


Spring 5-25-2014

# The Perceptions of Race and Identity in Birmingham: Does 50 Years Forward Equal Progress?

Lisa Murray  
*SIT Graduate Institute*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones>

 Part of the [Political History Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Murray, Lisa, "The Perceptions of Race and Identity in Birmingham: Does 50 Years Forward Equal Progress?" (2014). *Capstone Collection*. 2658.  
<https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/2658>

This Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Graduate Institute at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

**The Perceptions of Race and Identity in Birmingham:**

Does 50 Years Forward Equal Progress?

Lisa Jane Murray

PIM 72

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts  
in Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro,

Vermont, USA.

May 25, 2014

Advisor: John Ungerleider

I hereby grant permission for World Learning to publish my capstone on its websites and in any of its digital/electronic collections, and to reproduce and transmit my CAPSTONE ELECTRONICALLY. I understand that World Learning's websites and digital collections are publicly available via the Internet. I agree that World Learning is NOT responsible for any unauthorized use of my capstone by any third party who might access it on the Internet or otherwise.

Student Name: Lisa Jane Murray

Date: May 25, 2014

## Table of Contents

I. Abstract	1
II. Overview of Contextual Information	2-4
III. Methodology	4-5
IV. Introduction	5-7
V. Historical Context and Analysis	7-31
VI. Contemporary Research on Regional and Racial Identity	31-41
VII. Current Perspectives in Birmingham	41-45
VIII. Conclusion	45-46

## **Abstract**

Research has shown a connection between regional and racial identity in the South with much emphasis on the role it has played in exacerbating racial conflict and divisions. In 2013, Birmingham launched a year-long campaign entitled 50 Years Forward to reflect on the events that led to the passing of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and celebrate the progress made over the last five decades. Through research and interviews, this paper seeks to explore the connection between identity and racial conflict in the South by analyzing the history of racial exploitation, class struggle, and the Civil Rights Movement in shaping racial attitudes and identity conflict, how it has affected current perceptions of race and identity among Birmingham residents, and recommendations for bridging the racial and socioeconomic divides.

## **Introduction**

As part of SIT Graduate Institute's requirement for a Master of Arts in Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding, I completed a sixth month practicum with the Birmingham City School System in Birmingham, Alabama. As a Birmingham native, I grew up hearing about the history of racial turmoil. As an aspiring peace practitioner, I was excited to return to Birmingham and apply the theoretical frameworks from on-campus coursework to a real life conflict. During my practicum, Birmingham launched the 50 Years Forward campaign to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The goal was to bring the Birmingham community together to celebrate the people who fought against hatred and discrimination. The paper grew out of this campaign and what current Birmingham residents thought about the progress of racial dynamics in the city.

This paper is structured in a Course Linked Capstone (CLC) format combining theories from Conflict and Identity coursework with experience and research in Birmingham. The focus is on the intersections of racial identity and group conflict specifically looking at how the history of racial turmoil in the South has influenced current social group dynamics in Birmingham.

I begin with a brief introduction of the Birmingham's role in the Civil Rights Movement, the purpose of the 50 Years Forward campaign, and why they are important for understanding the evolving racial dynamics. Using Critical Race Theory by Omi and Winant (1994), I discuss how race is socially constructed and racism is embedded in the fabric of our society. Racial dynamics shape and inform identity; therefore, understanding the

history of the Civil Rights Movement is important for understanding identity conflict in Birmingham.

The next several sections focus on the link between violence, race, and class using Marx's theory on class struggle. According to Marx, all social conflict is a form of class struggle. I looked at contemporary research on violence and class in the South (Glaser 1994; Inwood, 2011; Kelly, 2001; Letwin, 1998; Price, 2010) to support this theory as related to Birmingham. I discuss the history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation drawing connections about the use of racial segregation by the elite as a means of social, political, and economic control against blacks and poor, working class whites. Using research by Key (1949) and Glaser (1994), I explain how white ideology, and subsequently white identity, grew out of the Black Belt region influencing many Southern regions and cementing a social structure controlled by the white elite. The paper then transitions into the founding of Birmingham as Alabama's economy shifted from farming to manufacturing. Birmingham established a social structure that grew out of the ideals of the Civil War and the Black Belt region. Class struggle is again analyzed looking at Tajfel's (1986) work on in-group formation and assimilation. Birmingham was firmly divided along racial lines, but class struggle exacerbated existing racial tensions. With the abolition of slavery, working class whites were competing with blacks for wage paying jobs. According to Tajfel (1986), in-group assimilation and favoritism is strengthened when access to power and resources differ among social groups. It was beneficial even for working class whites to support white leaders in a white dominated social structure. Brewer's (2001) work on group conflict theory also explains how conflict is exacerbated when societies are stratified along racial lines like Birmingham was during this period.

