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# African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization<sup>1</sup>

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Through an analysis of gender in the civil rights movement, this article illustrates that the conceptualization of social movement leadership requires expansion. This study concludes that an intermediate layer of leadership is critical to the micromobilization of a social movement. This intermediate layer provides a bridge (1) between the social movement organization(s) and potential adherents and constituents, (2) between prefigurative and strategic politics, and (3) between potential leaders and those already predisposed to movement activity. The latter illustrates that mobilization does not always occur in a linear fashion (i.e., formal leaders mobilize and recruit participants). In the case of the civil rights movement, this intermediate layer of leadership was the primary area for women's leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

A central concern of social movement theorists is the process of micromobilization or the ways in which individuals come to participate in movement organizations and identify with its issues and goals. To this end, numerous studies have established the importance of institutional and/or interpersonal networks for successful movement mobilization (e.g., Morris 1984; Freeman 1975, 1979; Oberschall 1973; McAdam 1986, 1992, 1993; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Snow, Zurcher, and Eckland-

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Verta Taylor, Judith Stacey, Fred Block, Mayer Zald, Aldon Morris, and Myra Marx Ferree and especially the *AJS* reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions. Funding was provided by the Rackham Dissertation Grant, the Center for the Continuing Education for Women Scholarship, and the Program on Conflict Management Alternatives Dissertation Grant, all from the University of Michigan; the American Sociological Association Minority Dissertation Fellowship; and the Wellesley College Mary McEwen Schimke Dissertation Scholarship. Support was also provided by the University of California Davis, Faculty Research Grant and Faculty Development Grant. Address correspondence to Belinda Robnett, Department of Sociology, University of California, Davis, California 95616. E-mail: bbrobnett@ucdavis.edu.

Olson 1980; Snow et al. 1986; Curtis and Zurcher 1973; Fernandez and McAdam 1988; Gould 1993; Rosenthal et al. 1985; Walsh and Warland 1983). For example, Morris's (1984) well-known account of the civil rights movement emphasizes the important links and interpersonal ties among ministers, which were critical resources in mobilizing community and student support. Such ties and networks were mediated through preexisting community institutions and organizations. Through these mediated structures, interpersonal networks were formed. While Morris's work has contributed significantly to our understanding of the processes of movement mobilization, it is important to further our understanding of the processes by which the formation of mobilization potential is cultivated.

Klandermans (1988) points out the need to analyze the processes by which consensus is formed and action is mobilized within social movements. As Klandermans notes, structures alone cannot mobilize individuals to act. Potential constituents must be convinced of the legitimacy of participation. They must be persuaded to act. Snow et al. (1986) discuss the essential processes necessary for persuading potential constituents to join a movement. In doing so, they outline four social psychological processes necessary in the recruitment process. First, frame bridging involves providing those who are already predisposed to one's cause with the necessary information to persuade them to join the movement. Second, the process of frame amplification emphasizes the compatibility of the movement's values and beliefs with those of the potential constituents. This also involves persuading individuals that their participation is essential and that the movement goals can be achieved. Third, frame extension occurs when the movement extends its boundaries to include the interests of potential recruits. These interests are not necessarily a part of the movement's goals but serve as a means of increasing support. Finally, there is frame transformation, which requires that individual frames be changed entirely or in part to achieve consensus with the movement's goals.

These four processes have received a great deal of social movement research and theoretical discussion; however, three areas of research have received scant attention. First, the significance of the social location of movement carriers has been generally neglected. We do not yet fully understand how mobilization takes place in day-to-day community work, and we do not know who is likely to do such work, although identity has been discussed in the context of developing collective identity, group consciousness, and solidarity (see, e.g., Snow et al. 1980; Klandermans 1986); however an analysis of who is likely to succeed at the techniques needed to persuade potential constituents to join a movement has been

neglected. Consequently, the significance of "who" is doing what type of micromobilization for a movement has been left unanalyzed.

Recently, scholars have begun to examine the different experiences of men and women activists (e.g., Bridenthall Koontz 1977; Lawson and Barton 1980; Payne 1989, 1990; and McAdam 1992). McAdam, for example, has discussed the importance of deconstructing the experiences of movement participants. He found significant gender differences in the recruitment processes of white male and female participants in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a civil rights movement organization. Such a study provides support for the notion that participants are not a monolithic group. Thus it is equally important to analyze the different movement experiences as determined by one's race, class, and gender (see, e.g., Collins 1990; Collins and Anderson 1995; Davis 1981; Zinn and Dill 1994; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; and West and Blumberg [1990] for a fuller understanding of differential experiences based on race, class, gender, and sexual preference).

Indeed scholars of "new" social movements (e.g., Mellucci 1985, 1988, 1989; Pizzorno 1978; Cohen 1985; and Klandermans 1986) emphasize the need to analyze movement groups whose solidarity does not emerge from shared cultural and/or racial experiences. The emphasis upon collective identity as only important to the study of "new" social movements is limiting and problematic (see Gamson 1992). The notion that collective identity is more important for movements that are, for example, non-ethnic and interracial, assumes a uniform experience within racial and ethnic groups. It does not take into consideration differences based upon class and gender. Scholars of "new" social movements would, therefore, assume that the collective identity of African-American participants in the civil rights movement was nonproblematic.

As this article illustrates, the development and sustenance of a collective identity within the civil rights movement was anything but nonproblematic. Not all African-Americans were eager to join the movement or even knew about the movement. Particularly in rural pockets of the South, any media coverage portrayed the movement as Communist backed. Many rural African-Americans believed that the "outsiders," who were stirring up trouble in their communities, were going to get them killed. Specific methods of recruitment were employed to persuade the masses to risk their lives for the movement. Often, the purveyors of the movement's message were women. The gendered organization of the civil rights movement defined the social location of African-American women in the movement context and created a particular substructure of leadership, which became a critical recruitment and mobilizing force for the movement.

This brings us to a second area of research that needs attention. Although social movement theorists often discuss movement leaders, the concept of leadership is generally left unanalyzed. Typically, movement participants are dichotomized as leaders or followers. An analysis of gender has led to a reconceptualization of leadership activities within social movements. Within the context of the civil rights movement, African-American women operated as "bridge leaders," who—through frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation—initiated ties between the social movement and the community and between prefigurative strategies aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness and political strategies aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions (see Breines 1982; Gamson 1992; and Tarrow 1992). The activities of African-American women in the civil rights movement provided the bridges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and the political life of civil rights movement organizations.

Finally, the theoretical treatment of movement mobilization has focused primarily upon the mobilization of potential recruits or followers and not upon the dialectical relationships *among* movement leaders and *between* movement leaders and followers. Consequently movement mobilization is conceptualized as taking place in a linear fashion in which leaders begin movements and mobilize the masses. As later discussion illustrates, leaders are often mobilized by the masses they will eventually come to lead. Moreover, bridge leaders and followers may eventually amplify, extend, and transform the message of the movement so that it is no longer in congruence with that of the formal leaders.

