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5 Tensions, Ironies, and Social Justice in Black Civil Rights
Lessons from Brown and King

Horace R. Hall

When studying history, ideally we come to the conclusion that it is not random, nor is it a result of mishaps. History is a decision that we make with our lives, and by gaining a richer understanding of it, we become more aware of how individual choices impact the lives of others. Moreover, history informs us of the deep-seated structural inequities persistent in our society and the ways in which we can continue challenging them based upon past struggles. In his book *Living Black History* (2006), Manning Marable writes:

Knowledgeable civic actors can draw important lessons from history, which does incrementally increase civic capacity. Historical amnesia blocks the construction of potentially successful social movements. As the gap between the past, present, and future diminishes, individuals can acquire a greater sense of becoming the “makers” of their own history. Thus, for the oppressed, the act of reconstructing history is inextricably linked to the political practices, or *praxis*, of transforming the present and future. (p. 37)

Noting Marble’s commentary, historians, sociologists, and legal scholars have all drawn and extensively documented lessons from *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954/1955) and the *Civil Rights movement* (1955–1968)—lessons that can surely advance *civic capacity* and, if heeded, assist present-future social movements in avoiding *historical amnesia*. The following discussion, however, is not a comprehensive historical review of these milestones. Rather, I choose to reflect on these events, using political–historical research, with the hope of expanding the discourse that seeks to deepen our senses of history and increase our capacity for civic action. Thus, for the sake of organization, I will present a synopsis of some of the social tensions catalyzed by these events. I will then discuss significant ironies that emerge out of each. Finally, I will close with some brief thoughts on the meaning of these tensions and ironies within the conceptual framework of social justice education, specifically underscoring the individual’s role in initiating personal and institutional change through the practice of *social perspective-taking*.

**Brown** (Desegregating Schools with Segregated Minds)

*Brown v. Board of Education* was a class action suit comprised of five cases from segregated school districts in Kansas, Delaware, South Carolina, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the most important civil rights organization at that time, used these cases in consolidation in order to magnify the unconstitutionality of maintaining separate school facilities and to bring school segregation to an end altogether (Brown, 2004). The *Brown* decision
overturned almost 60 years of “separate-but-equal” policies under *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) (Franklin & Moss, 1988). *Brown I* (1954) declared that segregated educational facilities were “inherently unequal” and violated the Equal Protection Clause assured by the Fourteenth Amendment (Franklin & Moss, 1988). *Brown II* (1955) realigned the issue of relief to the plaintiffs in *Brown I*, citing that dismantling of separate school systems must be initiated “with all deliberate speed” (Brown, 2004). Over the next 30 years, “all deliberate speed” became somewhat of a relative term. As the Court gave state and local school authorities primary control in organizing desegregation, there was only gradual progress toward making this happen, particularly in areas of the country not aligned with public opinion or court decree (Butler, 1996; Mack, 2005).

In the 1960s, massive White resistance to desegregation, at the state and local level, often took the form of procedural delays and school transfers (Mawdsley, 2004). In one extreme case, Prince Edward County, Virginia had abolished public schools entirely. Much of the open antipathy toward school desegregation occurred in the Old South, where in a decade after the *Brown* decision “only 2.14% of African American children in 7 of 11 southern states attended desegregated schools (Horowitz & Karst, 1969)” (Mawdsley, 2004, p. 246). While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided more incentives for school districts to comply with school desegregation (as federal dollars would go to these districts), the 1970s and 80s witnessed a surge in White flight, where White families left urban centers for suburban life (Kruse, 2005). During this period, the courts used busing to advance “all deliberate speed,” as well as to establish more racially balanced schools in urban communities. However, Black children were primarily bussed to those schools nearest to their home. In this instance, White flight proved to be the most effective oppositional tool to school integration as the courts could not control residential segregation (Andrews, 2002; Brown, 2004).