From there, the paper moves into the history of progressive mobilization between the 1940's and 1960's in Birmingham, when coalitions of white and black citizens challenged the social structure. Using Jabri's (1996) structuration theory, I explain how individuals reinforce or challenge the social structure. The coalitions between the 1940's and 1960's are examples of individuals repeatedly challenging the white power structure and segregation. White and black citizens became disillusioned with racial segregation and felt it was hindering the economic progress of the city. They worked to alter the political structure and oust segregationist politicians. This period laid the groundwork for the larger ideological shift embodied in the Civil Rights Movement. I discuss the various business leaders, coalitions, and events that were influential during the Civil Rights Movement, which culminated in the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The final section of the paper presents current perspectives on race and identity from people living in the South. It begins with research from Thompson and Sloan (2012) on regional and racial identity. Their research shows a strong connection between race and identity for African Americans and regional identity for many white Southerners. The history of racial subjugation was influential as well. Following Thompson and Sloan's (2012) findings, I include my own findings from interviews with Birmingham residents to draw comparisons with other contemporary research on identity and race in the South. It is also used to gauge how the history of Civil Rights has affected identity and racial dynamics, and how much progress Birmingham residents think has been achieved over the last fifty years.

### **Methodology**



Interviews with Birmingham residents provided the primary qualitative research for this paper. A sampling of approximately 12 residents of varying ages, professions, and backgrounds were invited to participate in a survey on race and identity in Birmingham. Participants were selected based on whom I had access to during the research process. All participants were over the age of 18, and there was no perceived risk of involvement. Responses were used as a comparative analysis of current perceptions to previously published research on conflict and identity in the South; to gauge what progress had been made in terms of racial dynamics; and suggestions moving forward.

Secondary sources serve a significant role in this paper. Research was gathered from past interviews, documentaries, news articles, and scholarly works. Public data compiled and available at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the archives at the Birmingham Public Library, and the Birmingham Museum of Art were also utilized.

Data analysis included analyzing the history of identity conflict in the South and how effective events such as the Civil Rights Movement and 50 Years Forward campaign have been in transforming social divisions. Social identity and conflict theories provide the basis for analyzing the conflict, supported by participant interviews.

### **Birmingham's Role in the Civil Rights Movement**

Race has been a significant part of my identity. In a society – [such] as the United States – that is so race-conscious, it is difficult to escape such a part of one's identity. Race is apparent in all parts of my life, because it is so intertwined with culture, lifestyle, and socio-economic status. Race is more than just a part of one's identity. In my personal opinion, race defines one's identity; it's how I see the world and understand why certain people do [the] things that they do -- (black male #1, Birmingham, personal correspondence December 21, 2013).

The South has played a contentious role in history, especially in terms of race relations. While racism and segregation are not exclusive to the South, the region promoted

white supremacist values that were the norm throughout much of the United States for over a century. The passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended legalized segregation, but an underlying structure of racial inequality still exists. In many parts of the South, racial segregation is apparent. Birmingham, Alabama became a focal point for the Civil Rights Movement because of the intense violence against its citizens that drew national media attention and public scrutiny. Charismatic politicians and hard-line segregationists like Eugene “Bull” Connor and Governor George Wallace launched Birmingham onto a national stage with their anti-desegregation antics. Birmingham became known more for extreme violence and racism than a booming economy. Videos and photographs displayed police officers using high-pressure fire hoses and unleashing police dogs on the citizens. Bombings were so commonplace; Birmingham was often referred to as “Bombingham”. It was considered by many to be “The Most Segregated City in America” and the “Johannesburg of the South”. (Kimerling, 2012).

This past year marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events that led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Throughout 2013, Birmingham held a series of events to reflect on the past, present, and future of the city. The yearlong campaign, entitled “50 Years Forward”, implies progress with civil rights and racial tensions over the last five decades. Certainly tremendous gains have been achieved. There are no longer signs demarcating “white” and “colored” in public spaces. No longer are hard-line segregationists holding public office and maintaining order through fear and terror. The daily bombings that crippled Birmingham are a thing of the past. Explicit hatred and racism seems to have faded.