#### RECONCEPTUALIZING LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Women activists, as bridge leaders, were able to cross the boundaries between the public life of a movement organization and the private spheres of adherents and potential constituents. Such bridging has been implied by Sacks (1988) in her study of union organizing. She discusses the role of "centerwomen," or those "who were centers and sustainers of work-based networks," and links them to union organizing (Sacks 1988, p. 120). As Sacks notes, many of the women she studied operated as leaders but rarely accepted the title as such. They preferred to stay behind the scenes. Moreover, through her study, her own *a priori* notions of what constituted leadership were challenged. She had conceived of leadership in much the same vein as most scholars. Leaders have been generally defined as those who hold titled positions, have power over members, make decisions on behalf of the organization, and are per-

ceived by the public and the state as the leaders. Sacks has challenged these notions of leadership, suggesting that they are too narrowly defined. Likewise, in my study I allowed the women to define who were leaders and to explain what they felt exemplified leadership. Victoria Gray, an activist, provided a response typical of my interviewees: "They, [Ella Baker and Septima Clark, who will be discussed in detail later] were both leaders . . . in the sense of that effectiveness, of the loyalty of those who work with and around them. It was a lot to do with a kind of loyalty and influence that you are able to elicit from the people around you."<sup>2</sup>

She further suggested that it did not matter whether leadership was exhibited at the local or international level, what counted was the presence of the aforementioned personal qualities. Her definition of leadership as well as those of other respondents indicates that what defines a leader is not his or her position in terms of titles or recognition by the state, public, or international community but the ability to influence others and to have loyal followers.

Feminist scholars, of course, have been challenging the basic approaches and theoretical underpinnings of analyses of political participation (see West and Blumberg 1990, pp. 3–35; Jones and Jonasdottir 1988; Smith 1988; and Spender 1983) suggesting that top-down analyses of political participation necessarily exclude women and ignore their significant contributions. In contrast, several studies of women's organizations compared and contrasted organizational structures with varied types of power and leadership (e.g., Freeman 1975, 1979; Buechler 1990). Still other feminists writing about women's organizations have approached the study of social movements through an examination of women's networks (see Ferree and Hess 1985, pp. 94–103) or their separate communities of organization within a movement (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Yet, the notion of bridge leaders (those who provide the bridges between prefigurative and strategic politics) is largely undeveloped in feminist as well as social movement theory.

Of course, organizational theory has dealt rather extensively with the distinction between formal and informal leadership. These definitions lend greater clarity to the notion of bridge leaders. Etzioni (1961, p. 90) defines formal leaders as "actors who occupy organizational offices which entail power and who also have personal power over subordinates." Informal leaders are "actors within the organization who have personal but not official power over lower participants. The same person may have official power over some subordinates and personal influence as well over others. Moreover, he may be an officer to some of his subordinates, a

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Victoria Gray by telephone, February 6, 1990.

formal leader for some others, and an informal leader of participants of his own rank over whom he has no official power" (Etzioni 1961, p. 90).

In social movement theory, informal leaders are often mentioned among the types of leaders, but typically the position is left unanalyzed in terms of the social construction of these positions or the ways in which these positions develop in terms of social limitations. Several studies have conceptualized informal leadership. Smelser (1962, p. 297), for example, suggests that there are two kinds of leadership, one directed at developing group beliefs and one concerned with movement mobilization, which may be divided into several types of leadership as the movement progresses. Gusfield (1966, pp. 141–42), too, suggests that leadership within an organization is divided into two functions. Yet he suggests, as does Smelser, that these functions may be merged into one leadership position. Anthony Oberschall (1973, pp. 115–17) writes about leadership in terms of Olsen's selective imperatives, which "stimulate" rational individuals to participate in social movement organizations. He articulates the need to "distinguish several levels of participation." Yet, he never elaborates the differences or defines the top from the secondary in terms of tasks performed toward meeting the organization's goals. While Gusfield and Smelser do a better job of elaborating the differences in leadership, we are still left without an understanding of the impact of social categories (i.e., race, class, and gender) on the social construction of movement hierarchy and the effects this has upon the attainment of movement goals. While we are given an understanding of leadership functions and roles, we do not know how informal leadership is constructed, who comprises the informal leadership, what exactly informal leaders do, or how informal leaders and primary leaders interact. We are left with a view that there are certain roles in social movements that individuals may fill, but we do not gain an understanding of how they are constructed by the hierarchies and power differentials that already exist in society.

For example, Barnett (1993) provides a much needed analysis of gendered leadership in the civil rights movement but does so within the context of roles. She suggests that certain leadership roles were viewed as more valuable to civil rights movement leaders than others and that women, along with men, performed many of the most important roles. Although she discusses race, class, and gender as variables affecting the recognition of women's leadership within and outside of the movement organization, she does not fully elaborate the extent to which the power dynamics of these social categories shaped the civil rights movement organizations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I do not use the term "role" in my analysis of women's positions in the civil rights movement organizations. Sex role theory is ahistorical and does not allow for dialectic-

Although exact numbers are not available, it is clear from numerous accounts of the civil rights movement (e.g., Crawford 1987; Crawford, Rouse, and Woods 1990; Payne 1990; Robinson 1987; Morris 1984; Giddings 1984; Cantarow and O'Malley 1980; Clark 1986; Barnett 1993; Evans 1979; King 1987; McAdam 1988) that women formed a substantial portion of the participants within the movement. This should come as no surprise since numerous studies document women's involvement in grassroots mobilization (e.g., West and Blumberg 1990; Andreas 1985; Bookman and Morgen 1988; Fainstein and Fainstein 1974; Jayawardena 1986; McCourt 1977; Sacks 1988; Chafetz and Dworkin 1986; Piven and Cloward 1977; Kaplan 1982; Thomis and Grimmatt 1982; Tilley 1981; Naples 1992). What has not been provided are systematic analyses of the patterns of their participation and the ways in which constructs of exclusion, such as gender, shaped the development of leadership as well as the organization of social movements.

This article illustrates that women, because of their gender, were often channeled away from formal leadership positions and confined to the informal level of leadership. Gender provided a construct of exclusion that helped to develop a strong grassroots tier of leadership that served as a critical bridge between the formal organization and adherents and potential constituents. Bridge leaders were by no means exclusively women. However, this area of leadership was the only one available to women. Consequently women, who, because of their strong capacities to lead, might otherwise have been a part of the formal leadership, contributed significantly to the extraordinary nature of the grassroots leadership within the civil rights movement. Within this context, the civil rights movement's organization was gendered.

The concept of organization as a gendered process is not new (see, e.g., Cockburn 1983, 1985; Connell 1987; West and Zimmerman 1987; Kanter 1977; Scott 1986; Harding 1986; Game and Pringle 1984; Acker 1988, 1990; MacKinnon 1982; Young 1981; Ferguson 1984; Ressler 1987). The present study analyzes gender as an exclusionary construct that shaped the development, sustenance, and outcome of the civil rights movement. The gendered organization of the civil rights movement created a particular substructure of leadership that was central to the development of identity, collective consciousness, and solidarity within the movement. This research highlights the significance of African-American women's participation as bridge leaders within the civil rights movement.

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tical change or consider power relations. It further assumes voluntarism and ignores social and political determinants. See Stacey and Thorne 1985; also Connell 1987 for a more detailed discussion.



## THE STUDY

This article, which is derived from a larger study, places African-American women at the center of the analysis and focuses upon the movement within the context of their organizational participation. As much as possible women's voices are used to illustrate themes which emerged during the personal interviews or through archival research. This study used a number of qualitative data sources, including life histories, archival materials, secondary sources, and personal interviews. Multiple methods through triangulation were employed in an effort to discover which women were leaders. For example, names were located in several well-known accounts of the civil rights movement (e.g., Morris 1984; McAdam 1982, 1988; Branch 1988). The accuracy of these findings was verified through the use of archival data. Interviewees were also asked for names of women who they felt were movement leaders, thus implementing the "snowball" method. Through this process, I could be relatively certain that my categorization of a particular woman as a leader was valid. Additionally, this allowed the participants to define leadership in their own terms.

Data from a subset of 50 interviews were used for this article. Women were asked the same questions regarding their participation as well as the participation of other women in their respective civil rights movement organizations. The method was to ask specific open-ended questions and to follow the interviewee's line of thought with additional questions. The remaining interviews were obtained from the Civil Rights Documentation Project at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center of Howard University in Washington, D.C.; the Oral History Project at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for the Study of Nonviolence in Atlanta; and from secondary sources. These interviews, primarily with women who are now deceased, were especially suitable for the study as the interviewers had focused attention on the participation of these women in the movement organizations.

