# Civil Rights Movement of 1964: Theories

## Civil Rights Movement and the Theory of Attribution

The 1960s was the most pivotal time of the 20th century America; it marks the period when the civil rights movement peaked in as far as advocating for social justice is concerned. To fully comprehend the significance of the period to Americans, particularly to the African-American demographic, it is important to examine the events through the theoretical perspective of attribution. According to this theory developed by Fritz Heider, social interactions play a fundamental role in explaining people's behaviors (Malle, 2011). In others words, to understand people's behavior, it is crucial to examine their perceptions of social interactions. In essence, the theory helps explain why things happen within the social sphere. In this light, to understand the development of the civil rights movement, especially in 1964, it is critical to explore why the event occurred in the first place. Notably, after decades of police brutality and social injustice, several incidents took place in 1964 that led to a series of racially-motivated riots in different parts of the nation. However, New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Jersey City experienced the most tumultuous events involving young African Americans and law enforcement authorities.

Indeed, the decades-old Jim Crow regime was to blame for the development of the civil rights movement that climaxed in 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was passed. Notably, the Jim Crow system was a state-sanctioned form of social domination that, in some way, extended the slavery tradition to the 20th century. The central tenet of this system of White domination against the Blacks was racial segregation, where Blacks were banned from using the same things as White. Even though the Jim Crow culture allowed African Americans to have to access the same services as Whites, they just could not share with the Whites the same facilities. For example, Blacks could not use toilets labeled Whites-Only, access hotel accommodation, travel in the front seats on a bus, or send their children to the same schools as White kids. It is these social injustices that led to the development of the civil rights movement, which succeeded when the Civil Rights Act was passed banning all form of racial segregation in the nation.

## The Civil Rights Movement and the Social Cognitive Theory

According to the theoretical perspective of social cognition, human behavior and personality, cognitive functioning, and other environmental events act as interacting determinants influencing social interactions. Before the civil rights movement, the American Society had disenfranchised the African American community for decades economically, socially, and politically. This form of social discrimination and segregation had resulted in downgraded cognitive self-awareness among Blacks, or elevated cognitive-awareness among Whites (Hargrove & Williams, 2014). In other words, the Whites saw themselves as superior to Blacks not only socially, but also in cognitive functioning. This form of social existence developed a sense of inferiority in the African-American population, more so considering the psychological effects caused by years of social segregation.

Environmentally, the American society was hostile to the Black community. Economically, Blacks were at the very bottom of the economic ladder with most of them working as hired hands in White farms (Hargrove & Williams, 2014). As they migrated towards the northern and southern cities, Blacks found themselves confined to the unskilled wage sector of the American economy. Socially, the Jim Crow system enforced a climate of segregation, where Blacks existed as the subordinate race to the dominant White race (Hargrove & Williams, 2014). Politically, the existing framework denied Blacks the constitutional rights of political representation, and this enhanced the continued disenfranchisement of the population.

## Basic Perceptual and Cognitive Processes

Human perception, learning, attention, memory, concept formation, and reasoning are critical components or processes of cognitive psychology. Others include judgment, decision-making, problem-solving, and language processing (Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield, 2015). According to cognitive psychology, human perception involves the interpretation of the surrounding environmental through the different sensual frameworks (Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield, 2015). Attention involves problem-solving after the cognitive processing systems experience information overload; in other words, it concerns the management of information to solve existing problems. Learning concerns the improvement of how humans respond to events in the surrounding environment. Memory is the bank where information is gathered, processed and retrieved for problem-solving or decision-making (Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield, 2015). Concept formation concerns the ability to classify experiences, while reasoning is the process by which humans make logical arguments. Judgment and decision flow from information processing from memory and assist in problem-solving or initiating the response to events in the environment (Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield, 2015). Problem-solving concerns how humans pursue established goals (Pervin, 2015) and language processing involves how humans acquire, comprehend, and produce language. It also concerns the reading element.

## Impact of Social Psychological Processes

In the field of sociology and psychology, dramatic social changes do not just happen; they are products of time and environment. Throughout human history, society has experienced dramatic social changes at one time or another (de la Sablonnière, Bourgeois, & Najih, 2013). These changes emanate from societal needs for growth and development. Recently, events such as Hurricane Katrina, 9/11 terrorist attack, and the Arab Spring resulted in dramatic social changes that continue to affect millions of people. Historically, events such as the civil rights movement stand out as phenomenon considering the dramatic social changes that they delivered. Notably, collective action is central to the framework of social psychological processes (Burr, 2015). In essence, collective action indicates the actions of a particular demographic group due to a sense of dissatisfaction (Burr, 2015). Evidently, through examining the civil rights movement, it is clear that the Blacks acted collectively as a race to express a sense of communal dissatisfaction, which had been entrenched by the Jim Crow regime.

## Heuristics, Biases, and Errors

The term ‘cognitive bias’ was first introduced by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in early 1970s to describe how humans systematically, but erroneously, respond to judgment and decision problems (Newell, Lagnado, & Shanks, 2015). In a heuristics and biases program, the duo observed that the human cognitive system was designed to draw inferences regarding the external world using imperfect cues. These imperfect cues, however, tend to result in errors from time to time. According to Tversky and Kahneman, judgment and decision mechanisms incorporate the component of representativeness, where people draw judgment according to the hypothesis fitting available information (Newell, Lagnado, & Shanks, 2015). In the component of availability, people make judgments according to how readily they can formulate an example in mind (Newell, Lagnado, & Shanks, 2015). Lastly, in the component of anchoring-and-adjustment, humans make judgment according to specific anchors, which are then adjusted to explain other environmental factors.

## Impact of Cultural Differences in the Analysis of Human Behaviour

It is a known fact in psychology that human behavior is a product of the interaction between social values that are culturally dependent and role identities that are different from person to person. Further, social roles comprise of expectations and behaviors that people develop from the psychological meanings that they attribute to particular environmental contexts (Spradley, 2016). In this respect, therefore, culture emerges through environmental adaptation from the interaction between basic human nature and the environmental contexts that exist. As such, cultural diversity impacts human behavior in three major ways (Spradley, 2016):

1. develops basic human nature through universal psychological processes,
2. defines culture through social roles, and
3. defines personality through individual role identities.

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