life and with anger and frustration for the system of policing in the U.S. (Robinson, 2015). The response was immediate and widespread largely due to the use of both mass media (print, TV, radio) and the internet & social media. These technologies provided the organizational force through which emotions could be channeled into productive action.

The power of this video was a total game changer. Instead of relying on the police for information regarding Garner’s death, individuals were able to watch this video and

create and express their own opinions about the incident. Truth is hard to avoid when there is video evidence of the altercation. Without video documentation of this event, many police officials would not have known the details of the incident. One police official stated, “We didn’t know anything about a chokehold or hands to the neck until the video came out... We found out when everyone else did” (Baker, Goodman, & Mueller, 2015). This video was even cited in the final autopsy report as one of the factors that led the city medical examiner to conclude that the chokehold and chest compression by the police caused Mr. Garner’s death (Baker, Goodman, & Mueller, 2015). This video is a main reason why Garner's death gained so much attention and acted as a spark for the Black Lives Matter movement.

During the month following Garner’s death, there were a large number of protests happening nationwide, fighting against a racist system of policing and expressing solidarity with victims of police brutality. Then, on August 9th, 2015, Michael Brown was killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. This death caused a new wave of protests fueled by even more anger and frustration. Michael Brown was 18 years old and unarmed when officer Darren Wilson shot him six times within a three minute interaction ("Ferguson Protests: What We Know," 2014). The incident was witnessed by a nearby resident who used Twitter to live tweet the entire event (Dalrymple, 2014). This immediate response gained national attention and allowed no room for obscuring the truth behind the event, but this did not stop the police department from framing the story in a way to justify the killing (Rosenfeld, 2014). Not only did the Ferguson police attempt to convince the public that Brown had fought with the officer and reached for his gun, they even released a video of him allegedly stealing from the convenience store he left

before the incident took place (Rosenfeld, 2014). Unlike the video of Eric Garner that showed an entire event without a biased perspective, the video the Ferguson police released was meant to convince viewers that Brown was a criminal who deserved his fate. While the video of Garner allowed individuals across the country to form their own opinions about a situation, the video of Brown was used by mainstream media to create a story that focused more attention on a minor crime than the actual murder of a human being, ultimately turning the victim into a suspect framed by racial stereotypes.

The way the media chose to represent the victims of these cases of police brutality seems severely biased. The phrasing of article titles as well as the images used to represent the victims tells a story that appears to justify these killings. “There is a double standard where police and mainstream media all too often turn police brutality victims into people who somehow deserved what they got” (Rosenfeld, 2014). In an article written for the Huffington Post in August 2014, Nick Wing points out how black victims are often considered deserving of their fate, comparing the ways in which white suspects and killers are written about reveals an even clearer racial bias. Examples of headlines show how white suspected killers are excused from their actions due to their intelligence and good grades, as well as their apparent mental illness. However, it is common for black victims of police violence to be associated with drug use and gang affiliation (Wing, 2014).

Due to the widespread use of the social media and the abundance of news outlets read online, these misrepresentations were quickly acknowledged and challenged by individuals all over the country. The hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was created and used alongside posts of two contrasting pictures of the same person, asking the question,

which one the media would choose to represent a potential African-American victim of police brutality? Individuals posted photos of themselves posing with friends in casual, social settings wearing street clothes juxtaposed with graduation pictures or images of them in military uniforms (Dickerson, 2014). It is not hard to imagine that conservative news outlets would choose the image that might be more likely to impose racial stereotypes instead of the graduation photos. The hashtag went viral and reached an international audience (Dickerson, 2014). In a conversation I had with a young black male artist and activist named Pierre, we discussed the necessity and value of challenging these social misconceptions. Pierre explained, “I want to present myself as an artists and someone who is educated, any effort that can ease the barriers of prejudice. Putting a picture of myself in the New York State capital, just that picture says a lot”. Social media promotes user generated content and puts the power into the hands of the individual. It may not seem like a life changing act of resistance to post a photo of oneself in a successful position, however due to the stereotypes placed on people of color in this country, even these small acts hold weight in the fight for change.

This online activity kept the conversation alive with a constant flow of first-hand experiences and frustrations with racial injustices. “It was an incident of police abuse that triggered the current protests, but it is the ongoing frustration and anger over racial injustice that will sustain a movement for fundamental change” (Dreier, 2014). These and many other examples of police brutality sparked local protests all over the country. At first these were only loosely linked within the fight for black lives. However, as more and more individuals became involved, the Black Lives Matter movement became a more cohesive organization. During the two months since the death of Mike Brown on August

9th, 2015, “an amorphous anger has evolved into a structured, organized response to an array of concerns that extend beyond the shooting itself” (Cobb, 2014). By October, the local demonstrations had united into an aggregate movement with events including Ferguson October and a National Day of Action Against Police Brutality (Robinson, 2015). Ferguson October, an “umbrella organization” created by local activists to sustain local protests, drew supporters from New York, Georgia, New Jersey, Chicago, and California. One activist traveled all the way from Hawaii to participate in the planned acts of civil disobedience. Demonstrators marched through the streets lead by a line of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian clergy members, singing together arm in arm (Cobb, 2014). This image alone is symbolic of the power of inclusivity that the Black Lives Matter movement has and continues to promote and is reminiscent of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s. The movement recognizes that difference is not something worth dividing us as a society, let alone a human family. Accepting difference and expanding our understanding of who we are as a composite whole in society is a crucial step in the fight for equality in the United States.