The 50 Years Forward campaign focused on commemorating “the movement that changed the world” ([www.50yearsforward.com](http://www.50yearsforward.com)). Federal legislation was enacted to ensure the rights and equalities of all citizens, but how much change has truly occurred in the last fifty years? Alabama still ranks in the bottom 5<sup>th</sup> in education, while the city of Birmingham ranks lower than the rest of the state. In terms of poverty and healthcare, Alabama is still severely trailing the rest of the country ([www.alabamapossible.org](http://www.alabamapossible.org)). Historically, minorities and poor, rural whites were disproportionately affected by socio-economic inequality. Those demographics hold true today. Jim Crow may have been legally eradicated, but remnants of the old social structure still exist to serve the predominately white, business and political elites.

The events of 1963 are a focal point in Birmingham’s racial history, because the amount of violence drew international attention. However, many events and figures that played a crucial role in the two decades prior to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 have been overlooked. Racial tensions existed long before the Civil Rights Movement and continue to exist more than fifty years later. According to Payne (2007) “the Civil Rights Movement [may have] struck down the outright segregation that dominated the [South’s] racial project, [but] the foundation of economic exploitation that lies at the heart of the region’s history has remained” (as cited in Inwood, 2011).

### **Historical Context and Analysis**

Toni Morrison (1994) once wrote we live in a “wholly racialized world” meaning racism exists on a global level, touching every place and everyone (as cited in Price, 2010). Proponents of critical race theory (CRT), such as Omi and Winant (1994), have argued “race” is socially constructed (as cited in Price, 2010). CRT focuses on the everyday racism

that exists in society and is ingrained in the moral fabric of the country. It is so deeply embedded in the structure of society that legislation, like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, cannot eradicate it completely. It can only serve to remove the overt, legalized forms of racism (Price, 2010). This kind of racism has dominated much of the Southern region for decades and embroiled Birmingham in violent, racial segregation during the Civil Rights Movement.

Racial dynamics and ideology shape and inform identity. To understand the importance of Civil Rights Movement in terms of identity conflict, it is necessary to understand the history of racial dynamics and identity formation that occurred before and after the movement. The events of 1963 are significant because they led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but the tides of change had already been set in motion as early as 1943 in Birmingham. It was not just the black population that challenged the system of Jim Crow segregation. A small but determined coalition of progressive, white citizens worked to change the political structure and end segregation. By the early 1940's, it was clear that Birmingham was laying the groundwork for a radical shift in social structure and racial dynamics. The black/white binary and white supremacist ideology was beginning to crumble.

### ***Class Struggle***

Violence in the Alabama has been linked to racism, but there is also a historical connection between violence and class (Inwood, 2011). German philosopher Karl Marx devoted much of his writing to the analysis of class struggle. Marx focused on social systems and recognized the social structure of society, rather than human agency, is the main cause of conflict. The social structure is set up to encourage racism creating social and

class divides. These divisions contribute to ideology influencing human agency and behavior (Marx, 2011). This was true throughout the South where slavery, and later, Jim Crow segregation kept society stratified by skin color. Birmingham native Suzanne Martin (white woman #1, personal correspondence, January 21, 2014) says:

I see ... a divide along socioeconomic lines [in Birmingham] ... We inherited the consequences of long term racism, but not necessarily the understanding of how things got the way they are ... the bigger obstacle is social class/economics but in Birmingham there seems to be a correlation between race and poverty.

Another Birmingham resident said, “socioeconomic segregation persists alongside racial segregation” (white woman #3, personal correspondence, March 1, 2014).

Many contemporary scholars have written about the connection between racial conflict and class struggle in the South (Glaser, 1994; Inwood, 2011; Kelly, 2001; Letwin, 1998, Price, 2010). Class struggle is often about the control of production and economic and political power. Historically, white, Southern plantation owners controlled the means and modes of production. They owned the land to grow cash crops and the slaves who worked the land for no wages. Many whites profited from a system of slavery. After slavery was abolished, a period of absolute violence began to protect economic interests and newly enfranchised African Americans from challenging the white power structure (Inwood, 2011). Slavery may have been legally abolished, but the white elite had no intentions of allowing blacks access to economic or political power. Instead the white elite found new, “legal” ways to subjugate African Americans.