Other societal tensions roused by *Brown* can be found in the paradoxes emerging out of it. Two of the more notable ironies of the case are the links between “equal access” and Black identity development. The NAACP contended that legal segregation had a negative psychological effect on Black children, and thus school desegregation was the principal method for ensuring healthy Black identities, as well as harmonious future relationships between Blacks and Whites (Martin, 1998). With regard to the latter point, *Brown*, as previously stated, sparked intense White resistance to integration as witnessed in school transfers and White flight—two dynamics still in effect today in the form of school vouchers and gentrification. Yet, to the former point, mass school desegregation might have incurred another form of detriment on Black students than what was alleged by the NAACP. The idea of equal access for Blacks was embodied and pursued in the legalism of “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Hence, the initial course of action taken by the courts was not to financially equalize Black schools (via school curricula, teacher salaries, and building infrastructure) or to merge White students into them. Instead, the view of the Court was that wherever Black students were coming from was racially inferior and that the spaces they sought to occupy were culturally superior (Butler, 1996). And so witnessed were mandated thrusts of Black students into White academic arenas, which for some were tremendously hostile and violent (Martin, 1998; Ogletree, 2004). Bell (2004) points out, Black children “were shuffled in and out of predominantly white schools” and “all too often met naked race-hatred and a curriculum blind to their needs” (p. 112). Furthermore, the courts’ misguided approach to equal access and the alleged fostering of healthy Black identities came at the cost of Black school closings and consolidations, the loss of employment and status of Black teachers and principals in their respective communities, and the removal of Black students from their cultural spaces of connection, esteem, and self-knowledge,
which was negligently replaced with White curriculum and ideology (Karpinski, 2006; Ogletree, 2004).

The impact of the above is still felt today as Black and Latino students continue to struggle with the lingering effects of community dislocation, and the reality of attending disproportionately segregated schools that are poorly resourced, overcrowded, standards driven, and exceptionally punitive in disciplinary measures (Conchas, 2001; Hall, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Stevens, 2002). As civic actors, we should understand that the limitation of the Brown case was that the notion of “equality” was ill-defined at the outset. Though Brown sought to level the playing field by destroying legal segregation (via skin color), arguably it did so, but in principle only. Equality, most assuredly, must also be linked to economic parity. Racial integration alone cannot eliminate concentrated sections of poverty, much less transform minds bent on segregation. In the NAACP’s quest for social justice, the goal of equality was lost in litigation as it was obfuscated by the political rhetoric of “sameness” (i.e., the norms of Whiteness by which all other racial groups are judged). Nonetheless, with all its shortcomings, Brown should still be seen as a victory. It confronted a brutally White supremacist system embedded in nearly 300 years of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial violence. While it did fall short of social equity and educational opportunity, the Brown decision produced a ripple effect which compelled others toward change in multiple aspects of social life. The next segment looks at the Civil Rights Movement and its central figure, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

King (and the Civil Rights Movement)

The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement is founded in its struggle to emancipate and develop the lives of marginalized groups through the intersection of legal and educational efforts. Largely viewed as an integrationist movement, its accomplishments include the passage of key civil rights and antipoverty legislation. The origin of the movement arguably was an outgrowth of the discontentment that Black citizens, predominantly in the South, felt toward the prolonged, legal approaches to desegregation assumed by the NAACP (Lehman, 2006). Although Black communities acknowledged the triumph of Brown, they continued to wrestle with second-class citizen status in areas of housing, employment, voting rights, and segregated public facilities, which still included schools.

As an alternative to litigation, small Black grassroots organizations in the South began to employ tactics of civil disobedience. One notable example, and the stimulus for the Civil Rights Movement, was the Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott of 1955. Initiated by the arrest of Rosa Parks (an active NAACP member at the time), organized by E. D. Nixon (president of the Montgomery NAACP chapter), and led by an inexperienced and reluctant Dr. King, the one-year boycott involved a community of hundreds. As it gained national attention, in part due to a significant number of protestor arrests that included King, the federal government, pressured to intervene, finally passed a city-wide injunction that brought an end to the segregation of buses (Gordon, 2000). The success of the boycott propelled King into the role of leader and spokesperson of the Civil Rights Movement. It also served to galvanize other locally based organizations (e.g., the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; SNCC) to take part in nonviolent protests which took the form of sit-ins, pray-ins, read-ins, and freedom rides (Miller, 2004). The media associated many of these campaigns, often student organized, with King, in spite of the fact that these groups sought to operate relatively independent of his top-down leadership (Fairclough, 1987; Lawson & Payne, 2006).