The goal of the protestors was to get arrested and fill the jails in order to prove their solidarity with victims of a racist and corrupt system of policing in the United States. Much to the protester’s surprise, the police department’s response was far less aggressive than it had been to protests in the previous weeks. Due to the mass amounts of negative media attention the Ferguson Police Department had received in the weeks following Brown’s death, they seemed to be taking on a new approach. They attempted to avoid the creation and circulation of images of their putting handcuffs on dozens of men and women in clergy robes (Cobb, 2014). It is unacceptable that the threat of negative

media attention caused the police to stop and think about the consequences of their actions more than the fact that their policing practices are unjust and need to be reformed. The police seem more concerned about their reputation than the lives of innocent Americans. If they had been able to get away with their actions the police would have undoubtedly continued their corrupt behavior. While this didn't stop the Ferguson police from eventually arresting protestors, the mere fact that their behavior had changed is an important sign that they are at least paying attention to the frustrations of people in their community. Without the use of social media these protests were likely not to spread as far as they did, and the policing forces themselves may not have recognized the severity of the issue at hand.

The Black Lives Matter movement has succeeded in drawing national attention to issues of police brutality in the United States. However, awareness raising can only go so far and when part of the goal is legislative change. There is a large debate over policies of policing practices and the need for reform. One organization called Campaign Zero, has created and published set of proposals to be considered as specific policy solutions (Friedersdorf 2015). In an assessment of this proposal, one a policy expert at the University of Chicago, Professor Harold Pollack, declared, "One does not need to embrace every element to recognize that this well-crafted document provides a useful basis of discussion between grassroots activists, elected officials, law enforcement professionals, and policy analysts" (Friedersdorf 2015). This type of action is really important and was organized by an organization linked with the Black Lives Matter movement, but not directly connected. Similar to the work done by the SNCC organization in the 1960's, having multiple sectors of a movement uses different tactics

and work on specific goals allows for the movement to grow, strengthening its demands and influence while continuing to raise awareness.

October was a very active month for the Black Lives Matter movement. With momentum building over the months following the death of Michael Brown, a National Day of Action was planned to take place on October 22. The mass action united many local organizations against the threat of state sanctioned violence in over 30 cities (Robinson, 2015). Many organizations fighting against state sanctioned violence towards African-Americans joined together to coordinate anti-police brutality protests across the country. The Stop Mass Incarceration Network is one organization that planned three days of mobilization from October 22 through the 24th. The network was founded by Dr. Cornel West and Carl Dix in 2011. The planned action was called Rise Up October, which became its own hashtag used to promote the demonstration. Organizers had made #RiseUpOctober a trending topic in the U.S., with more than 2,300 Twitter mentions in the months leading up to the protests (Morrison, 2015). This protest took place in New York City on October 24th and organized families who had lost loved ones at the hands of police to travel from their local communities to share their stories with thousands of individuals.

I attended this protest to express my solidarity with these families and the movement as a whole. I met many active participants of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as many other local organizations. I was able to use the protest as a tool for networking, connecting with individuals whom I would later interview for this project. The interviews I conducted and the stories they tell will be explained and analyzed in the following chapter. I found that in listening to the stories of the families at



the protest, as well as hearing about the experiences of individuals involved in social movements from my interviews, that there is a great deal of power that comes from individual interactions. The attention that the Black Lives Matter movement places on individual experiences of emotions, specifically frustration and confusion with the system of power in place, encourages more people to get involved. Human beings are inspired by each other's passion, and by allowing individuals to recognize their similarities and relate to one another the barriers of difference and discrimination fall apart.

A powerful tactic seen at the anti-police brutality protest, as well as many others in the Black Lives Matter movement, is the use of posters and large banners. These visual aids act a form of media, simplifying the message of the movement into a concise and direct phrase that can to be absorbed by anyone who views it. The Stop Mass Incarceration Network used this tactic by creating a massive banner covered with the names and faces of victims of police brutality. This banner could be seen at protests in a number of major cities, including Newark, Chicago, and New York City (Morrison, 2015). By placing a face to the name of an individual who has been murdered by the police, these posters insight an almost immediate emotional response from the viewer. Additionally, the Rise Up October organization produced hundreds of signs with the question, "Which side are you on?", asking a question that draws attention to the fact that there are really only two sides in this fight: the side of the State and institutional power structures, and the side of the people. Dix explains his opinion on this question of power: "What I see [the New York City demonstration] accomplishing is radically transforming the way people look at this question -- [which side are you on?] ... [It's about] getting them to go from sympathy with people who are suffering this to actively siding with them

and acting together with them” (Morrison, 2015). Dix makes an important point in distinguishing the type of action that is taken against police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. Individuals who are not subjected to the harsh treatment from the police often have a hard time moving past *sympathizing* with victims of the system to *empathizing* with them. It is necessary for individuals to feel affected in order for them to get involved. Unfortunately, the relationship between the system of policing in the United States and the individuals who suffer from their oppressive force is one with very clear lines of distinction. Individuals have an obligation to choose whether or not to act, and this choice is not necessarily easy to make. We are at a point in history where we are constantly being reminded that inaction is equal to oppressive action. This is not a new concept. As Desmond Tutu said in 1984 (quoted in the book *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* by Robert McAfee) : “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor”. One of the most powerful aspects of the Black Lives Matter movement is directing the public’s attention to issues present in our society for decades, if not centuries. It is equally frustrating and motivating to realize that the struggle of Black Lives Matter has been commented on by powerful individuals throughout history.