### ***Jim Crow Era***

Shortly after the Civil War, Jim Crow laws were enacted creating a system of legalized segregation. These laws dominated the racial landscape and were virtually

uncontested for decades. Jim Crow segregation became the new system of social and political control. Sociologist James M. Glaser (1994) looked at the racial environment and white racial attitudes in the South as a source of political strife. Much attention has been given to racist attitudes and the difference between the “Old South” and the “New South”(Glaser, 1994; Griffin, 2004; Inwood, 2011; Price, 2010). The “Old South” of plantations, sharecropping, white supremacist attitudes, and Jim Crow segregation is still the stereotype of much of the “deep South”.

Glaser (1994) draws on V. O. Key’s research in the Black Belt region from 1949. Key considered the Black Belt the backbone of the Old South. Historically a high proportion of blacks lived in the region, which led Key (1949) and later Glaser (1994) to determine that whites living in areas with a high percentage of black residents have a strong need to maintain white supremacy in order to retain power. Black Belt planters had long resisted equality for blacks. They operated under a strict racial classification system where blacks were the lowest genetic group. They adopted and nurtured ideology that maintained the racial attitudes of the Civil War era. It taught blacks were subservient to whites under slavery and should be happy with their position. After slavery, it was enforced with strict Jim Crow laws and violence (Kimerling, 2013). Therefore, the white racial attitudes of the Black Belt helped shape the values and folklore of the Old South. Political leadership founded on white supremacy grew out of this area. The Black Belt played an important role in Alabama’s economy, prior to industrialization, when tobacco and cotton plantations were the dominant sources of income. Sharecropping provided jobs and economic prosperity for white Southerners prior to the Civil War. As the Civil War and

Reconstruction ended, a new era of industrialization and materialism was ushered into Alabama creating further racial and class divisions.

The industrial landscape shifted to manufacturing, and the “Big Mules” of the timber, mining, and steel industries reinforced Vertical integration was the dominant economic model of the day where corporate tycoons owned every phase of production. Most of these tycoons were the same white men who owned plantations and grew rich from a system of slavery. The white power elite recognized the economy was shifting, and they needed to act quickly to maintain their power. A new economy and newly enfranchised slaves could present a threat to the white power structure. The business elites saw Birmingham as an opportunity to maintain their economic and political dominance. It was during this transition, the city of Birmingham was constructed to be an industrial powerhouse (King, 2012).

Birmingham was an agricultural wasteland and therefore had no economic benefit for planters. As the economy shifted towards industrialization, city developers realized Birmingham was sitting on a geological gold mine. It was the only place in the world with all the essential elements needed to produce pig iron. Mining became the bedrock of Birmingham’s economy. Founded in 1871 at the onset of Gilded Age, Birmingham represented the mainstream values of the time including unregulated capitalism, individualist work ethic, and Jim Crow segregation. The Gilded Age saw a period of vast and rapid economic growth coupled with social conflict. Many cities faced the challenge of blending the conflicting ideals of capitalism and segregation. None did this as well as Birmingham (King, 2012).

At its founding, Birmingham represented the ideal city designed specifically for economic production, not for social and political growth. The economic shift exacerbated long standing racial tensions. Divisions of in-group and out-group became even starker in Birmingham as working-class whites benefited from new industries and blacks were struggling to enter the system and advance. Whites did not want to compete with blacks for wage paying jobs, so it was beneficial to support Jim Crow ideology that taught African Americans were innately inferior. Company mining towns further divided the races and classes. Mining towns provided houses, schools, recreational facilities, and medical facilities for workers. All facilities were segregated along racial lines with better facilities located next to inferior facilities to encourage workers to advance to higher levels. Capitalism promoted hard work as a means to a better life. Mining towns were designed to encourage competition among workers (King, 2012).

Mining towns were also used to control labor. The towns mirrored a medieval feudal system where workers were provided with labor and a good environment in return for undivided loyalty. A sense of trust was established especially between white owners and the white working class who benefited most from the social structure. Many scholars of social identity have noted the importance of trust to in-group formation and identification (Ashmore, et al., 2001; Brewer, 1991). Tajfel (1986) notes in-group assimilation is related to positive differentiation, but in-group favoritism does not automatically lead to out-group hostility (as cited in Ashmore, et al., 2001). Being a member of the in-group is beneficial when access to resources and power differs among social groups. Whether all whites in Birmingham agreed with white supremacist ideology, they benefited from the social structure. Wealth and power was still concentrated in the hands of a few business leaders,



but they were all white and far more willing to extend favors to working class whites over blacks. Despite the class differences, whites still fared better in terms of jobs, housing, and education than black citizens.

