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# Social Workers and the Development of the NAACP

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*This article addresses the relationship between African-American leaders and settlement house workers in the development of the NAACP. Using social movement theory and Hasenfeld and Tropman's conceptual framework for interorganizational relations, it analyzes the linkages developed between voluntary associations and how they benefitted all involved. This linkage provides lessons for today's struggle for social justice.*

## Introduction

This paper discusses the origins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) including the role played by settlement house workers in the development and ongoing leadership of that organization. Using social movement theory and Hasenfeld and Tropman's (1977) conceptual framework for interorganizational relations, it analyzes the way voluntary associations come together to create and maintain linkages which benefit all parties.

## Theoretical Framework

Social movements are often reflections of shifts in norms and values during social and cultural transitions (Killian, 1964) and in many cases, are responsible for those shifts. The main "vehicles of social movements" (Morris, 1984, p. 56) are social movement organizations (SMO), the movement centers which reflect the ideology and values of a social movement (Freeman, 1983).

According to classical collective behavior theory, SMOs emerge from social movements (Smelser, 1963). However, many theorists (Morris, 1981; Freeman, 1983; Aveni, 1978) argue that

SMOs often emerge prior to a social movement. Thus the social networks and resources necessary for the success of the social movement are preexisting.

Studies of several social movements related to civil rights reflect that there has been a consistent organizational network among African-Americans providing a framework for social action (Morris, 1984; Killian, 1984). This network originated during slavery and not during Reconstruction as generally assumed (Bennett, 1982).

Several histories of the NAACP have been written. The role of the NAACP in the Civil Rights Movement has been studied extensively as has the NAACP's antilynching campaign. However, the emergence of the NAACP has not been studied as a reflection of a social movement yet it demonstrates how a "preexisting organization of a dominated group" (Taylor, 1983, p. 289) and a "preexisting communications network" (Freeman, 1983, p. 9) can provide the basis for developing an SMO. It also demonstrates the importance of linkage in mobilizing an SMO.

The emergence of the NAACP in 1910 is an interesting study of the convergence of social forces over three decades, including the legislating of racism, several failed SMOs, and the growth of a social welfare system which challenged the prevailing norms, leading to the development of "one of the most powerful and successful social movement organizations in the country" (Aveni, p. 190). The NAACP has been called "the largest, most influential, and most successful of the organizations devoted to the task of winning full American citizenship for the Negro" (Jack, 1943, p. x). It was developed by people committed to social change and experienced in mobilizing people and resources.

### The Progressive Era

The period following Reconstruction laid the groundwork for much of the activity among African-Americans in the early 1900s. From the post-Reconstruction years to 1909, African-Americans were exploited and provided very little support from the federal government. The 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision

sanctioned segregation and in the South, Jim Crow laws kept African-Americans out of the economic mainstream and socially separate from white society. Lack of education, a legacy of slavery, left many African-Americans unable to acquire the kind of jobs necessary for success as did the deliberate exclusion from economic opportunities. Mob behavior and lynching were common especially in the South and were used to "intimidate, degrade, and control" African-Americans (Zangrando, 1980, p. 3) as well as emphasize white superiority.

However, the Progressive Era was a productive time for African-Americans and reflects many activities which laid the groundwork for the emergence of the NAACP. From 1880 to 1910, many social forces were converging to develop the linkages which would support the founding of the NAACP. Total segregation forced the development of a African-American capitalist system. Political leadership within the African-American community emerged and the political commentary of a powerful African-American press began to be heard (Marable, 1983). African-Americans developed a specific ideology and set up an effective communication network with linkage to powerful white organizations. Although given little attention, there was a subtle yet very strong social movement of African-Americans during the post Reconstruction years fueled by anger and frustration but the social movement lacked focus and direction. There were conflicting ideologies and leadership struggles among African-Americans during the Progressive Era.

### Settlement House Movement

While racism continued to dominate the social arena, a group of idealistic and optimistic settlement house workers, "became initiators and organizers of reform in the progressive era" (Davis, 1967, p. xi). They attempted to combat the segregation, violence, and discrimination against African Americans. While in many ways African-Americans were not direct recipients of the reform movement, the emphasis on equality and removal of oppressive societal conditions allowed African-Americans to organize and to garner white support (Jansson,

1988). The settlement houses with their political linkage were also in place when crisis occurred.