Many obstacles can impede an individual’s involvement in a movement. However, thanks to social media, these barriers have become much easier to overcome. While social media and online activism should not and cannot replace real life protests and meetings, they do allow individuals, perhaps busy working a full time job, to become informed about the movement and support in any way that is possible. Social media can be defined simply as any website or application that enables its users to create and share

content or to participate in social networking ("Social Media"). A key point in this definition is the importance of user-generated content. Social media are unlike any other form of media, for they provide a direct link among individuals. They act as a bridges among communities, allowing people from all of over the world to connect and share their opinions and experiences first-hand.

The internet and the social media outlets it supports have proven to be incredibly popular and have introduced an unexpected threat to traditional media outlets. Such media outlets include newspapers, television programs, and radio stations and are operated by professionals who have wielded substantial power in their role as providers of information to the masses. In his book *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky emphasizes this notion of professionalism. Shirky believes that professionalism is something that influences the way professionals understand the world, and therefore influences that ways in which they react to and write about it. Shirky notes how, "A professional learns things in a way that differentiates her from most of the populace, and she pays as much or more attention to the judgment of her peers as to the judgment of her customers when figuring out how to do her job" (Shirky, 2008:58). Shirky connects this idea to an individual's motivation, explaining that because professionalism is a type of elite community, professionals tend to write for other members within their profession instead of serving the public (Shirky, 2008). This is problematic for individuals who rely on these media outlets for an objective presentation of world events. Creating more difference in the world is not conducive to the goal of equality and acceptance because it limits our capacity to relate to one another. When mainstream media outlets present information influenced by the opinion of the writer and the professional community that

judges this work, the readers of this content are not encouraged to create their own opinion. The work of thinking critically about the content is done for the readers, making active engagement with the content seemingly unnecessary. This practice perpetuates generalized ideas about the world, and when matched with a discriminatory and patriarchal society founded on white supremacy, there is no doubt that these opinions will be promoted as the norm.

Professional media outlets are institutions that have been consistent throughout history, providing coverage of events that are relevant to society. While one would hope and expect these news sources to be unbiased, there has been a consistent problem of exclusion of certain issues that either challenge the status quo or deviate from mainstream interests. This is due to the fact that money is the deciding factor. Profitability is the primary motive behind who and what gets published (Shirky, 2008). However, social media and the internet allow for content to be published and consumed for free. Social media empower individuals to become creators of content, and allow them access to endless amounts of information. Such access enables them to have agency over their own opinions. It has become increasingly common for people to read an article and immediately research what they have just read. This is a practice of socially engaged individuals, promoting more active engagement with the content being consumed. With increasing amounts of content produced and consumed online, the need for fact-checking and active engagement with the content can be met. Some may see this as a negative aspect of social media and a reason to rely on professional media outlets because of their perhaps undeserved reputation as reliable sources of information. However, this can be

understood as a positive factor because it promotes critical thought from the reader and ultimately creates a more engaged society.

Another positive characteristic of social media is the ability to create connections, not only amongst individuals but within the narrative of historical events. “Social media’s significance is that it is recognizing different incidents that might have gone unnoticed and sewing them together as a coherent whole ... and that means we’re forced to recognize very serious structural issues” (Day, 2015) says Ethan Zuckerman, the director of the MIT Center for Civic Media. When individuals share their experiences online they are able to see that others are experiencing the same thing. In the case of issues of police brutality, this allowed an entire movement to be born. The ways in which social media empower individual agency goes hand in hand with the way the Black Lives Matter movement is structured. The movement was formed because of the power of social media and has developed with similar structural tactics. Black Lives Matter stresses the importance of non-hierarchical organizing and provides accessible ways for individuals to create chapters and become leaders of the movement within their local communities. Todd Wolfson, author of *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left*, explains that one of the benefits of online activism is its ability to flatten hierarchies and governance processes, while simultaneously using the logic of social networks for deep consensus building (Day, 2015). The goal of the Black Lives Matter movement is not to perpetuate systems of hierarchy that exclude individuals and promote oppressive systems of organizing. Instead the message of the movement is one that consistently reminds us to consider the ways in which systemic racism and oppression affects all black lives, particularly those of marginalized communities including black women and queer and

transgender black individuals. Some of the most important contributions of the Black Lives Matter movement are simply expanding the discourse about the black experience in America while avoiding generalizations and limiting the narrative. This is done by promoting the idea that anyone can be a leader within this movement and recognizing that one individual cannot and should not represent an entire population of people.

The Black Lives Matter movement has been characterized as not “leaderless”, but instead “leader-full”. Alicia Garza supported this notion by stating, “We have a lot of leaders, just not where you might be looking for them. If you’re only looking for the straight black man who is a preacher, you’re not going to find it” (Day, 2015). While many crucial leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were women of color and members of the LGBT community, the social climate of the time was seriously influenced by patriarchal and heteronormative values. These norms resulted in mainstream attention being focused on specific straight, male leaders. While some may see this as a weakness in the movement, there are many reasons why this arguably can be a strength of the contemporary movement. Jitu Brown, national director of the Journey for Justice Alliance, a network of community-based organizations, stated: “We don’t need spokespeople; we need a space where folks can have their dreams realized. Charismatic leadership has its place. People want to be inspired, they want to look up to that figure, but that model of leadership also lends itself to corruption” (Belton, 2015). He explains that relying too heavily on a single leader can be a danger to the longevity of a movement, for if something were to happen to that individual, there is a risk of the work not continuing because “people were following that individual instead of following their core values” (Belton, 2015). Because social media spreads information so rapidly,

individuals are no longer reliant on leaders to tell them what is happening in communities across the country and why they need to be upset. Instead, people all over the world can see for themselves what is going on and experience an authentic reaction to these events.