Just as Brown was an impetus of enormous racial discord and opposition through legislative pressure, the Civil Rights Movement, with its hand in multiple social settings,
heightened racial tensions exponentially. One significant aspect of the movement is that it comprised a number of national (NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality; CORE), regional (King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference; SCLC) and local grassroots organizations. Based mainly in southern states, the mobilization of these groups helped to unmask White hostility and, with the use of media outlets, position it on a national stage (Lawson, 1997; Levy, 1998). Thus, communities all across America were able to witness the explosion of White resistance to Black nonviolent protest. Television, newspapers, and magazines captured horrendous images of White private citizens, police officers, fire fighters, and other public officials engaged in hate speech and terrorist retaliation against demonstrators. For King, the attention of the media was integral to the civil rights agenda because organizing and mobilizing in and of itself could not generate change—a national conscience had to be evoked (Washington, 1986). And indeed it was, as the face of the oppressor and of the oppressed were rendered in daily news stories such as the Little Rock Nine, where Black students entered into the fiercely contested Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas (1957); the lunch counter sit-ins in Tallahassee, Florida, Atlanta, Georgia, Greensboro, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee where Black college students protested eating facilities slow to desegregate (1960); the March on Birmingham, Alabama, where fire hoses and police dogs were turned on high school students and teachers opposing biased voter registration (1963); the March on Seattle, contesting unfair hiring practices in retail stores (1963); the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, a frequent meeting place for civil rights organizers, where 20 church members were injured and four young girls were killed (1963); the Marches from Selma to Montgomery (also known as Sunday Bloody Sunday), where thousands of protestors converged on the state’s capitol disputing intimidation tactics in Black voter registration only to be met with billy clubs, bull whips, and tear gas (1965) (Lawson, 1997; Levy, 1998). The appallingly inhumane responses that demonstrators faced were magnified tenfold by news images, which swayed mainstream sentiment toward the movement, weakening White Southern business structures and pressuring political powers to intercede (Lee, 2002).

An intriguing paradox that surfaces from the Civil Rights Movement concerns the intersection between King, the media, and the movement itself. As previously stated, the media linked King to virtually every organized nonviolent protest. Though these news reports served organizers by bringing national attention to the movement, they also inflated the public perception of King’s power and position. While he embraced the efforts (e.g., the mass sit-ins in the South) of independently acting groups, King was mostly unaware of their planning and outcomes (Garrow, 1986). Even so, the press perceived King as the head coordinator, much to the resentment of other national and local protest organizers. In Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968, Lawson and Payne (2006) write,

King, many of them complained, would come into a town where SNCC or CORE had done the dangerous, thankless work of getting something off the ground, give some speeches to the adoring masses and the fawning press and then fly off to the next place, leaving others to deal with the letdown.... He was a mobilizer, not an organizer, good at involving large numbers of people in short-term, media oriented events but never in one place long enough to see that a local infrastructure got created that could carry the struggle on with or without him. (p. 115)

The intention here is not to minimize the extraordinary leadership of Dr. King, but rather to point out how media sensationalized him, influencing the public mindset of
the time. News reports and public perceptions fitted comfortably within the pervasive American ethos of rugged individualism, which accordingly minimized the organizational efforts of other grassroots campaigns. This, in turn, later constructed a skewed, more widely established history of King as the Civil Rights Movement—its creator, hero, and martyr (Lawson & Payne, 2006). The oddity of this is that while King and the movement used media to emphasize its struggles, the process inadvertently deemphasized the foundation of the movement itself. Its roots had been grounded in the actions of everyday, individual citizens unified with the shared desire and commitment for social change. Yet today, school history books implicitly tell students that for people to mass mobilize a great and omnipresent leader must emerge to engage them. This idea runs counter to the reflective, activist spirit that the Civil Rights Movement espoused in the first place and induces a kind of mental paralysis that subconsciously tells citizens that they cannot act with fire and fervency (as witnessed in the actions of Rosa Parks and others) unless a centralized, larger figure is present to spur and control their “movement.”