Owners exercised tight control over company town to prevent workers from organizing and challenging the system. A convict-leasing program also controlled job competition and wages. Convicts, most of whom were black, had been a source of free labor since Alabama passed the Vagrancy Act in 1868 allowing the state to lease convicts to the mines to work off their sentences (King, 2012). The Vagrancy Act was another way to keep slavery and white supremacy alive through legal means. Economically it was a threat because it forced paid (white) workers to compete with free, prison (black) labor. It created an incentive for company workers to stay in line and not challenge the system. Black citizens had the added burden of Jim Crow segregation hindering entry and advancement within the job market.

All social conflict is a form of class struggle between the working class and elites. Superstructures, such as laws, politics, and culture, reflect the underlying forces of the economic structure of production (Marx, 1994). When analyzing Birmingham's racial conflict, it is important to look at less visible sources such as socio-economic influences that mirror the larger, more visible structures such as culture, ideology, and politics. Segregation was a visible form of control, but the underlying forces were economic control and political power.

While Jim Crow laws dominated the cultural landscape, the most extreme forms of racial segregation were visible in the south. Research by V. O. Key (1949) found a correlation between racial environment and white racial attitudes (as cited in Glaser,

1994). Key found the most extreme attitudes of white supremacy and segregation occurred in the areas with the highest concentration of black citizens because it represented a political threat. At the time of Birmingham's founding, the racial demographics were approximately 35 percent white, 20 percent European immigrants, and the remaining 45 percent black. The black population was large enough to mobilize and create a real political and economic threat. Hostility over power and politics can exacerbate intergroup conflict (Ashmore, et al., 2010).

Based on Key's (1949) findings, the large black concentration in Birmingham would have heightened white racial attitudes and created a stronger sense of in-group identity and trust among whites (as cited in Glaser, 1994). It is also not surprising that whites in areas with high concentrations of black populations were the most supportive of segregationist politicians like George Wallace and Eugene "Bull" Connor. These politicians vowed to protect white interests at all costs creating a sense of security and trust among whites. Connor and Wallace exploited fears that black citizens could challenge the system politically and compete with whites for resources. According to Tajfel (1981) in-group formation is knowledge of one's membership but more importantly the value attached to that membership (as cited in Ashmore, et al., 2001). For whites, it was beneficial to have a strong sense of in-group identity because they benefited from a system of racial segregation. When the in-group feels threatened by out-group goals and values, out-group aggression emerges to protect the in-group and one's own self identity.

In the early 1900's, Birmingham had the highest concentration of African Americans of any city with a population over 100,000. The ratio of blacks to whites was relatively even prompting stricter segregation initiatives to protect white interests. In 1910, Birmingham

changed its mayor-alderman structure to a three person, elected commission to prevent newly enfranchised African Americans from gaining political control. Trust is a key component of in-group identification; therefore, it is feasible that whites in Birmingham would fear out-group (black) control. The threat of blacks gaining political power increased in-group cohesion and loyalty among whites. Segregationist politicians exploited these fears and promised to fight to defend segregation at all costs. Protecting in-group interests has greater appeal than personal self-interest (Ashmore, et. al., 2001). It was more beneficial for whites to support the system and identify with white supremacist ideology. Whites still represented the majority, however small, and they quickly elected officials who would reinforce the white power structure and eradicate any possibility of political takeover by the black population (King, 2012).

Birmingham enjoyed a period of economic prosperity from the late 1800's through the early 1900's. The economic depression of the 1930's hit Birmingham particularly hard because it was so dependent on the iron and steel industries. If one were to collapse, the whole city would collapse alongside. President Roosevelt said Birmingham was hit harder than any other city by the Great Depression, and some reports indicated Birmingham experience the highest rate of unemployment in the country (King, 2012).

Many Birmingham workers welcomed Roosevelt's New Deal Programs after the hardships of the Depression. However, segregation policies prevented most black citizens from enjoying the benefits of their white counterparts. Birmingham's economy rebounded strongly during World War II creating more jobs than ever and becoming the most heavily unionized state in the country. Working class whites were thriving economically and highly organized politically. As a result, Birmingham fulfilled white citizen's demands for better

neighborhoods, schools, and amenities. Black neighborhoods were not given the same attention. Racial tensions increased as black communities pushed back and tried to advance. Around the same time The Depression occurred, “Bull” Connor was first elected into office.