The role of networking was an important one well before the internet and social media. However, it was limited to those who were already a part of some sort of traditional social, political, or religious network. The SCLC and the SNCC are perfect examples. The leaders of these organizations had a responsibility to connect the dots in terms of individuals experiences and decide how to react. Today, individuals can connect with each other on their own without the need for an intermediary. Additionally, “by letting the people dictate the messages, those who follow the community-led model believe that you get better ideas, better actions, and better solutions to problems” (Belton, 2015). A community based approach has allowed the goals of Black Lives Matter to expand the goals of the black liberation movement, strengthening it through the inclusion of previously marginalized communities. This approach to organizing and including the voices of all participants of the movement allows the movement’s goals to keep up with the times and represent the values and opinions of contemporary activists.

Johnetta “Netta” Elzie, a St. Louis based activist who plays an avid role in educating the masses through the sharing of news of information about the movement, explained how: “There has been no one organization or one front-runner or one face for this movement. It is multiple people doing multiple things all at the same time to put pressure on the system” (Belton 2015). No doubt this has and will continue to lead to clashes in opinion about how to confront issues of systemic oppression and state-

sanctioned violence. Elzie herself experienced this while participating in the Justice for All March in Washington D.C. in December of 2014. The march was organized by Reverend Al Sharpton's National Action Network and featured many speakers who "talked about young people while not actually being young people" (Belton 2015). Elzie and other young protestors wanted to hear voices of youth speaking about issues that affect their generation and were upset when they felt ignored. Sharpton wants whatever differences that may arise between the older and younger generation of black activists to be dealt with in a way that doesn't distract from the real goal: fighting racism, police brutality and injustice. "He is worried about people pitting them against each other, agitators - racists, anarchists, duplicitous instigators on the left and the right - who want to see them both fail" (Belton 2015). Sharpton was quoted saying, "We've all got to respect each other to achieve something because, other than that, they're just playing everybody against each other" (Belton, 2015).

While Sharpton may recognize the arguments against his traditional approach, this may not be enough to align his intentions with those of the younger generation of today. Traditional leadership roles no longer apply to contemporary social activism. The system itself is changing along with technological advancements and new developments in communication and information sharing. Creating a divide among the older and younger generations may be one of the main risks facing us today due to the role that social media is playing in contemporary social movements. The role that students play in social movements cannot be taken for granted. In my attempt connect with individuals currently involved in social movements, students were by far the most passionate and willing to discuss their experiences. Whether this is due to the fact that they are



constantly learning about social issues, or that they have more time than individuals who work a full time job, students continue to be a prominent force within social movements today. The voices of students make up the majority of the interviews discussed in the following chapter. While I am aware that these interviews present a limited perspective, the involvement of students is crucial and relevant to the discussion of the future of contemporary social movements.

### 3

Social media has affected racial justice movements in the United States in complex way, with many layers of historical links and sociological implications. Through the research I conducted and the questions it raised, I realized that what I was most curious about was why and how individuals get involved in social movements. Analysis of social movements from a broad perspective is important, but I believe that narrowing the focus to individual, personal motivations and reactions can lead to a more complete understanding of the ways social movements are created and maintained.

In this chapter I present the stories of eight individuals who participate in contemporary social movements that deal with issues of racial justice, as well as civil rights and environmental justice. The stories are based on in-depth interviews I conducted. I do not claim that these stories are representative of contemporary activist's experiences as a whole. Each subject has a different level of involvement in social movements as well as a completely unique life experience. Acknowledging this is crucial in understanding the importance of these interviews. The conversations between me and the interview subjects provide insight into the motivations and emotions experienced by individual actors participating within a large social movement. Drawing attention to the factors that influence an individual to become and to remain involved in social action validates their experience. Such a focus recognizes the aspects of contemporary social activism common among activists today. Information gained from these interviews is analyzed here thematically, using multiple examples to illustrate complexities and commonalities within individual experiences of social action. My goal is to understand

why these individuals became involved in social movements and have remained active in the struggle for social justice.

Many themes that arose in the conversations are consistent with the issues discussed throughout this paper. These include ideas about the importance of individual identity and inclusion in social movement; validating the work of Black Lives Matter; and, the importance of widening the focus and goals of a movement. Similarly, each interview subject recognized the systemic interconnection among all social justice issues, drawing back to the link between Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights movement. Additional ideas emerged regarding the power of social networks, in real life and online. Many interview subjects spoke of the ways in which their local community and the social institutions of which they are a part were essential to their involvement in social movements. Everyone I spoke with considers the influence that emotional reactions to historical events have on an individual in terms of one's motivations to get involved in social movements. Lastly, each subject values the importance of an active awareness and engagement with information regarding the politics and work of organizations. While most of them are active users of social media to gain access to information, to learn about events, and to connect with other activists, they were all wary of the risk of relying too heavily on online activism.