The Settlement House movement was based on the strengths philosophy. While the already existing Charity Organization Society sought to reform poor or needy *individuals*, the settlement house workers focused on *social* change. Rather than passing moral judgment and mandating specific behavior, settlement house workers asked community residents to assess their own needs. They also respected cultural differences. The main focus of the settlements was to provide neighborhood support for immigrants who were segregated in the inner cities with few skills and few economic opportunities and where often language was a barrier.

Many settlements began as community-based but recognized the need for local, state, and even national legislation to change community conditions. Settlement house leaders were forced to enter the realm of politics and as a result, began to emerge as prominent reformers (Davis, 1967). They had a major impact on social legislation in the late 1800s and early 1900s becoming politically powerful and able to command financial and political support for a variety of causes. This power was to be an important component of the emergence of the NAACP.

The settlement house movement grew rapidly but settlement houses rarely were in African-American communities unless run by African-American workers. However, despite opposition from the general public "at least some settlement house workers helped foster African-American pride and Afro-American culture" (Trattner, 1979, p. 146). Settlement house workers were more involved than most Progressives in working for equality (Davis, 1967). Several settlement house workers including "Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, Francis Kellor, Florence Kelley, Mary White Ovington, William E. Walling, Henry Moscovitz, and many others . . . were among the few outstanding white pioneers in the fight against racial discrimination" (Trattner, 1974, p. 147). They recognized the impact racism and segregation had on African-Americans and were able to use their research and legislative efforts to eliminate prejudice and dismantle Jim Crow (Addams, 1902). As Jane Addams (1910) wrote, Americans disliked hearing that it was "divided into two nations"

(p. 45) but some few people had to be concerned about the inequality that existed in this country. The settlement house workers initiated the study of conditions for African-Americans particularly W.E.B. DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro* and Mary White Ovington's *Half a Man* using the information to urge reform and equality (Davis, 1967).

By and large though, white settlement house workers included African-Americans among the many immigrant groups they served and rarely focused on them separately. Most did not advocate integration or work with African-American communities; rather they advocated segregated settlements in African-American communities most of which were underfunded and thus not always successful. However there were other social institutions that were quite successful.

#### Social Institutions

There were four social institutions that emerged during the Jim Crow era—African-American churches, African-American lodges, African-American women's groups, and African-American colleges—which subtly taught power, tactics, and pride (Bennett, 1982). These institutions were key factors in the development of an African-American consciousness which strengthened the social movement and led to the growth of several different SMOs. African-Americans in the early 1900s shared an oppressed existence but the experiences of slavery and segregation provided a sense of community. Blackwell (1991) argues that the African-American community was actually developed as a means to deal with the racist and oppressive social structure.

Because of the leadership opportunities in the churches, lodges, and women's organizations, and the educational opportunities provided by African-American colleges, an African-American middle-class with economic power and an African-American intelligentsia with ideas and demands were able to impact the direction of the social movement (Bennett, 1982). Several organizations were created to fight for the elimination of Jim Crow laws, to seek recognition for the contributions and abilities of African-Americans, to demand rights to education and jobs, and to address the problem of lynching.

In 1890, the National Afro-American League was founded as a militant protest organization (Meier & Rudwick, 1966). It was replaced by the National Afro-American Council in 1898 which in its early years advocated militant protest (Bennett, 1982). The Equal Rights Council was founded in 1893 to fight against lynching (Zangrando, p. 12) and the National Council of Colored Women emerged to focus on equality.

### Leadership

The strongest African-American voice in the late 1800s was that of Booker T. Washington; his leadership set the tone for many years. He advocated accommodation and social segregation and argued that individual change through the development of vocational and social skills rather than social change would make African-Americans more acceptable to whites. His acceptance of segregation caused him to be praised as the "national spokesman of black America" (Alvarez, p. 72) by white economic and political leaders.

A competing African-American voice during this era was W.E.B. DuBois. His philosophy of racial pride, societal change, and radical protest was in direct conflict with Washington's. His message was more threatening to whites and he generated less white support than Washington but by the early 1900s, Washington's message of accommodation was coming under attack. DuBois and other radical African-Americans began to fight openly and vocally against Washington's philosophy, the most specific attack occurring in DuBois' book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

### The Niagra Movement

Opposition to Washington, while strong, was not well organized until the Niagra Movement was begun. In 1905, DuBois invited several African-American intellectuals to meet in Niagra Falls, Ontario (segregated American hotels were unavailable to African-Americans) to discuss strategies for achieving equality. The group was adamant that accommodation was unworkable and dangerous. This Niagra Movement was the "first national organization of Negroes which aggressively and

unconditionally demanded the same civil rights for their people which other Americans enjoyed" (Alvarez p. 78) including the vote, an end to segregation in public facilities, adequate education, and equal protection under the law.