In line with Key’s (1949) findings, whites living in areas with large black populations, like Birmingham, were the most pro-Connor and staunch supporters of segregation. Connor served four consecutive terms as the Birmingham’s Commissioner for Public Safety between 1937-1953. An adultery scandal prevented Connor for running a fifth consecutive time. After a brief absence, Connor returned to his old post in 1957 winning by a small margin. Even during his political absence, Connor had continued to be a staunch supporter of segregation and many around the country believed “Connor was white Birmingham” (Kimerling, 2012).

### ***Social Structure***

On the surface, Birmingham seems firmly divided along racial lines with whites supporting hard-line, segregationist politicians and white supremacist ideology. Social structure can exacerbate such conflicts especially when society is stratified along ethnic or racial lines. Birmingham, as with most of the “deep South”, had a dichotomous social structure split firmly along racial lines. Brewer (1991) asserts such stark divisions encourage social comparison and perceived threats of interests causing increased negative attitudes towards out-groups (as cited in Ashmore, et al., 2001). The less complex the social structure, the greater the potential for intergroup conflict. Jim Crow divided society into two distinct subgroups. Everything in public and private life was literally viewed as “black” or “white”.

Racism and segregation were not exclusive to Birmingham or the South. Birmingham promoted values and beliefs that were prevalent throughout U.S. society at the time. The city became a focal point because of intense media focus on charismatic politicians and extreme violence that took place at the height of the Civil Right's Movement. Between the 1940's and early 1960's, Birmingham was commonly referred to as the "Johannesburg of the South" and "the most segregated city in America" (Kimerling, 2012). Public perception throughout the country influenced the racial dynamics further. Segregation was a rallying cry for white southerners. One of the most prominent political figures in Alabama, Governor George Wallace, famously proclaimed in his inaugural address, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" (King, 2013).

Interestingly, the tides of change had already been rolling into Birmingham for over a decade when Wallace made his proclamation. Hard-line segregationists like Wallace and "Bull" Connor seemed to be holding steadfastly to fading ideals out of principle. Segregationist ideology had become so entwined with the South; it was synonymous with white, Southern identity. To challenge segregation was a direct assault to Wallace, and many other white people's sense of self and social identity

### ***Group Conflict Theory***

Group conflict theory is useful when looking at racial-political attitudes in Birmingham (Glaser, 1994). The theory posits racial attitudes and policy formation reflects more than positive or negative feelings towards the out-group. Attitudes are shaped by group identification and intergroup struggle for power or benefits leading to an "us" versus "them" mentality. Racial attitudes are shaped by individual's perception of group conflict (Glaser, 1994). Analysis of intergroup conflict by Sears & Funk (1991) found conflict often

arises because of perceived threats and existing intergroup hostility (as cited in Ashmore, et al., 2001, p. 28). Sociologists Larry Griffin (2012), Ashley Thompson (2012), and Robert Zieger (2012) have all written about the connection between identity and social class. White were the dominant social class, and the threat of losing economic and political control creates intergroup conflict. However, as racial tensions increased so did the socioeconomic divide, and many white citizens grew frustrated with the social structure. Change was slow, but attitudes were shifting and many white citizens began to question if racial segregation was preventing Birmingham from progressing as a modern city.

### ***Progressive Mobilization***

Between 1943-1963, a variety of coalitions formed and reformed around various issues in Birmingham. Ultimately it was an evolving coalition of white voters that affected the most immediate change during the Civil Rights era in Birmingham. The reaction of white citizens to the actions of political leaders is evidence that many no longer identified with segregation and white supremacist ideology. The coalitions changed direction and key players over the course of two decades, but the connecting thread was a desire to challenge Jim Crow segregation as the norm in Birmingham (King, 2012). A major step to defeating Jim Crow was ousting “Bull” Connor from office and changing the social structure to prevent white supremacist politicians from regaining absolute control.