Each interview began with a discussion about identity. The way individuals choose to identify themselves, or at least one's recognition of the complexities of identity, can often reveal the values one places on different aspects of society. Each person I spoke with exhibited a level of self-awareness that I would consider above average. For example, one of the first subjects I interviewed was **Dariel**. He describes

himself as a “Black American male living in New York City”. He explained that he makes this distinction because the term *African American*, “groups the entire continent together. There are fifty-six countries in Africa and everyone has their own culture and background”. Dariel is highly aware of the dangers of stereotyping people into a singular, homogenous group. He described how he is affected daily by society's habit of lumping people into a generalized group, explaining how, “people don't even know me as a person, just all the stereotypes and other baggage that comes with it whether I’m looking for a job to exercising, like running on the sidewalk”. The consciousness of the way one’s identity is perceived and the reactions one receives based on the stereotypes imposed upon them by society are ever present and vastly influential. Dariel explained how his negative experience with the consequences of racial stereotypes has led him to pursue a career that focuses on the deeply rooted causes of social inequality. His activism works to empower certain marginalized communities and fight for the rights of individuals who are all too often seen through the lens of negative and harmful stereotypes. There is, of course, no valid reason to claim that all contemporary social activists hold this type of awareness about identity. However, the fact that all of the subjects I interviewed spoke about the concept of identity with such depth and understanding presents an important point about the types of people who become involved in social action, and can lead to a clearer understanding about why they get involved with social movements.

Another subject spoke about this in terms of their gender. **Grace**, a white lesbian woman, explained how for a period of time she struggled with understanding her gender and has identified as genderqueer until recently. She explained how, due to her involvement in a local activist organization and her increasing awareness of history, “I

became more and more in touch with the fact that I am a female and a lot of the experiences I have gone through in my life have been because I am a woman in this world and what that has meant for me". For Grace, gaining more awareness about the oppression one faces due to certain aspects of their identity was illuminating. By acknowledging and accepting the parts of her identity that lead to her oppression and mistreatment, Grace's motivations to confront these very real issues were pushed to the forefront of her consciousness. This level of consciousness often leads to an understanding of how the meaning one gives to a social situation becomes a shared definition implying collective action within a social group or system (Gamson 1990:58).

Grace recognized that the experience of oppression is not a singular one, but a shared result of one's membership within an entire group whose aspects of identity targeted them as worthy of discrimination. Grace realized that the reasons for her oppression could not be avoided, despite her denial of traditional gender roles. This could not change the way others perceive her and treat her based on her apparent assigned gender. Grace felt that she could tackle these issues by embracing them and the community of women who share a similar experience. This led her to join an organization that works to confront this country's patriarchal system of oppression, focusing on issues regarding women of all races and backgrounds. Through her involvement in this group, Grace was able to connect with hundreds of other non-male individuals who are passionate about fighting for equality. This both aided Grace's awareness about issues of inequality due to gender and sexuality, and also motivated her to remain active.

Grace spoke about how she believes, “If you have an understanding and you are given the opportunity to make change then you have a responsibility to. And I think me as an individual, I was unconvinced. I was like, ‘What the f\*\*\* can I do? There’s a whole system of capitalism and imperialism that’s crushing and dominating people’. But then you realize that you are needed to make change”. Grace explained that through working with a organized social activist network she was able to become informed about the issues at stake as well as learn about opportunities to confront these issues. Her interest in activism grew rapidly. By connecting with her own identity and historical narrative she became a much more engaged citizen and her passion for social justice dramatically increased. As William Gamson explained, and as cited in the Introduction, individuals are often motivated to act based on the social and/or cultural system of which they are a part, understood as a result of experiencing solidarity and consciousness. This theory of collective identity is exemplified through Grace’s experience, as well as the rest of the interview subjects.

Another conversation I had was with **David**, a Black American college student from New York City. In our discussion about the reasons for his involvement and the ways participating in social movements and protests affect him, David explained: “I am not empowered by myself. But just seeing that people are there, you know at vigils, rallies, marches. Just knowing that people have a similar interest in just fighting racial and social and economic oppression. I am empowered by other people being there”. David became interested in social justice at an early age. He has been recognized on numerous occasions as an intelligent and promising student, and was granted opportunities to pursue his education through after school programs and scholarships.

While David has utilized the resources offered to him to organize events relating to social justice, he doesn't see his activism work as being possible without the power of collective action. David acknowledges the power that comes from a group of people all fighting for the same cause. He experienced this on a number of occasions and this has instilled his passion for social justice work.

Other people I spoke with also expressed their understanding of the value of solidarity. **Lula**, a Puerto Rican- American lesbian woman, spoke about her experience dealing with the issues that arise from other's perceptions of her apparent identity. Like Grace, Lula felt the need to recognize the parts of her identity to which she hadn't always related to. As a Puerto Rican, Lula was raised with a connection and awareness of her cultural background. However, as someone who appears as ethnically ambiguous, she can easily be mistaken as simply white. Lula described how her awareness of the privilege that comes from her appearance allowed her to recognize the value of her participation in social movements dealing with issues of racial justice. "To recognize my privilege--what looks like a white woman walking through this world, although there are a lack of privileges being woman--to walk through being white, I am privileged enough to know I won't be harassed by the police. And to put my body on the line, to stand up for what's happening is really important".

Lula's ability to relate to multiple identities can be really helpful in bridging the gap between individuals who are all fighting for social justice and equality but might have other barriers to overcome when it comes to expressing solidarity for one another. Lula continued on by stating:

There's this whole idea that you can't speak on somebody else's oppression if you're not them. Like you can't understand what they've

gone through, therefore you can't speak on it. I think that's wrong. I can, as a white person, recognize the horrors that are happening to black people. And although I haven't experienced them, I can certainly speak to them, and call them out for what they are. I should be able to help organize and help lead if I have an understanding of it. To say that all black people have an understanding of the oppression they feel is false. Just like to say that all women understand the oppression they feel is false.

Lula shared her belief that this fight for social justice is everyone's fight. "It's everyone fighting against the mass incarceration and the oppressions of black and brown people in this country, and how that's linked to the oppression of a lot of other people too". Echoing the notions put forth by the Black Lives Matter movement, Lula understands the connection of social justice issues and believes that recognizing this is the first step in overcoming them.