Archival research took place in several locations. The Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolence, the Civil Rights Documentation Project at Howard University, and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers at Boston University supplied detailed information regarding women's activities in civil rights organizations. The years 1954–65 are the central focus of this study since these were the years of heightened civil rights movement activity. Women's activities in seven civil rights movement organizations—the Women's Political Council (WPC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the National

## GENDER AS A CATEGORY FOR EXCLUSION FROM FORMAL LEADERSHIP

That women were excluded from formal leadership positions during the time of the civil rights movement should come as no surprise. The women's liberation movement in the United States did not develop until the late sixties and early seventies. Within this context, notions of feminism and equal representation of women were not considerations in movement participation. Therefore, any analysis of gendered power relations is necessarily post hoc. This should not, however, preclude analysis. It is clear that the expectations were for men to occupy the formal leadership positions. In all of the movement organizations, women's representation as formal leaders was scant.

The MIA, for example, whose organization was patterned after the church, was established with only one woman officer, the financial secretary. Women participated in committees where they were outnumbered by men. For example, Rosa Parks was the only woman to serve on the committee to write the MIA constitution, and Irene West was the only woman on the nine-member committee to establish a bank and savings association. Erna Dungee, Alda Caldwell, and Eurette Adair were on the finance committee with four men. Women did chair certain committees, such as the welfare committee and the membership committee. Both areas were also the responsibility of women in the church.<sup>4</sup> Women within the welfare committee were responsible for the well-being of those who might suffer economic reprisals for movement participation. It was not that women were prevented from participating in important ways but that their participation options were limited.

In an interview, Johnnie Carr, a member of the MIA, agreed that, while women could chair a committee or hold office as a secretary, they would not be elected president: "Well, it was not a stated thing but just an understood thing. . . . Now of course when you spoke out against things like that, a lot of times you were even criticized by other women that felt like . . . this is not what we ought to be doing." She continued, "I think we just accepted the servant [role] and done what we could because we felt like togetherness was the point."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See King Papers, Boston University (box 6, ser. I, file 38, MIA folder). This includes numerous documents of women's committee positions during the boycott and within the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Johnnie Carr by telephone, January 26, 1990.

It was not that women could not be viewed as possessing leadership qualities; such qualities were viewed in positive terms within the community. Rather, it was that these qualities were suitable for local activities and committee duties. Though Jo Ann Robinson, Irene West, and later Johnnie Carr were members of the board, most women's activities included fundraising, membership recruitment, and community welfare.<sup>6</sup> Jo Ann Robinson was an instrumental leader in the Montgomery bus boycott, which is often thought of as the beginning of the civil rights movement. The boycott was organized as a means of forcing desegregation on the buses. Yet, Robinson's position within the MIA did not reflect her leadership abilities. Her actions were certainly no less critical to the success of the boycott than were those of the male officers. Yet, as Dorothy Cotton recalls, the recognition of women's leadership often took the form of a "paternalistic pat on the head."<sup>7</sup>

At the mass meetings, which were generally minister led, women's activities were acknowledged with anecdotal stories that portrayed their courage in not riding the buses. Committee chairs of the membership and welfare committees were often given three-minute slots to give updates on the progress of these endeavors. The belief in the ministers' authority as leaders was born out in the MIA newsletter, edited by Jo Ann Robinson but subject to approval by Martin Luther King, Jr., which did not contain much information on the activities of women and tended to focus on the ministers.<sup>8</sup>

This pattern of gender exclusion from formal leadership positions was also true of the SCLC. Males, in particular ministers, dominated the upper ranks of the SCLC hierarchical structure. At the executive staff level, there were only two areas where women actively participated, the Citizenship Education Program and the fund-raising department. Until 1965, there were either no women on the board of directors, or one woman. In 1964, Marian B. Logan of New York City served as the only female member of the board. By 1965, there were three women on the board: Logan, Erna Dungee, and Victoria Gray. Thirty-nine males constituted the rest of the board roster.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, women, even when they were privy to board and executive staff meetings, found themselves left out of decision-making processes

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Hazel Gregory by telephone, February 15, 1990; King Papers, King Center, MIA document (box 16, file 25).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dorothy Cotton, January 20, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> See Hazel Gregory Papers, King Center (box 1, file 21); MIA Newsletters 1956–60, King Center.

<sup>9</sup> See SCLC Papers, King Center (subgroup D, ser. 9, box 120, file 19); SCLC Newsletter November 1959 and SCLC Papers May 28, 1959 (sub. D, ser. 8, box 129, file 1).

regarding organization, structure, and future strategies. Ella Baker, despite her experience as a seasoned activist and freelance consultant to civil rights groups, was hired as the acting director of the newly formed SCLC. Since the ministers did not feel that a woman was a suitable director for their organization, they hired her on a temporary basis while they searched for a more appropriate replacement. During her tenure, she was consistently frustrated by the dominance of the Baptist ministers and their lack of confidence in her skills. In commenting on why she decided to leave the SCLC, she replied, "In the first place, I had known, number one, that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister." She continued,

In the first place, the combination of being a woman, and an older woman, presented some problems. Number one, I was old enough to be the mother of the leadership. The combination of the basic attitude of men, and especially ministers, as to what the role of women in their church setups is—that of taking orders, not providing leadership—and the ego that is involved—the ego problems involved in having to feel that here is someone who had the capacity for a certain amount of leadership and, certainly, had more information about a lot of things than they possessed at that time—this would never have lent itself to my being a leader in the movement there."<sup>10</sup>

This feeling of not being allowed to rise in the ranks of the SCLC leadership was echoed by Septima Clark, a key activist in the SCLC. She recalled, "I was on the Executive Staff of SCLC, but the men on it didn't listen to me too well. They liked to send me into many places because I could always make a path in to get people to listen to what I have to say. But those men didn't have any faith in women, none whatsoever. They just thought that women were sex symbols and had no contribution to make. That's why Rev. Abernathy would say continuously, 'Why is Mrs. Clark on this staff?'"<sup>11</sup>

Clark's and Baker's comments reflect the degree to which women's positions were controlled by the belief that male ministers should be the primary source for formal leadership. At most of the conventions the only women to participate regularly were Septima Clark and Dorothy Cotton, both of whom ran the education area of the SCLC, and Diane Nash Bevel, the youth group coordinator. Clark and Cotton were usually afforded a few minutes to report on the progress of the Citizenship Education Program, while Bevel ran a youth group workshop. At board meetings as well as executive staff meetings, women's verbal comments

<sup>10</sup> See Ella Baker Transcript, p. 10, Civil Rights Documentation Project.

<sup>11</sup> See Septima Clark Oral History Project, King Center, transcript 17, p. 39.

were scarce and usually treated without serious consideration, especially if they were policy suggestions.<sup>12</sup>

Dr. King, in a letter intended as a preface to Septima Clark's autobiography, *Echo in My Soul*, indicates his view of women's positions in the struggle for civil rights. He wrote, "*Echo in My Soul* epitomizes the continuous struggle of the Southern Negro woman to realize her role as a mother while fulfilling her forced position as community teacher, intuitive fighter for human rights and leader of her unlettered and disillusioned people."<sup>13</sup> The young Baptist minister believed that women, while capable of leadership, did not and should not exercise this ability by choice. A woman's position was more naturally suited as a support to her husband and as a mother to her children.