The celebrated achievement of the Civil Rights Movement was that it produced a series of antidiscriminatory legislation that fundamentally changed U.S. social policies in voting, housing, employment, and immigration. With the passage of these various acts followed the assumption, like Brown, that “integration as equality” would settle racial tensions and improve the lives of all Black folks (Carnoy, 1994). Yet, the intersection of race and class plays a pivotal role in discerning which Black folks benefited most from civil rights legislation. Marable (1998) contends that, in a capitalist society, social class arrangements have everything to do with “ownership of capital, material resources, education, and access to power” (p. 151). While civil rights statutes offered greater access for middle/working class Blacks (those comparatively more integrated into the system), for Blacks unemployed, illiterate, poor, and homeless (those by and large invisible to the system), these enactments did not translate in the same manner (Marable, 1998). Though integration was unmistakably a significant factor in helping Black citizens carve out a sociopolitical space in American society, it offered them little by way of full economic engagement (Levy, 1998). Hence, the benefits of civil rights legislation mostly impacted those who previously had a “bootstrap” to pull up by and could more easily meld into the White social order. In one respect, the gains of the movement were conciliatory and on the conditions of White society (Lawson & Payne, 2006). The message being, “We’ll give you access and maybe some privileges, but power is a thing you will never have.” Quite aptly, these terms were part and parcel to the same rugged individualist ideology that enveloped perceptions of the movement. And, over the past three decades, this pervasive ideology has functioned to shift public opinion, subtly dismantle the rewards of the Civil Rights Movement, and manipulate policy outcomes that stress individualism, competition, and privatization (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Today, we observe this as disproportionate numbers of working class folk find themselves overtaxed and underemployed and public educational institutions are being inexorably subjected to nationalized accountability and privatized control and conformity (Bell-McKenzie & James, 2004; Saltman, 2000).

Social Perspective-Taking (Equality versus Equity)

Perhaps, we can best understand the tensions and ironies of Brown and the Civil Rights Movement by first undertaking the notion of “equality.” Though integration served as a means of maximizing social equality and minimizing racial conflict, it deceptively transmuted into mass assimilation. Stated differently, “integration as equality” actually meant the absorption of Black minds into the dominant group’s ideology—their norms,
standards, and mores. Thus, Black identities, represented by infinite epistemologies, cosmologies, and ontologies, have been relentlessly measured and defined by the yardstick of another culture. In turn, Black folks have been left with biased moral and cultural interpretations that frame their individual problems as group pathologies and deficits. While being able to integrate into the larger system may be necessary for the benefit of exploiting resources to address one’s needs, full incorporation into it comes at the cost of losing one’s humanity, as well as the capacity to see others as fully human. Therefore, as civic actors and social justice educators, an additional lesson we may be able to draw from Brown and the Civil Rights Movement lies in discerning the concept of equality. Gordon (1999) differentiates between equality and equity this way: “equality requires sameness, but equity requires treatments be appropriate and sufficient to those characteristics and needs of those treated...for educational equity to be served, treatment must be specific to one’s functional characteristics and sufficient to the realities of one’s condition” (p. xiv). So the question becomes: How do we come to know one another as human beings for the purpose of one, recognizing individual needs and conditions, and two, transforming and humanizing the workings of oppression from the personal to the institutional level?

In answering the above query, I propose the use of social perspective-taking as an extension of our pedagogical practice. As humans, it is enormously difficult to separate our personal theories about the traits of others from our views on how to relate to them (Selman, 1980). In this instance, social perspective-taking works to develop new cultural schemas that help individuals reevaluate the deeply internalized subjectivities of race, class, ethnicity, and gender, and those biases (and even hatreds) that are attached to them. Through narrative, poetry, oral history, and spoken word, this self-defining activity invites us into the lives of others. It offers us a glimpse into their world and informs us of far more than their skin color, the community in which they live, or the statistic that the larger society attempts to make them. Social perspective-taking encourages classroom participants to rethink and reconstruct their personal theories about other social groups, in relation to themselves, and provoke critical dialogue around oppression and the ways in which it can be altered at multiple levels. When educators take on this practice, Ríos and others (Ríos, Trent, & Vega-Castaneda, 2004) claim that “‘Teaching otherness’ connects teachers’ lives to difference and similarity,” whereby they come to “understand, embody, and become advocates for social justice and in turn, transfer this perspective to their students as a way of understanding and improving society” (p. 6). Social justice, in this regard, becomes more than just about theoretical declarations of egalitarianism. It is also fused with genuine inflection that serves to revolutionize and nurture our human existence.

In our labor to embrace and transform humanity, we must first come to understand the intimate and unbounded nature of it. Unearthing stories of triumph and defeat, of ignorance and awareness, of hate and love help us in understanding our shared human thread. Such stories hold the potential for desegregating minds that operate to keep our world segregated and the marginalized excluded from possessing power. Social perspective-taking as a small, but critical piece of social justice, compels us to stare deep into ourselves and acknowledge that we may be both the oppressor and the oppressed, but that change is possible. As we are exposed to the narratives of others, made aware of their life history and the choices that they make, we become more cognizant of how smaller, seemingly inconsequential, personal histories can impact our collective future. It is at this point that we truly discover what equality and equity is, realizing that it looks different from person to person and from community to community.
References