An understanding of the interconnection between all social grievances and injustices was a consistent theme throughout every interview I conducted. Each person I spoke with has participated in some form of activism regarding a number of issues. Some of the more common movements include Black Lives Matter and other organizations that confront issues of police brutality and racial injustices. These include the "Fight for 15", which works towards increasing the national minimum wage to fifteen dollars, as well as fighting for equal rights for women. Dariel explained how the organizations with which he works base all their work around four main points which include economic, environmental, racial, and social justice. He noted that he likes those four pillars because "they're pretty broad and pretty much everything falls under them". Understanding the way these categories affect each other has lead Dariel to not limit his activist work to one specific realm of society. He explained how he really values the work that other organizations are doing, and makes sure to participate in events that they organize. He



believes that showing solidarity is a crucial part of a social activist's work. He recognizes that he is only one person, stating: "I am going to support others' efforts because I want them to come support mine. That's the only way we grow is through solidarity, we have got to work together".

Creating a network of activists and like-minded individuals who are willing to show up is not easy. Sometimes you must prove your dedication before others are willing to commit to the work that needs to be done. Dariel believes that "You have to put a little bit of yourself out there because that's the only way that people can truly feel you. Especially in social justice you have to be vulnerable and you have to be able to commit yourself to something or else it just doesn't work". This is true for all social movement, but the question remains about what truly motivates individuals to take a risk and get involved.

Besides creating connections and becoming motivated based on one's personal identity and awareness of shared experiences, there is another factor that proved to be quite influential in motivating individuals to take action. One notion is often overlooked when analyzing social movements: the power of emotion. The Black Lives Matter movement began because of one woman's reaction to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer. Of course Alicia Garza was not the only person devastated at this news, so #BlackLivesMatter resonated with millions of people and reached all across the world. The horrendous acts of violence that have taken place and continue to happen are undeniable. They evoke an emotional response from anyone who hears about them, inspiring feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, or confusion.

In some cases, the only thing one can do is empathize with a person, because their experience is something that you are unable to relate to. This is the case with individuals and families who have lost their loved ones at the hands of police. In this case, the only action that can be taken immediately is to offer support. Each individual I interviewed acknowledged that their reasons for becoming active within contemporary social movements were in part due to the emotional reactions they had regarding victims of police brutality. Dariel, who had been working with two separate social organizations in New York City at the time of Michael Brown's death, remembered how the news of this event fueled a recruitment drive in Staten Island during a march honoring Eric Garner. The fact that there were two instances of police killing unarmed black men within one month of each other (Garner's death on July 17th, 2014 and Brown on August 9th, 2014) magnified the response. Dariel recalled his feeling of frustration: "Every time you turn on the news there is another death. I'm not over the death that happened on Monday and then it's Tuesday and there's a new one. It's just a lot and it's always the wrong person winning". While Dariel struggled to process these horrific events, he did not give up his determination to fight against police brutality. He used the power of these instances to unite individuals who all felt a similar frustration and devastation. In a sense, this presented a political opportunity that enables the Black Lives Matter movement to grow exponentially.

**Pierre** is another individual who spoke to me about his motivations to participate in protests. A Haitian-American artist and academic whose work comments on the history of systemic oppression of women and people of color, Pierre became involved in social activism during his time in college in New York City. He explained that his

decision to participate in protests was due to his experience with oppression first hand. He believes that any and all acts of discrimination and racism are calculated and intentional, which fuels his motivation to fight back against the individuals and institutions that enact and perpetuate this oppression. Pierre made the distinction that “It’s not the act of protesting that makes me want to protest more, it is the acts of sexism, racism, that motivate me to join a protest. I need to be hit with the experience of oppression, whether through literature or directly to make me want to act and make some noise”. He continued to explain how protests allow him to express himself by providing an opportunity to release his emotions.

I don’t feel it as an obligation but necessary, like eating for me. Racism is about life and death, sexism is about life and death. I go there not to hang out but because I had an experience where I wanted to smash something, protests allows me the opportunity to scream, to yell. First comes the experience that motivates me to find some avenue where I can express my rage, no better place than at a protest. It’s like a release.

Pierre has a direct connection to the experience of oppression due to his racial identity. He lives in a society where he is constantly reminded that the color of his skin is understood as a valid reason for him to be discriminated against. He is reminded of this through his own experiences as well as countless examples from instances of police brutality to the state of mass incarceration in the United States. Pierre admitted to me that he does not see an end to the state of racial oppression or sexism for that matter. However, he does not allow this to discourage his participation in social movements fighting for equality for women and people of color. He recognizes that this release he feels when participating in a protest is necessary for him to remain sane and allows him to continue his work of making art that speaks to these very real and ever present issues of oppression.

It is clear that individuals who experience oppression first hand, either due to their race, gender, or sexuality, have a direct connection to the issues of social justice that are being fought for in contemporary social movements. They are passionate about undoing these systems of oppression due to the fact that they are confronted with them every day. But what about individuals who are not marginalized or oppressed in anyway? I wanted to make sure that I included individuals of many different backgrounds in order to see whether these motivations are consistent across socially constructed categories.

One subject I interviewed is **Peter**, a white Jewish male in his sixties. Peter's response to my question about his state of marginalization in our society was this:

I am not currently marginalized but you only have to go back one generation to get there. So I am at the fringe of being marginalized. There's no way for me to talk about my personal experience without talking about growing up with someone who survived the Nazis. At all times I was aware personally that my father's roots were as a survivor, so I had survivor energy around me at all times which affected me a lot. It fueled the reason to undo oppression.