The radical nature of these demands made it difficult for the Niagra Movement to gain white support and DuBois' elitist emphasis on the Talented Tenth ignored the masses of African-Americans. Meier & Rudwick (1966) argue that fear of Washington's power may have dissuaded many other African-Americans from joining the organization. Without white support or African-American mass support, the failure of the Niagra Movement was inevitable.

However, the Niagra Movement may have laid the groundwork for an organization with a similar message and focus but with greater resources to emerge. Failed social movements may "leave behind the seeds of another specific movement" (Killian, 1964, p. 48). This also may be true of SMOs. Although the Niagra Movement failed, it provided the philosophy, the leadership, and the sense of mission which helped the NAACP to be successful. Its radicalism, threatening to many whites, also may have made a less radical organization such as the NAACP look more acceptable.

### The NAACP

The key event which sparked the development of the NAACP was the first major race riot in the North. Although many incidents had occurred in the North, this riot in 1908 occurred in Springfield, Illinois near the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. For a week, a white mob killed and injured African-Americans and drove hundreds of them out of the city (Bennett, 1982). As Cavin (1983) notes, "Extremism and heightened outside pressures sometimes paradoxically serve to mobilize new resources" (p. 329). The mob violence provided a central issue around which a social movement was born. The riot provided the emotionalism which other issues had not generated in the white community.

An appeal for aid to the Negro written by journalist William E. Walling led to a response from Mary White Ovington, a



settlement house worker and activist for the African-American community. A leadership meeting which included William E. Walling, Henry Moskowitz, and Ms. Ovington was held to develop strategy. It is ". . . significant that all three were settlement workers" (Davis, 1967, p. 101). The meeting resulted in Oswald Villard writing *The Call*, a statement informing the public of the suffering and injustice experienced by African-Americans. It was released on Lincoln's birthday and was signed by 53 people both African-American and white including educators, settlement house workers, writers, and other leaders (Ovington, 1947). After *The Call*, coalition building began between settlement house workers and African-Americans from the Niagra Movement. In 1909, a group of African-Americans and whites held an organizational meeting and reception at the New York Henry Street Settlement which led to the development of the National Negro Committee. A major issue was whether or not to include Booker T. Washington who was quite powerful especially in fundraising for African-American causes. After much debate, the organizers included DuBois rather than Washington despite their need for money (Ovington, 1947).

Although initially organized by white liberals who were settlement house workers, the National Negro Committee soon included several members of the Niagra Movement, the most notable being DuBois. In 1910, the NAACP emerged from the National Negro Committee (Jack, 1943, Ovington, 1947). The main focus of the NAACP was to "change public attitudes as well as public law and transform race relations." (Zangrando, 1980, p. 20).

While African-Americans actively organized the NAACP and only African-Americans could hold full membership, with the exception of DuBois, the original leadership of the NAACP was made up of white community leaders, many of whom were settlement house workers. DuBois remained the only African-American leader for several years serving as publicity officer and writing *The Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP. According to Ovington (1947), it was often hard to forget that Negroes were men with strong ideas rather than poor people to be aided. This attitude led to conflicts between DuBois and the white leadership (Alvarez, 1971). Attempts by African-

Americans, especially DuBois, to assert leadership and control over the NAACP were met with sanction and confusion over appropriate norms.

“...interorganizational relations are the main vehicle by which various organizations attempt to influence and control each other” (Hasenfeld and Tropman 1977, p. 263). Ovington (1947) said it was a “confession to the world that we cannot work with colored people unless they are our subordinates” (p. 80). Marable (1983) argues that dependency is a key factor in the underdevelopment of African-Americans in the U.S. “Blacks are pressured to become dependent on white liberals and moderates in order to articulate their agendas, in order to acquire majoritarian support” (p. 8). Morris (1984) states that “bureaucratic protest movements of poor and dominated groups are not likely to initiate or direct a mass movement . . . because their internal and external dynamics force them to march down a limiting institutional path” (p. 35). The emergence of the NAACP depended on white support and thus, at first, the organization was not allowed to be self-sufficient. The issues discussed by Ovington demonstrate the difficulty faced by African-Americans and the value system so hard to change which permeated the thinking of whites. However, while leadership struggles were taking place, the organization was able to obtain the legal expertise to use in the courts to fight lynching and to make African-Americans “legal entities” (Alvarez, 1971, p. 84).