Structuration theory posits the social structure, which includes traditions, norms, moral codes, and institutions, is established by repeated actions from individuals (Jabri, 1996). However, it can be altered when people ignore or replace the structure, as happened with the coalitions that formed in Birmingham to replace Jim Crow segregation and the politicians who supported it. There is an evolving reciprocal relationship between the

individual and the social structure, which cause latent conflict to turn violent (Jabri, 1996). After the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court banned school segregation, the social and political atmosphere in Birmingham grew increasingly turbulent and violent. Within a few years, many white citizens became disillusioned. They felt isolated by the two extremes of “Bull” Connor and his segregationist allies and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reverent Fred Shuttlesworth’s nonviolent struggle for civil rights. (King, 2013)

Despite public perception, hard line segregationists were not a monolithic group in Birmingham. A small but powerful coalition of black and white citizens formed with the goal of ending segregation and ousting politicians who wanted to maintain the status quo. Birmingham has a long history of resistance, but it also has a long, perhaps less displayed history, of organizing for progressive reforms. Not all citizens of Birmingham were staunch segregationists or even supporters of “Bull” Connor. While many were still inherently racist and did not see white and black citizens as equal, many citizens, particularly powerful business leaders, spoke out against segregation. Business leaders in the community said it was both “bad for business, and bad for Birmingham” (Kimerling, 2013). According to Jabri (1996), the repeated formation of coalitions by white and black citizens was a direct challenge to the white social structure and caused latent racial tensions to manifest into violent conflict.

### ***Ideological Shift/ 1940's -1960's***

As early as 1948, a coalition of citizens formed the Citizens Against Mobism (CAM) to directly challenge the KKK and its racially motivated violence. In June of 1948, a group of Klansmen attacked a biracial group of women’s counselors at a Girl Scout camp. The group received word that two white women from Tennessee were training a local black

chapter of the Girl Scouts. The men entered the tents at night stating, “white women have no business living in a Negro camp. We don’t like it and the people around here don’t like it. We mean to see that our orders are carried out. Do you understand?” (Kimerling, 2012). The biracial camp was viewed as a challenge to the white power structure. Klan member William Hugh Morris, released a report stating, “Having been actively engaged in a movement dedicated to the active maintenance of white supremacy, the preservation of the customs and traditions of our southern way of life, we have found with the exception of a very small minority of radical communists and a very few theorizing intellectuals, a vast majority of the responsible people actively opposed to any and all attempts to bridge the chasm that has separated the races since the beginning of time” (Kimerling, 2012). Any mixing of the races, especially by white citizens, was viewed as a challenge to the social structure and an affront to Southern, white, identity. As previously stated, trust is a key element in in-group formation and identification (Ashmore, et al., 2001). Norms and rules must be followed in order to maintain trust. The Camp Fletcher incident can be seen as a violation of trust by breaking with group norms. Prominent Birmingham attorney, Abe Berkowitz, wrote a letter proposing “anti-masking” legislation aimed directly at the Klan. Although his proposal was rejected, other groups and organizations quickly joined Berkowitz’s efforts. The Young Men’s Business Club claimed the Klan’s actions at Camp Fletcher were a hindrance to interracial relations and a challenge to law and order in Jefferson County. The CAM was officially formed and began vigorously working towards anti-masking legislation.

In the years between the Camp Fletcher incident and 1954 school desegregation, the coalition for racial reform disintegrated. It was not until 1954, the coalition would



reemerge to challenge the city government and race relations. After the courts declared school segregation unlawful in May 1954, a wave of backlash and resistance emerged. On April 28, 1958, sticks of dynamite were found at Temple Beth-El, one of two Jewish synagogues in Birmingham. Thankfully, the bomb had been diffused by rain from the previous night. Bombings against black institutions and communities were commonplace the city was commonly referred to as “Bombingham”. The attempted bombing on Temple Beth-el prompted the city’s Jewish community into cohesive action and mutual cooperation with the black community. Prominent Jewish leader and respected businessman, William P. Engel demanded an investigation of the bombing attempt. Engel became a leader against segregationist policies and laws. Even “Bull” Connor supported an investigation into the bombing, although he had ulterior motives for doing so. Connor was well aware of the racial dynamics in Birmingham and used incidences like Temple Beth-el to exploit racial tensions for his own political gain. The police did not interfere in bombings of black institutions and neighborhoods, but attacks on white institutions, including Jewish, were forbidden. Within a few weeks, Bethel Baptist Church, was bombed. Bethel was an African American church led by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. The Birmingham police and FBI launched an investigation. However, Klansman J. B. Stoner, who was responsible for the bombing, would not be arrested until 1980. The bombings of Temple Beth-el and Bethel Baptist Church were a significant turning point. Hatred had transformed from an individual level to an institutional, and it spurred the Jewish community to become an agent for change. (King, 2012).