Dr. King's ambivalence toward women extended into his dealings with other women on his staff as well. Carole F. Hoover was the daughter of a minister in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who began working for the SCLC in 1962 and served as an aide to Wyatt T. Walker, the executive assistant. In 1964 Walker was relocated, leaving Hoover uncertain of her status. Repeated attempts to discuss her situation with Dr. King failed, and in a letter to him she wrote,

I regret that I have to communicate by this means with you, however, it seems that it is impossible for me to be afforded an opportunity to talk with you. . . . I need to know specifically what my responsibility will be and also my job classification. . . . My second concern stems from the fact that I am so obviously excluded from meetings where programming, policy and future plans for the organizations are dealt with. Consequently, I am poorly informed which is bad, because I am constantly before groups for promotions, fund raising and other things where it is mandatory to be

<sup>12</sup> See SCLC Executive Staff Meeting minutes, August 26–28, 1965, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 1, box 3, file 37); Seventh Annual Convention, September 24–27, 1963 (sub. D, ser. 13, box 130, file 2); Staff Meeting, September 16, 1964 (sub. E, ser. 1, box 137, file 4); SCLC Conference, November 10–12, 1964, Erna Dungee Papers (box 2, file 22); Annual SCLC Meeting, September 27–29, 1961 (sub. D, ser. 13, box 129, file 12); SCLC Conference, September 25–28, 1962 (sub. D, ser. 13, box 129, file 31); SCLC Convention 1963 (sub. D, ser. 13, box 130, file 2); Letter from Martin Luther King, Jr., to the presidents of affiliates, February 3, 1962, King Papers, King Center (box 29, file 1); SCLC Board Meeting Minutes, 1960, 1961, 1962, King Papers (box 29, file 1); SCLC Board Meeting Minutes, September 24, 1963 King Papers (box 29, file 2); SCLC Board Meeting Minutes, August 9, 1965, King Papers (box 29, file 5). For the years 1958 and 1960–66, there is only one press release from the SCLC that mentions a woman (ser. D-9, box 120, file 6). Dorothy Cotton, the one woman, is also mentioned several times in newsletters. Some women are recognized for graduating from the Citizenship Education Classes and going back to start schools in their communities (SCLC newsletters [sub. D, ser. 9, box 120, files 20–21 and box 122, file 19]).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., to the associate editor of E. P. Dutton, July 2, 1962, King Papers, King Center (box 29, file 18).

equipped with information on our present program. At present, I do not know what cities we will be in this summer for direct action. I feel that if I am to remain on the staff at least I should be informed.<sup>14</sup>

Carole Hoover was not a part of the executive staff, though her position clearly required such participation (by 1965 she was included in these meetings).<sup>15</sup> That women were systematically excluded from positions in formal leadership is obvious. Such exclusion was not, however, limited to minister-led organizations.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was primarily a secular, nonhierarchical organization, also tended to exclude women from the formal leadership. Although there were rotating chairs and an executive committee, between 1960 and 1965, all of the chairs and executive secretaries were men. Likewise, the majority of those who served on the executive committee were men. Virtually all project directors were men until 1964.<sup>16</sup> So men tended to dominate official positions of power, though in SNCC there was no clear line of authority. Theoretically, SNCC leaders were to take the form of organizers who would inspire local leadership.

In the beginning, the membership in SNCC was primarily composed of men. In correspondence sent to the SNCC office in 1962, a prospective woman volunteer writes, "Many of us are interested in the possibility of going to the South but are hesitant because from the information we have received about SNCC we could find only male students' names in the accounts of students working there."<sup>17</sup> In response, Horace Julian Bond, a SNCC field secretary, replied, "Although we do not presently have any girls on our field staff, we do have a very capable office manager who is very female. Diane Nash one of the leaders of the Nashville Student Movement, was a leader on SNCC's staff until her recent marriage. Glen Green, Joy Reagan, Bertha Gober, and other college girls have been members of the staff in the past as well." He continued, "In addition, let me say that if we were able to hire a girl to type some of our correspondence, I wouldn't have made as many mistakes as I have."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Carole Hoover to Martin Luther King, Jr., King Papers, King Center (box 34, file 5).

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of SCLC Executive Staff Meeting, August 26–28, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 1, box 3, file 37). The view that King was ambivalent toward women is presented throughout Coretta Scott King's *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*

<sup>16</sup> See SNCC Papers, Chairman's Files 1960–65 (sub. A, ser. 1, boxes 1–5); Executive and Central Committees 1961–65 (ser. 2, box 6); Staff Meetings, 1960–65 (ser. 3, box 7); Executive Secretary Files, 1959–65 (ser. 4, boxes 8–24); and State Project Files, 1960–65 (ser. 15, boxes 94–105).

<sup>17</sup> Marion Michaels to James Forman, April 5, 1962, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 4, box 16, file 221).

<sup>18</sup> Julian Bond to Marion Michaels, April 10, 1962, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 4, box 16, file 221).

From the beginning, a core of men remained central in various positions of power. Such male leaders as James Forman, John Lewis, Marion Barry, Bob Moses, Worth Long, Courtland Cox, Ivanhoe Donaldson, and later Stokely Carmichael, were either chairs of SNCC or representatives on the executive committee. Women tended to rotate in or out of the executive committee positions and to align themselves with either the Forman, Moses, or Carmichael camp.<sup>19</sup>

Though women were viewed as capable and often participated in ways that endangered their lives, certain gender-based restrictions on their participation remained. In 1964, the Atlanta staff, which included administration, the "Student Voice," photography, research, Northern coordination, Southern coordination, communications, office managers, telephone operators, the financial department, Freedom Singers, and others, was predominately male. Carol Merritt was the only woman in the administrative area, where she directed the education program. The executive secretary, program director, administrative assistant, chairman, and Freedom Summer coordinator were all men. There were no women in the "Student Voice" area and only one or two women in the other areas. The only exceptions to this pattern are the telephone operators and the financial department, who were exclusively women.

Ruby Doris Smith Robinson's position in charge of personnel was placed in the "other" category.<sup>20</sup> This position actually gave her a great deal of power within SNCC since she was responsible for hiring and firing volunteers and for signing checks that went to the various projects.<sup>21</sup> There were also women campus travelers who solicited funds and volunteers. These included Jean Wheeler, Enoch Johnson, Joyce Brown, and Judy Richardson.<sup>22</sup> In a 1964 job description of personnel in the Atlanta office, it is clear that job title and job descriptions adhered to gender-based divisions of labor. For example, the executive director, the "unofficial" office manager, and the staff coordinator were all men. The descriptions of their jobs included words that indicated authority over others, while women's job descriptions, such as those of Forman's secretary and of the women coordinators, included the verbs "answers" and "handles." The receptor of women's authority was generally an object, namely correspondence.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Fay Bellamy, February 7, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> See Persons working out of the Atlanta office, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 6, box 28, file 21).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Fay Bellamy, February 7, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> See Persons working out of the Atlanta office, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 6, box 28, file 21).

<sup>23</sup> See Job Description, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 4, box 28, file 17).