### Conclusion

Freeman (1983) points out that while crises may be the catalysts for developing SMOs, they are only effective if an organized “communications network” exists prior to the crisis. Morris (1984) also argues that spontaneous emergence of an SMO is a myth and that linkages are often in place well before the catalyst which brings awareness and organization to the movement. He states that many researchers underestimate the abilities of dominated groups such as African-Americans in the early 1900s thus missing the “important roles that organization-building and skilled activists play in producing collective action (p. 76). Certainly this was true of the emergence of

the NAACP. Essentially, the social movement which had been developing over several decades and which had attempted to develop SMOs to further the values of the movement became institutionalized through the formation of the NAACP. It became an established SMO that quickly was integrated into the society. Its leadership was made up of people who had status and power in other areas of the society, providing further legitimacy and stability for the organization.

McCarthy and Zald (1977) argue that while grievances and emotional issues may begin a social movement, the resources available to that movement will determine its success or failure. In this sense, the success of the NAACP was very dependent on outside resources. Many of the previous attempts at developing SMOs around the African-American movement were unsuccessful even though riots, lynchings, and other emotionally volatile events occurred regularly. Until African-Americans who were organizing were able to garner the support from settlement house workers, newspaper editors, and other society leaders thus establishing the linkage necessary for success, the social movement did not mobilize. This was especially true because for African-Americans in the early 1900s every door to economic, political, and social power was closed. The organizational resources they had developed were not powerful enough to allow the emergence of an effective SMO without white support. While existing networks of African-American organizations were critical to the *success* of the NAACP, the larger network of interorganizational linkages which included whites was the key to its *emergence*.

Settlement house workers, journalists, clergy, and a handful of political leaders both African-American and white, all brought resources to the development of the organization which allowed it to become successful and the political climate enabled the movement to begin and continue. There appear to be many reasons for the support of the white individuals and organizations. Most writings of the time point to humanitarian concerns for African-Americans although there is some indication of political power struggles at work as well. Whatever their motives, the importance and status of the original organizers lessened the vocal opposition to the organization. The support of whites

for the NAACP may have been perceived as what Aveni (1978) calls the "restraining effect" (p. 199) of linkages between SMOs. The support of whites, particularly influential whites, not only provided legitimacy for the NAACP, but according to Meier and Rudwick (1966), provided interaction between white and African-American attorneys allowing the NAACP to become very successful in its later court battles. Aveni (1978) points out that the linkages SMOs develop are important to their ability to mobilize resources and to their growth. Without the experience and effort that went into the development of the NAACP, and the linkages it developed and maintained, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s may have had fewer organizations and resources available to it.

Hasenfeld and Tropman (1977) argue that "the survival and effectiveness of the organization is predicated on its ability to articulate with its environment and occupy a vital niche in it" (p. 269). This assumes the ability to adjust to the environment and to develop within the organization a communication system and a work system to carry out needed tasks. African-Americans' ability to articulate linkage with the social workers of the settlement houses enhanced the survival of the NAACP and demonstrates the shared value system of the two groups. This value system remains a part of the social work profession today and includes justice, empowerment, equality, peace, and the provision of mechanisms for developing a sense of community among disenfranchised and oppressed groups.

The value struggles and conflicts settlement house workers encountered as they became involved in the leadership of the organization reflect both the segregated and racially divisive times of the early 1900s and the conflicts social workers face today in working with oppressed populations to develop a sense of community. While respect for cultural differences remains a crucial component to effective community work, it also remains difficult for social workers to shake off the legacy of racism. Changing a value system perpetuated by the larger society is a challenging task and one which demands self-examination and self-awareness. Marables's (1983) concept of dependency also remains an issue. Social workers today must clearly recognize the tendency to want African-Americans to remain dependent

or to conform to the norms of the larger society. We often delude ourselves that we are culturally sensitive when we 'know' the differences rather than when we respect them and use them in the social work process.

There is very little in the social work literature about the contributions of the settlement house workers to the beginnings of the NAACP. Settlement House workers were able to locate and use resources effectively as well as serve as resources to the larger African-American community. The major contributions of the settlement house workers were organizational skills, political power, and legitimacy. This legacy is a rich one and one which needs attention as we struggle together to achieve social justice.

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