This response connects back to the discussion regarding the importance of understanding one's identity and the way this can motivate someone to become a social activist. It is also interesting that the experience of Peter's father was a very specific, personal one. However, it resulted in Peter's acknowledgement that any and all forms of oppression are unjust and caused him to fight for the rights of all people. These stories of the individuals I interviewed are not merely anecdotal. They represent deep expressions of the type of person who is willing to commit to fighting for equality, which make up the social movements that change the minds and actions of people all over the country and the world.

I spoke with a young student **Shauna**, a black woman from Louisiana, and asked her what types of people she has seen and interacted with during her time participating in protests and rallies calling for social justice. She replied: “People who are open-minded, willing to learn something about themselves, about history, and willing to face harsh truths. It doesn't matter your race or gender, it doesn't matter who you are. You have to be willing to face a truth”. This description is true for all of the individuals I interviewed and is consistent with the discussion about the importance of having an active engagement with the information you receive about social issues. It is critical that the activists that comprise social movements recognize for what they are fighting and understand the reasons why these issues exist. While every one of my interview subjects, except Peter, use social media to gain access to information about social movements, each expressed concerns about the dangers of relying too heavily on social media as a tool to replace real life connections and action.

The majority of my interview subjects agreed with the fact that social media plays an undeniably helpful role in networking and organization, but each person pointed out risks of online activism. These range from the amount of false information that exists online to the lack of people's commitment to show up despite their clicking “attend” on a Facebook event. An example happened to David when he attended a protest to shut down Rikers Island, New York City's main jail complex. The protest was in response to the death of Kalief Browder, a 22-year-old African American who was arrested at the age of 16 on charges of robbery. He was imprisoned pending trial for three years, and eventually committed suicide while in Rikers Island (Gonnerman 2015). In the interview David recounted:

I was the only black guy there, at least of our generation. I was there protesting because of his death and there weren't a lot of people there which is interesting because on Facebook it said like over 1000 people were gonna come. I found out about it through Facebook so I went and I thought a lot of people were gonna be there.

This is a common misconception caused by the the ease of “clicktivism”. Clicktivism or “slacktivism” are terms created to describe the type of activism that has been created by combining the ideology of computer programming while uncritically embracing the ideology of marketing (White 2010). In an opinion piece written for the *Guardian*, Micah White, a main founder of the Occupy Wall Street movement, heavily critiqued the concept of clicktivism. In the article he draws attention to the tragic fact that, in order to inflate participation rates, some organizations increasingly ask less and less of their members, resulting in the degradation of activism into a “series of petition drives that capitalise on current events. Political engagement becomes a matter of clicking a few links” (White 2010). White points out that while many online activist organizations can easily be perceived as successful measured by the number of followers, page views, and likes they have recorded, the reality is that “the vast majority, between 80% to 90%, of so-called members rarely even open campaign emails” (White 2010).

The individuals I spoke with in my interviews all recognized that clicktivism is a real thing, but do not see it as a significant threat to social activism. One student I interviewed was **Stephen**, a white male who has attended roughly twenty-five protests by the age of twenty. He brought up the point that “the people who are signing petitions online would not otherwise be leading the protests”, and believes that clicktivism merely provides a way for people who would not have been involved to at least become

informed about certain social issues and even donate money and help share information.

Pierre was also skeptical about the threat posed by online activism when he said:

I don't think it could ever replace. The physical body is what counts. It's a physical world, and what happens in the physical world is what changes things. When more bodies are in the streets it calls for more attention. I would assume that the internet, the online space cannot replace the physical.

Online activism appears to be much more powerful than it actually is. Micah White revealed how clicktivists utilise advanced email marketing software that tracks and calculates every action taken on their website including "opens, clicks, actions, sign-ups, unsubscribes, bounces and referrals, in total and by source"(White 2010). White critiques clicktivists who "equate political power with raising these 'open-rate' & 'click-rate' percentages, which are so dismally low that they are kept secret" (White 2010). The existence of the internet is fairly new, but social media use has become extremely prominent. While these sites present new and helpful tools for social activism, such as efficient information sharing and networking technology, there are many reasons why social activism continues to rely on real humans and interpersonal interactions.

Shauna discussed her skepticism about the potential for authenticity in online interactions. She explained that all of the friends she has on Facebook are people she has met in real life and who know her personally. She believes that the possibility of anonymity is problematic "because of the end of the day you can still hide behind the screen". She noted that her online presence is powerful because everyone who reads her posts are connecting her message with her personal background and intentions. However, in instances where the individuals who interact with each other via social media sites do

not know each other, they could have no way to connect to each other about what the other person is saying.

Another issue that arises from the use of social media relates to security and the possibility for security to be compromised. Stephen discussed his experiences working as an organizer of protests and social organizations. He explained that he is aware how easy it is for the government to see what you're doing. He noted that the permanency of online content is troubling to him in many ways. "It's definitely something to think about and if you're not thinking about it it's a problem", he said, telling me about various ways he works to avoid this security threat through his use of encrypted messaging apps and private planning meetings. He also avoids becoming reliant on social networking platforms and, like Shauna, expressed his belief about the limits of the connections created through online social networking.

You don't create the same kind of bonds online than you do in person. You know you can interact with people and discuss articles with them but it doesn't have the same meaning as it does if you know someone. Certainly social media has had positive impacts on what people can do in terms of communicating with people around the world, in terms of sharing information. But on the other hand, it can lead to people seeing what they want to see, spreading inaccurate information, creating ties that aren't really as strong as people think they are.