In a 1964 office staff meeting, Julian Bond, the director of communications, indicated his dislike of working with women, which was honored with the appointment of a man as his coworker. As the staff minutes state, "Julian doesn't like working with women. . . . Would like to have Mike Sayer as requested earlier." There was no attempt to confront this issue by either the men or women present at the meeting.<sup>24</sup> Later that year in an executive committee meeting that included four women and 14 men, the group discussed the possibility of training a SNCC member to become a fundraiser. As indicated by the minutes of this meeting, Forman suggests, "Let's discuss whether we should have someone from our own ranks or hire someone for lots of money. This person should have 'internal drive,' should be someone who feels fundraising is very important, who is willing to learn and who can move into cities and move the people there, who will attend to details, who will travel, who won't dump the program because of a commitment to be in the South. Ivanhoe could do this." The minutes continue: "Some discussion on the person to fill this job. T. Brown asked if it had to be a male and suggested Prathia [Hall]. John Lewis suggested we refer the names to a committee but Forman thought it was too important a question to be referred to a committee. Forman mentioned that male would be better since job involved living virtually out of a suitcase."<sup>25</sup>

Although the restrictions involved gender-based assumptions, there was a general belief that women were capable of doing the job but that they should not do it. Though SNCC was not minister led, it was male dominated. Many respondents stated that women did not want to be in the office but preferred to work in the field. One respondent recalls, "If you had a title, you were in the office."<sup>26</sup> Titled positions, for women, often translated into less power. This was not true for men such as Julian Bond or James Forman, whose titled positions often translated into greater power to make decisions. If a woman was titled, this usually meant that her duties would be restricted to clerical activities. On the other hand, when she participated without a title, her activities could stretch beyond the bounds of her otherwise stated duties. In other words, it was unsuitable for a woman to hold a titled position with an undue amount of power. So women, cognizant of the fact that titles restricted one's leadership opportunities, chose to participate in a different context.

Women preferred to do fieldwork, though here, too, they did not often

<sup>24</sup> See Office Staff Meeting Minutes, February 16, 1964, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 4, box 7, file 1).

<sup>25</sup> Executive Committee Minutes, September 4, 1964, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 3, box 6, file 4).

<sup>26</sup> Interview with "Anonymous" by telephone, March 16, 1989.



hold titled positions. Still such a position allowed for more autonomy. They worked at canvassing in local communities and, on a day-to-day basis, were able to make decisions within the local community. Canvassing included (1) seeing what was on people's minds—what kinds of things they would like to see done; (2) getting individuals to register to vote; and (3) recruiting individuals for local demonstrations.

Few women were able to become project directors though more were appointed as SNCC expanded and the need for experienced leaders increased. Between 1964–65, of the 50 staff members in Mississippi, there were 12 women. In Mississippi, Southwest Georgia, and Alabama, there were 29 project directors and only five were women, which included Muriel Tillinghast in Greenville, Mississippi; Mary Lane in Greenwood, Mississippi; Willie Ester McGee in Itta Bena, Mississippi (she worked alongside Stokely Carmichael who was the district director); Mary Sue Gellatly in Shaw, Mississippi; Lois Rogers in Cleveland, Mississippi; and Gwen Robinson in Laurel. Women project directors did not generally supervise more than one fieldworker, while most men supervised three or more.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that women's participation options as titled staff members were limited does not reduce the importance of their activities. Likewise the women interviewed did not perceive their activities as limited. Women felt themselves to be an important and integral part of the movement. Bernice Reagon, a member of SNCC, stated, "So that one of the things that happened to me through SNCC was my whole world was expanded in terms of what I could do as a person. And I'm describing an unleashing of my potential as an empowered human being. I never experienced being held back. . . . And I think if you talked to alot of people who participated in the movement, who were in SNCC, you find women describing themselves being pushed in ways they had never experienced before."<sup>28</sup>

This idea was echoed by most of the women interviewed. All felt their experiences in the movement to be liberating rather than constrained by their gender. Rather than focusing upon their limited positions within the movement, women shifted their leadership efforts toward bridging the movement to communities.

This gender bias within the civil rights movement was, of course, a reflection of the times. It did, however, create a specific effect. Since women, because of gender exclusion, could not be formal leaders, they more readily became bridge leaders. It was not the case that all bridge

<sup>27</sup> See Persons working out of the Atlanta office, SNCC Papers (sub. A, ser. 6, box 28, file 21).

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Bernice Reagon by telephone, November 30, 1992.

leaders were women, only that bridging was the primary area of leadership available to women. Nor was it the case that women were uniquely capable of performing such tasks. Rather, the effect of gender exclusion, which prevented strong leaders from becoming formal leaders, produced a remarkably capable tier of leadership that strengthened the mobilization of and recruitment to the movement.

#### BRIDGING ACTIVISM TO FORMAL LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

Numerous studies of women's involvement in grassroots mobilization (e.g., Andreas 1985; Barrios 1978; Bookman and Morgen 1988; Fainstein and Fainstein 1974; Jayawardena 1986; McCourt 1977; Sacks 1988; Sacks and Remy 1984; Chafetz and Dworkin 1986; Piven and Cloward 1979; Kaplan 1982, 1987; Thomis and Grimmett 1982; Cantarow 1980; Tilly 1981; West and Blumberg 1990; Robinson 1987; Blumberg 1990) suggest that women, even when they outnumber men in participation as they did in the civil rights movement (Payne 1989, 1990), often initiate and lead movement activities and later recede into the background (see, e.g., Lawson and Barton 1980; Dunayevskaya 1985; Davies 1983; West 1981; West and Blumberg 1990). The present study produced similar observations.

Bridge leaders provided essential linkages in a myriad of ways. Many scholars and readers of the civil rights movement are, by now, familiar with Jo Ann Gibson Robinson's (1987) account of the origins of the Montgomery bus boycott. Following the arrest of Rosa Parks, who refused to relinquish her bus seat to a white man, Robinson and members of the Women's Political Council (WPC; an organization that had met with city bus officials and the mayor on numerous occasions) rallied the ministers and other male leaders to support a citywide bus boycott. Robinson, a college professor, and her students created circulars announcing a bus boycott and distributed them to the ministers. Robinson and the women of the WPC acted as a bridge between the desires of the community and its leaders. Seemingly, in this initial phase, recruitment was turned on its head. Movement identity, political consciousness, and group solidarity were already in place, as was discussed in an interview with Thelma Glass, an active member of the WPC: "We had all the plans and we were just waiting for the right time. . . . We talked about transportation and we talked about communication and all the things that would happen when we finally decided to do this. . . . It was planned years in advance before it actually came to fruition."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Thelma Glass by telephone, February 2, 1990.

It was not the case that the potential formal leaders of the movement mobilized the masses. Rather bridge leaders acted to mobilize the potential formal leaders. The efforts of another African-American woman provide an additional example of the importance of bridge leaders to the mobilization of potential formal leaders.

By the early 1960s, student-organized protests were beginning to develop in cities such as Nashville, Tennessee, and Greensboro, North Carolina. Ella Baker, former director of New York's NAACP's chapters and a seasoned activist, was now the acting director of the SCLC. Frustrated by the dominance of the ministers within the SCLC, the decline in movement activity following the Montgomery bus boycott, and the lack of support for voter registration by many ministers, she turned her energies toward the development of a national student movement organization. Baker believed that student activists across the South would benefit from contact with one another, and she sought to create a bridge through the development of SNCC. This bridging served several purposes. Not only were students connected to one another, but they were able to coordinate their efforts through an organization and to develop a leadership base that could then reach out to broad-based populations.

Ella Baker created SNCC's nonhierarchical structure and group-centered philosophy of leadership. Leadership took the form of rotating chairs and executive committees. The idea was for SNCC to build leadership within a respective community but not to become its leader. Baker's philosophy became the cornerstone for SNCC efforts at community mobilization. SNCC workers, upon entering a community, attempted to build upon its existing infrastructure thus creating its own local leadership base.

#### BRIDGING MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS TO SMALL CITIES AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

While the civil rights movement had gained momentum in the upper South, it became increasingly clear that there had been almost no effect in smaller cities, especially in the rural South. A strategy was needed to link movement organizations to these otherwise isolated areas. The activities of bridge leaders filled this need. Following the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, civil rights movement organizations, primarily the NAACP and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), targeted Southern cities for direct action (i.e., sit-ins and organized protests). The Freedom Rides, precipitated by CORE, resulted in several successes in the upper South. In the deep South, the challenge to segregation in interstate travel resulted in bloodshed and left the racist order intact (Zinn 1964, p. 60).

