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## Bookworm's Corner

### Book Review

**Morris, A. D. (1984). *The origins of the civil rights movement: Black communities organizing for change*. New York: The Free Press. Reviewed by Melinda Pilkinton, MSW, LCSW, ACSW**

Although Mr. Morris' work is more than two decades old, it remains a definitive chronicle of the history of the African American Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Mr. Morris researched archival records and conducted personal interviews with forty-nine significant personalities of this movement to document the story. The depth of his research is admirable. In this book, the story of civil rights is told for posterity. The rich details augment the telling of the history and, in part, serve to correct some of the previously held erroneous beliefs about the movement. Within and beyond the details lie incredible stories of courage, persistence, sacrifice, honor, pride, and evidence of such moral responsibility that one is inspired by the actors.

Additionally, the author critiqued the movement based on three theories: classical collective behavior theory, the theory of charismatic movements, and the resource mobilization theory. The theories provided a framework for both positive and negative comparisons.

While Mr. Morris did not entirely agree with the precepts of the aforementioned theories, he did express some agreement with segments of the theories. Primarily, he agreed that collective behavior theory involves the goal of social change, which was applicable to this movement. He differs with the concept regarding the absence of planning and organization. In collective action theory, the presence of planning and organizational activities is absent and the use of existing organizations is not typically found; thus, the events of the Civil Rights Movement do not mesh with this aspect of the theory, according to Mr. Morris.

Charismatic theory posits that individuals possess specialized skills or talents that contribute to their attractiveness and ability to perform needed functions in movements. Mr. Morris agreed that charismatic theory applied to the Civil Rights Movement in that Dr. King was highly visible, a gifted orator, and extremely motivational to the followers of the movement. According to charismatic theory, indigenous leaders arise during stress and chaos, do not adhere to formalized rules, and, moreover, if charismatic leaders are to remain leaders, they must become more rational and routine leaders. Morris departs from the theory in his analysis regarding Dr. King's influence. Dr. King remained a significant motivational force throughout his involvement in the movement and following his assassination. Additionally, the existence of charisma within the movement (possessed by Dr. King as well as many other leaders) was evident in the leaders' communities before the escalation of the Civil Rights Movement. In this case, charisma was not borne of spirited crowds and circumstances, it already existed.

Resource mobilization theory addresses the availability of resources needed to carry out the movement's work. Mr. Morris agreed with the application of resource mobilization theory with some reservations. Primarily, in accordance with the theory, Mr. Morris contended that the resources necessary for the movement existed within the Black community in the form of churches, the generosity of individuals, and communication networks. He disagreed that a significant portion of the resources were provided by liberal Whites. Although he acknowledged that contributions from Whites existed, he denied that the bulk of donations that funded the Civil

Rights Movement were from Whites and emphatically asserted that Black communities contributed heavily, particularly through their churches.

The strength of this book is that it provided an overview of a grassroots movement that served to change many existing laws, mores, and traditions of the times. In the field of social work, practitioners are called on to mobilize individuals, advocate for increased resources, and to facilitate the empowerment of others in order to obtain necessary changes to benefit clients. Mr. Morris provided numerous examples of the work of the civil rights leaders and the courage of ordinary citizens who were weary of their 'second-class' status. These inspiring histories are motivational for those who desire to help others. This book has relevance in the regard that basic human needs are universal and that the social work profession is charged with helping to alleviate the needs of vulnerable populations by the most effective means possible. In spite of the age of this work, social workers should find it to be meaningful for social justice and advocacy issues.

Mr. Morris' story is replete with examples of the phenomenon of a few individuals who wanted societal change who were able to build a ground swell of enthusiasm for the effort. Communication, networking, and brainstorming were significant factors in the planning process. In this manner, the smallest group often grew to large numbers of individuals who were willing participants in the action. Additionally, the primary actors of the Civil Rights Movement had a profound sense of social capital and influence which were heavily used throughout the entire movement. The leaders recognized the strengths and weaknesses of individuals, the pertinent skills these individuals had to offer, and whether or not the person could withstand public exposure or scrutiny. All of these skills are essential daily tools in macro practice as well as in other areas of social work.