Each of the individual interviewed for this project is active in social movements in one way or another. They all use social media, but place immense value on the importance of personal connections and interactions. The first-hand accounts of their experiences participating in contemporary social movements shed light on the influences that play a large role in motivating people to become involved in social action. In these interviews I asked my subjects about their opinions on what social movements require in order to maintain their power and efficiency. What are the main differences they have



noticed about their experiences participating in social action today compared to the history of social movements of the past? Shauna pointed out that for the most part she sees that:

Queer people are usually at the forefront of protests. The ones that are highly inclusive, from my experience. In my opinion, this is very powerful because historically, even black women are excluded from the narrative. I'm pretty happy that the Black Lives Matter movement is very inclusive and the movement itself is a leaderful movement. And that's something you don't hear with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black power Movement. It's very intersectional.

Shauna acknowledges the importance of the work of Black Lives Matter in drawing attention to the importance of intersectionality and inclusivity is evidence of the validity and necessity of this work. Individuals are inspired through the experience of inclusion and solidarity, and they become increasingly aware about new ways of confronting issues of exclusion and oppression through their participation. Even those who benefit from white privilege, or the privilege of being male have expressed this level of awareness.

It is important to note that, as stated earlier, the opinions and experiences expressed in these interviews do not represent the total population of social activists. However, the stories presented here represent a diverse group of individuals who come from extremely different backgrounds. What I find most interesting is the common value placed on interpersonal interactions among activists. The sense of community and collective awareness is reminiscent of the Civil Rights movement while simultaneously embracing contemporary systems of networking and communication. The consistency seen between the two movements is exhibited in individual's emotional responses to tragic events and the ability to mobilize and organize these feelings into collective action. The death of Emmett Till inspired Rosa Parks and many others to resist

the system of discrimination and oppression present during the era of Jim Crow. Today, the lives of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, as well as Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd and many others are devastating reminders of the fight that remains to be won against the system of domination that prevails in this country. As awareness and discourse increase around the subject of police brutality and other forms of state-sanctioned violence against black Americans, the Black Lives Matter movement will continue to grow. My hope is that the stories presented here will inspire others to become aware of the importance of social justice work and provide advice and insight for individuals already involved in social movements today.

## Conclusion

Before conducting the research for this project, my understanding of social movements was very limited. Besides watching news coverage of demonstrations such as Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring, I had never had any direct experience with a social movement. This project began as an attempt to understand what social movements are and how they operate. As someone who had never participated in any form of legitimate protest or collective action, I had no idea about the level of complexities that comprise a social movement. As I started to become more aware about social justice issues and the importance of social action and civic engagement, I began to question the reasons why I had never participated in a protest. I have not been able to answer this with assurance, for my memory lacks the details necessary to provide accurate reasoning for my lack of social or political engagement throughout my adolescence. I have speculated on a few different reasoning, such as my identity as a white woman. Additionally, the environment in which I grew up was a predominantly white, upper-middle class neighborhood where the most recent protests were in opposition to a new Whole Foods super market. The lack of social and cultural awareness that I had, as well as my personal level of neutrality and ignorance at the time, may have led to my lack of involvement in political or social movements.

After writing this paper, though, I have come to recognize another possible reason for my inactivity. The power of individual relationships and interactions plays a huge role in the development of a social movement. The social networks individuals are a part of are the foundations of all social movements. Without any connections to politically active social networks, my understanding of social movements was quite limited. This project

has led to me recognize social movements as a complex aspect of society, and value the role individuals play within a movement to a much higher degree. These realizations lead to my decision to use interviews as my methodology. The interviews add an important element to the discussion of social movements; however there are a few ways in which they could be stronger.

The information received in the interviews is consistent with the themes presented in articles written about Black Lives Matter and contemporary activism. The process of researching for this project had many different layers and took a long time. I realized later on in this process that the questions I asked in the interviews could have been more specific. The interviews lacked questions regarding specific memories about events and emotional responses one may have had to them. This could have allowed the discussion about emotions to have more evidence in order to strengthen the claims made throughout this paper. That being said, the study of the role emotions play in social movements still calls for more research and discussion, so any addition to the field is valuable.

An additional shortcoming of this project is in regards to a focus on leaders of the movement. While I include a discussion on leadership in the Civil Rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement, not much attention is paid to specific leaders. The identities, backgrounds, and experiences of historical and contemporary leaders could add an interesting dimension to this discussion and provide more depth to the historical background. The discourse on the role of racial justice movements and the intersectional system of domination they oppose is so multifaceted that only so much could be tackled in one paper.

Overall, this process has led to some very important realizations and connections. Understanding the critical role history plays in the study of social movements has widened the conversation to include many different aspects of society. The deeply rooted interconnection of all social structures calls for a critical emphasis on inclusion. The system of domination and oppression in place in our society has remained constant throughout history. It has perpetuated a system of white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy onto the lives of the people. This project helped me recognize the interconnection of our grievances with this world. Social movements seem to be the only way to raise awareness of this fact and fight against these oppressive institutions. One phrase that really grounded this notion was chanted at the anti-police brutality protest I participated in: “the whole damn system is guilty as hell.” I came to recognize, through the conversations I had with the individuals I interviewed and the research conducted, that social movements remain as important and influential today as they did in the past. The incorporation of new technologies and ideologies open up many new ways for individuals to get connected, informed, and eventually involved in social action. While there are issues of confirmation bias and anonymity that come from the use of social media, the effects seem mostly positive, so far. However, it is clear social media and online activism will never replace the power of physical bodies filling the streets and the attention drawn by voices calling for justice ringing out through the air.

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