What became increasingly clear was a need to penetrate the very core of these Southern communities. Participation of blacks in the deep pockets of the rural South and in smaller cities had been weak, and such participation was critical for the demise of the Southern order. Both the SCLC and SNCC sought to mobilize these areas but were well aware of the dangers such tactics posed in these communities. Direct action in the rural South was a prescription for death. Even registering to vote was life threatening.

The mobilization of smaller communities was, in many ways, more difficult than previous efforts in larger cities. The direct action efforts in the latter, while certainly dangerous, were at least visible to the media. Violent reprisals especially in rural areas of the South were less likely to receive such attention. Moreover, in rural areas and in small towns, outsiders were more visible and the contacts among organizations more tenuous. Outsiders were not trusted by these populations, and many wanted no part in stirring up trouble. Mobilization of these sectors required specific recruitment tactics that built upon trust and interpersonal community ties. These masses, no matter how inspired by the charisma of the movement leaders or impressed by the financial resources of the organizations, would not risk their lives. Although network ties among ministers in large cities provided a powerful resource for mobilization, this was not always the case in rural communities or smaller cities. Muriel Tillinghast, a SNCC project director in Ruleville, Mississippi, states, "We did not work with the church. When we met, we met in people's houses. I remember once or twice someone allowing us to meet in a church. The church was not our main stay in my particular area."<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, Gloria Richardson, chair of a SNCC project in Cambridge, Maryland, echoed the belief that mobilization did not emanate from ministers, many of whom she felt were beholden to white officials and/or who felt protest was sinful. Rather she felt that women participated in spite of the church.<sup>31</sup> While it is true that student volunteers, ministers, and movement halfway houses provided some resources for rural and small town mobilization, it is also true that mobilization could not have succeeded without the efforts of bridge leaders, who facilitated the connection between these communities and movement organizations.

The seeds of a model for rural mobilization were planted by Septima Clark, a seasoned activist, at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Morris (1984) has described Highlander as an important movement halfway house that served to create associations among movement participants. While many important associations were formed

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Muriel Tillinghast by telephone, July 19, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Gloria Richardson by telephone, August 8, 1992.

among already active participants, Highlander had failed, as an institution, to link with the rural black masses. Fear of reprisals prevented Highlander from attracting nonmovement participants. Clark's Citizenship Education Program, however, had achieved a tremendous amount of success in the area of voter registration. Clark and Esau Jenkins, a former student, were able to develop a connection with the masses within the rural community. Although scholars either credit Myles Horton or Esau Jenkins with the development of the Citizenship Education Program, (i.e., Morris 1984 and Couto 1991), it was Clark who developed much of the educational program.

An often overlooked aspect of the recruitment process is that institutional and formal organizational networks often failed to elicit the support of those in rural and small town communities. It was the activities of bridge leaders and their efforts to connect through interpersonal ties that facilitated recruitment of the rural masses. In 1958, while Ella Baker was the acting executive director of the SCLC, she began to consider the importance of the Citizenship Education Program at Highlander for the development of movement mobilization (Branch 1988, p. 264). With the lack of a well-developed organizing scheme, the SCLC's voter registration drive had failed. The SCLC had been continually frustrated by lack of response on the part of the African-American community in the rural South. In a 1963 report to the Marshall Field Foundation, the Citizenship Education Program reported that "motivation is one of the big problems in arousing the Negro community to vote in the South. Many efforts have been made through preaching, mass media and public relations gimmicks from time to time, but it is our feeling that no one has ever taken the time to explain to the masses of people in our society how politics determines the course of their lives and specifically how their vote contributes to this process."<sup>32</sup>

Ella Baker decided to make a trip to Highlander Folk School with the intention of incorporating Clark's Citizenship Education Program into the fabric of SCLC. In 1959, at her prodding, King and Myles Horton, the founder, agreed to "open up a place and train people to go into the South to work" (Clark 1986, p. 61).

### Connecting Prefigurative Politics to Strategic Politics: Frame Bridging, Amplification, Extension, and Transformation

McAdam (1983, pp. 49–51) and Piven and Cloward (1977, pp. 3–4) argue that central to the development of a civil rights movement was a change

<sup>32</sup> Citizenship Education Project Semi-Annual Report to the Field Foundation, July 1, 1962, to January 31, 1963, King Papers, King Center (box 29, file 12, page 2).

in political cognitions. Most of the rural community were well aware of racial inequality. What they did not have was the basic information necessary to transform their prefigurative politics, based on personal experience, to an understanding of their constitutional rights and the strategic politics of the movement. Therefore, the primary task of the Citizenship Education Program was to provide the rural potential constituents with the information necessary to persuade them to join the movement. One of the successes of Septima Clark as a bridge leader was her ability to connect the politics of the movement to the needs of people. She did so through frame extension, or by making the needs of people one of the SCLC's priorities. She found that by listening to the problems of the potential rural constituents, they then became willing to listen to the teachers (Clark 1986, p. 53).

Clark solicited the help of her cousin Bernice Robinson, who was the perfect teacher. Although lacking teaching credentials, she was able to engage their interests. Clark recalled that "Bernice and her students would tell stories about the things they had to deal with every day—about growing vegetables, plowing the land, digging up potatoes. Then they would write down these stories and read them back. Any word they stumbled over, Bernice would use in the spelling lesson" (Clark 1986, p. 50). Part of Septima Clark's program was to teach the community to read and write. She felt that literacy was the only way to enlighten the rural masses about their citizenship rights, and the best way to do this was to become actively involved in the pupils' lives. Robinson would teach individuals to fill out money orders, sew, and crochet.

Through the process of extending the concerns of the SCLC, Clark and her staff then began the transformation process through teaching literacy and by connecting the personal concerns of the masses to that of the strategic politics of the movement. The philosophy of the Citizenship Education Program was to develop self-pride, cultural pride, literacy, and a sense of one's citizenship rights. Clark often became involved in the plight of these poor communities, and the SCLC provided food and clothing to those in need. Registration was the goal, but one could not achieve this without intimate involvement within the community. Clark explained,

The first night . . . we would always ask people to tell the needs of the people in their community. The first night they gave us their input, and the next morning we started teaching from what they wanted to do. But what they wanted varied. We had to change. Down in the Southern part of Georgia, some woman wanted to know how to make out her own check. . . . The next morning we started off with asking them: Do you have an employment office in your town? Where is it located? What hours is it open? Have you been there to get work? The answers to those questions

we wrote down on dry cleaners bags, so they could read them. We didn't have any blackboards. That afternoon we would ask them about the government in their home town. They knew very little about it. . . . We had to give them a plan of how these people were elected, of how people who had registered to vote could put these people in office, and of how they were the ones who were over you. (Clark 1986, p. 64)

This transformation process also involved frame amplification in which the religiosity of those in the rural community could be shaped to include activism. In 1963, the Citizenship Education Program reported that "we are attempting to hold conferences for ministers on 'The Bible and the Ballot' in cities across the South in an attempt to help overcome some of the ill effects of a pious, personalistic religion which has no prophetic concern for the community. Our experience has been that this gives ministers some theological basis for participating in voter registration."<sup>33</sup>

This amplification of religious doctrine was also presented to the rural constituency. Septima Clark and her staff were able to (1) form a bridge to those who were already predisposed to join the movement by providing more information; (2) extend the interests of the SCLC to include the daily concerns of the rural population as a means to increase rural support; (3) amplify already existing religious tenets to emphasize compatibility with movement ideology; and (4) transform prefigurative and personalistic frames to include the strategic politics of the movement. In this way, they were able to reach out to the potential rank and file participants as well as unsupportive ministers.

Clark's techniques would prove successful in the SCLC's efforts to increase voter registration throughout the rural South. After the first class of three men and 11 women, they opened other schools. The enrollments continued to increase. By the spring of 1961, Highlander had trained 82 teachers to work in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Clark was traveling all over the South visiting the schools and recruiting new teachers (Clark 1986, p. 60). In one year, according to a report compiled by Septima Clark, black voter registration was increased by 13,000 in Alabama, 16,000 in Arkansas, 68,000 in Florida, 60,000 in Georgia, 32,000 in Louisiana, 28,000 in Mississippi, 83,000 in North Carolina, 130,000 in South Carolina, 17,000 in Tennessee, 74,000 in Texas, and 16,000 in Virginia. Approximately 300 were trained as community leaders to return to their communities and develop citizenship workshops.<sup>34</sup>

In these ways, the bridge leaders established a sense of group identity,

<sup>33</sup> Citizenship Education Project Semi-Annual Report to the Field Foundation, July 1, 1962 to January 31, 1963, King Papers, King Center (box 29, file 12).

<sup>34</sup> See Citizenship Education Project Memorandum from Andrew Young to Martin Luther King, Jr., February 27, 1964, King Papers, King Center (box 29, file 13).

collective consciousness, and solidarity between rural and small town communities and the movement, and they did so by bridging the gap between the message of the formal movement organization and the day-to-day realities of the potential constituents.

### Local Women, Movement Organizations, and Rural Communities

Bridge leaders within movement organizations were often assisted by women indigenous to the community of entry, who themselves would often become bridge movement organization leaders. Annelle Ponder, an SCLC activist and teacher, recalls the help she received in Greenwood, Mississippi, when, "Mrs. Atlean Smith [a local beautician and later a dynamic leader in the Greenwood Movement], in responding to our plea for meeting space, volunteered the use of her home, and I started a class there while recruiting local people who would eventually set up their own classes."<sup>35</sup>

Such women also assisted recruiters from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. SNCC workers would enter the communities and contact a local leader who often secured facilities in which the activists could hold meetings or present their ideas on voter registration. Women not only provided meeting places but assisted outsiders with insight into the interworkings of the local community.<sup>36</sup>

A substantial proportion of the processes of recruitment within small town and rural communities was performed by bridge leaders, many of whom belonged to more than one civil rights movement organization. These leaders worked with various movement organizations as a means of maintaining relative autonomy. This left them relatively unhampered by hierarchical constraints and able to mobilize the community in their own way. Annie Devine, a longtime local activist, became involved, initially, in the Congress of Racial Equality and later in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Matthew Suarez, an activist, recalls,

<sup>35</sup> Annelle Ponder, Greenwood Mississippi Report, March 1964, King Papers, King Center (sub. E, ser. 1, box 141, file 7).

<sup>36</sup> Women such as "Mrs. Julian Turner" and Thelma Leweller of Moscow, Tennessee; Julia, Beverley, and Delois Polk of Byhalia, Mississippi; "Mrs. Ingram" and "Mrs. Wooten" of Marshall County, Mississippi; "Mrs. Dearworth" of Lincoln County, Mississippi; "Mrs. Reeves" and Willie Ruth Dougherty of Benton County, Mississippi; and Gloria Richardson of Cambridge, Maryland, are just a few of the contacts who provided SNCC workers with the necessary bridges to the community. (SNCC Papers: Lincoln County Voter Education Project, [sub. A, ser. 4, box 15, file 197]; Report on Benton County, by Peter Cummings August 15, 1964 [sub. A, ser. 4, box 14, file 175]; Report from Larry Rubin on Voter Registration, July 31, 1964 [sub. A, ser. 4, box 14, file 175]; Final Report, Marshall County by Cleve Sellers [sub. A, ser. 4, box 14, file 175]).



In many ways, she acted like a go-between with black male leaders [notably preachers] and young folks [who resisted their authority]. We were saying to leadership, "You ought to be ashamed not to be doing this and that for our people, and Devine was saying you ought to do this because of what has happened." She could draw on her lived experience. She was the backbone, a part of the strategists. She understood clearly how we should handle and conduct ourselves in Canton. We came in like we're here to save you folks and Devine instructed CORE that this was the wrong approach. You can't relate to people in this community using this approach. Mrs. Devine was a country diplomat. (Crawford 1987, p. 86)

This independence is discussed by Victoria Gray, an MFDP representative, who considered herself a "local person." She recalled, "I worked with every organization that was working in the state." She considered herself to be an interpreter between the old people and the young people. Many of the older people in the community believed in the local media, which were "just distorting everything." Consequently they were afraid to trust the movement organizers. She convinced them that the organizers were the same "young people as your daughters and sons." In this way she could encourage them to trust the workers and convince them to register to vote.<sup>37</sup>

Unita Blackwell, another MFDP leader, recalls doing the day-to-day organizing and footwork that is required to mobilize the local community. She stated, "Sometimes our contact would be just a friend in one county who knows somebody in another county. Then you go and talk to them and you go from house to house, and you knock on people's doors. . . . It was alot of foot work and we didn't have alot of cars, and we didn't have no money."<sup>38</sup>

Many women in the MFDP mobilized local support for an alternative election in 1964. The MFDP was established on April 26, 1964, in response to the efforts of racist Southerners to prevent blacks from voting. For example, in the Second District of Mississippi, 52.4% of the population was black, but only 2.97% had been allowed to register to vote (Zinn 1964, p. 258).

During the campaign, many local women became involved in mobilizing the masses to support black candidates. For example, Mary Belk, of West Point, Mississippi, who "had gone from house to house almost every night for a month, getting people out of bed who had spent the entire day picking cotton, talking about the elections, urging people to run, urging people to vote, reflected, 'I work for the white folks in the daytime, and against them at night.'"<sup>39</sup> Another member of the MFDP,

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Victoria Gray by telephone, February 6, 1990.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Unita Blackwell by telephone, January 30, 1990.

<sup>39</sup> Clay County Report, November 29, 1965, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Microfilm, reel 65, frame 305.

Ada Holliday of Clay County, in a November 26, 1965, letter to the Department of Agriculture writes, "We have worked on this election for two months now, canvassing, holding meetings, nominating candidates, getting petitions signed, and campaigning. We have written and talked with every Negro farmer in the county."<sup>40</sup>

These women served as bridges between the strategic politics of the movement organizations and the prefigurative politics of rural communities. Women such as Victoria Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, Unita Blackwell, Annie Devine, and Peggy Jean Connors became the bridges between organizations such as SNCC, CORE, the SCLC, the MFDP, and the NAACP and the community. They coordinated the activities of the young and developed strategies to achieve greater voter registration. These women were individuals within their local communities who responded to the efforts of movement organizations to register voters. They were bridge leaders within the movement.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FORMAL LEADERS AND BRIDGE LEADERS

There was not always consensus between bridge leaders and formal leaders. Unlike Sacks's (1988) centerwomen who shared familistic ties and were generally in consensus with the male leadership, women as bridge leaders in the civil rights movement sometimes disagreed with the formal leadership. Conflicts arose over the desires of the participants and the decisions made by the formal leaders.

As discussed, CORE developed the Freedom Rides Project, in which a busload of black and white activists rode from Washington, D.C., to New Orleans and tested the desegregation of local bus and transportation facilities. The first ride took place on May 4, 1961, and proceeded through the South without much difficulty until it reached Alabama, where the riders were attacked and severely beaten. Many were near death.

Though the CORE riders were unable to continue, Diane Nash, who participated in SNCC and the SCLC, phoned Fred Shuttlesworth, a minister and a formal SCLC leader in Birmingham, to insist that the rides continue. She told Shuttlesworth, "The students have decided that we can't let violence overcome. We are going to come into Birmingham to continue the Freedom Ride." Shuttlesworth responded, "Young lady do you know that the Freedom Riders were almost killed?" She replied, "Yes, that's exactly why the rides must not be stopped. If they stop us

<sup>40</sup> Letter to the Department of Agriculture, November 26, 1965, by Ada Holliday, MFDP Microfilm, reel 65, frame 324.

with violence, the movement is dead. We're coming; we just want to know if you can meet us" (Branch 1988, p. 430). Nash was a bridge between the desires of the participants and those of the formal leaders and, in doing so, gained considerable recognition and power. The Freedom Rides were to become a historic event that helped to erode the racist Southern structure.

Nash was also to cement the policy of staying in jail rather than accepting bail. When Nash was four months pregnant, she was brought to trial in Jackson, Mississippi, for purportedly "contributing to the delinquency of minors." Her offense was teaching workshops on nonviolence to young black children. Instead of pleading guilty and accepting a fine, she allowed the charges to go to trial and was sentenced to two years imprisonment. Prior to King's arrest in Albany, he stated his intention to remain in jail without bond despite the pressures from the Kennedy administration to accept bail. But within hours of his arrest, he allowed a bond to be posted for his release. Many SNCC members were deeply disappointed with King's action. Diane Nash addressed this issue in a memo describing her decision to serve a full two-year sentence rather than to accept bail. She wrote, "I believe that the time has come, and is indeed long past, when each of us must make up his mind, when arrested on unjust charges, to serve his sentence and stop posting bonds. If we do not do so, we lose our opportunity to reach the community and society with a great moral appeal and thus bring about basic changes in people and in society" (Garrow 1986, p. 202). Nash, as a bridge leader, was not obliged to consider strategic and political consequences faced by formal leaders seeking support from the state. Nowhere is this more evident than at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

The MFDP began in 1964 under SNCC's direction. The MFDP was attempting to unseat illegally elected white officials, who had prevented blacks from voting, by sending their own elected representatives to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Just prior to the convention, Lawrence Guyot, the Chairman of the MFDP, was jailed on trumped-up charges. This left four women—Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, Unita Blackwell, and Victoria Gray—responsible for the outcome of the convention, and it left the ultimate decision to Hamer, who was the vice president. Fannie Lou Hamer and Victoria Gray had previously attended SCLC citizenship workshops given by Septima Clark prior to the development of the MFDP, and both women were already involved in voter registration prior to their workshop participation.

At the 1964 Democratic convention, the MFDP demanded that all the delegates be recognized but were offered only two seats. During deliberation over the decision to reject or accept the compromise, the formal

leaders of other organizations, Charles Diggs and Bayard Rustin, as well as Aaron Henry, former chair of the temporary executive committee of the MFDP, accepted the compromise instead of allowing Hamer to make the decision. The deliberation had taken place in a church where Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, told the women that they were ignorant of the political process, and should listen to their leaders, and just return home.

In an interview, Unita Blackwell, another delegate, recalls the event. Fannie Lou Hamer

just sat there in the back . . . and she said "Girl, I'm going to tell you the folks didn't send us up here for no two seats. When we left Mississippi, we said that we wanted all of the seats or half because we wanted to be represented in our state." . . . So the three of us were just sitting there . . . and she said no compromise. "We been compromisin' all our life." I can feel it right now. Yes, honey, you could just feel the power of it. And, honey, they looked at us and told us we were ignorant. . . . The rumor went around that we was sixty-eight ignorant folks from Mississippi and didn't understand politics . . . and we looked at them and said, "We do understand more than you understand. We understand what we come out of."<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of her position as a formal leader within a civil rights movement organization, she was not acknowledged as a formal leader within the social movement sector. Her position then as a bridge leader spanned the gap between the desires of her constituents and the strategic needs of the more established formal leaders.

Women as bridge leaders often operated semiautonomously in what Evans and Boyte (1986) term a "free space." Here women controlled their day-to-day activities and kept in touch with the desires of the community and the movement's constituents. This does not suggest that the formal leaders were out of touch with the masses, only that they made decisions based on strategic and political considerations in light of their relationship with the state. Bridge leaders provided the maintenance necessary to sustain the identity, consciousness, and solidarity of the movement.

## CONCLUSION

What is abundantly clear is that movement participants cannot be conceptualized in a dichotomous fashion as simply leaders and followers. Payne (1990, p. 158) in his analysis of black women's activism in the Mississippi Delta has suggested that "men led, but women organized." Barnett (1993, p. 176), who also studies black women in the civil rights

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Unita Blackwell by telephone, January 30, 1990.

movement, agrees that women organized but that this organization is an important aspect of leadership. The present study illustrates that African-American women's activism included much more than organizing. While formal networks, leaders, institutions, and movement centers were significant factors in the recruitment process, they do not adequately answer the question, Who, on a daily basis, provided the local leadership necessary to bridge, extend, amplify, and transform the movement's message for potential recruits? It is clear that central to the success of a social movement is an intermediate layer of leadership, whose primary tasks are bridging potential constituents and adherents as well as potential formal leaders of the movement. Women, as bridge leaders, performed this task in the civil rights movement.

To be sure, men such as Esau Jenkins, who assisted with the SCLC's Citizenship Education Program, E. D. Nixon, a community leader and member of the Montgomery Improvement Association, and many others also participated as bridge leaders. Men, such as Andrew Young of the SCLC and Bob Moses of SNCC, were bridge leaders and later formal leaders. It is not the case that bridge leaders were exclusively women, rather it was the only level of leadership available to women. While women were excluded from formal leadership on the basis of their sex, men, too seem to have been excluded on the basis of their education. In the case of the civil rights movement, the exclusion of women from formal leadership created exceptionally qualified leadership in the area of micro-mobilization.

The social location of African-American women, as defined by a gendered hierarchy, served the movement's need for a bridge between the prefigurative politics of small towns and rural communities and the strategic politics of movement organizations. Within this context, potential constituents could be solicited by bridge leaders who had no direct access to the power politics of the formal organization. This resolved the problems faced by many movement organizations that lacked an intermediate layer of capable leadership. Gender exclusion was particularly useful because the movement could draw upon the resources of well-educated and/or articulate women to act as carriers, as cultivators of solidarity; in addition, a single set of leaders did not have to negotiate the conflict between movement constituents and mainstream political compromise. In the case of the civil rights movement, these tasks were divided, though not exclusively, along gendered lines, thus providing the movement with a strong base of leadership.

This analysis of women's participation in the civil rights movement also provides examples of the ways in which mobilization does not always occur in a linear fashion (i.e., formal leaders mobilize followers). Rather women, as bridge leaders, recruited men as formal leaders. Moreover,

they and the movement's followers extended and transformed the movement's message so that conflict existed between their desires and that of the formal leaders. Bridge leaders, as the lead voices of the movement's followers, were not afraid to challenge the power of the formal leaders. These challenges often resulted in the recognition by the formal leaders that a compromise must be reached to maintain the allegiance of the followers and still remain credible in the eyes of the state.

The fact that African-American women, for the most part, did not share formal leadership titles should in no way obscure the fact that they were leaders. They were instrumental as leaders in the recruitment and mobilization process and were effective, influential leaders who elicited loyalty from their followers. Given the context of the times, the period 1954–65, women who participated in the civil rights movement experienced unprecedented power. Their social location as black, as women, and as economically marginalized was empowered in a context in which they were the purveyors of political consciousness, in which they were able to lead relatively autonomously, and in which they were able to bring about group solidarity and social change. It is only in hindsight that we may observe their positionality as limited by their gender. Ironically, it is this very limitation that served to catapult and sustain the identity, collective consciousness, and solidarity of the movement.

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