Until the 1950’s, Birmingham operated with no economic, political, or social challenge. By the late 1950’s, Birmingham residents grew increasingly frustrated by an

economic and political system that exploited resources to benefit a small, white, elite. The greatest gaps were among white and black communities with most black citizens having no access to medical services or educational opportunities. The demand for progressive change was already underway. In order to gain what they wanted, liberal city residents had to tackle Jim Crow segregation head on. Birmingham had once been a rapidly growing economy, but by the mid-1955, steel production was down ten percent leaving Birmingham trailing every other major southern city in wholesale economy rankings. The commission did little to modernize the economy leading business elites to take matters into their own hands. In 1957, the city organized Birmingham Downtown Improvement Association to revitalize the downtown financial and retail district. The 1954 Supreme Court passing of *Brown vs. Board of Education* had reignited the Ku Klux Klan bombings. The Klan targeted neighborhoods in transition, and whites began buying up property in western and northern neighborhoods before the houses hit the market to prevent blacks from purchasing them.

During this same time, Mayor Jimmy Morgan announced he would not seek reelection. The Young Men's Business Club (YMBC) encouraged Birmingham native Tom King to run. The YMBC had a plan to oust "Bull" Connor and change the commission structure. King placed second in the primaries and was strongly supported by the black population. His opponent, Art Hanes, used racial tensions to rally white voters against black voters. King lost after his opponents circulated a photograph of King shaking hands with a black constituent. Although he lost, King's bid for mayor brought together a reform movement that included black, white, poor, and wealthy for the first time in Birmingham's history.

According to structuration theory, the existing social structure of norms, traditions, and values falls apart when individuals ignore the system and seek to replace it (Jabri, 1996). Beginning in the spring of 1960, underwent a major transformation, and by 1963, the vigilantes that once represented the city's ideals were perceived as operating on the outside of societal norms. The existing societal structure of Jim Crow segregation was crumbling, but not before Birmingham was thrust under a microscope for intense violence and terrorism against black citizens that drew national attention (Kimerling, 2012).

Connor's popularity was at an all time high when he was reelected to city commissioner on May 2, 1961. One month later, Art Hanes won the election for mayor against reformist Tom King. Birmingham seemed determined to remain the "Johannesburg of the South" (King, 2012). Shortly after the election, white mainstream attitudes began shifting when a group of Freedom Riders were severely beaten after arriving at the Greyhound Bus Terminal. It was later revealed that "Bull" Connor had alerted the Klan of the Freedom Riders arrival. Connor informed the Klan they would have fifteen minutes alone with the Riders before any police presence would arrive and intervene. The violence continued six days later when another group of Freedom Riders was attacked by a mob as the bus entered Montgomery. The incidents prompted Federal Judge Frank Johnson to issue an order demanding all parties cease the violence. His main concern was the safety of all citizens in public transit.

The economic situation worsened in the summer of 1961 as increasing racial unrest, a faltering steel industry, and a shifting national economy converged on Birmingham. The one time "Magic City" was crumbling under the weight of segregation. One prominent business leader had enough and led the charge to mobilize the white, business elite to act.

Sidney Smyer was the President of Birmingham Realty Company and supporter of segregation. He had been a founding member of the Dixiecrat Party, a state's rights, and segregationist political party. Smyer was in Japan at the time of the Freedom Rider's attack, but the incident made headlines around the world. Smyer had quietly begun researching alternative government structures with the goal of riding the city of Bull Connor and his allies for good. Smyer may have still been a segregationist at heart, but he was a businessman first and foremost and recognized segregation was killing the city. Many other business elites and white citizens shared Smyer's view about the economic health of the city, which hints that class struggle played a larger role in Birmingham than segregation. Segregation was acceptable as long as it served white interests, but as the economy continued to decline as racial tensions increased, Birmingham citizens became less supportive of racial divides. White citizens were financially strained, along with blacks, under the weight of segregation, and they demanded a change.

Desegregation movements gained momentum in November 1961 when a federal lawsuit filed three years earlier deemed all of Birmingham's municipal facilities must be desegregated. The city commission responded in January 1962 by a unanimous vote to close all facilities rather than integrate. Citizens responded immediately with letters requesting the Commission to reconsider, but public facilities were closed on January 15, 1962. Three black churches were bombed the following day as if segregationists were determined to assert the social structure was still in tact (Kimerling, 2012).

Eight months later, a coalition of young attorneys, business leaders and merchants, PTA groups, and labor unions formed Birmingham Citizen's for Progress to campaign for a referendum to change the city government structure. Glaser's (1994) research of group

conflict theory showed a connection between racial attitudes and political strife. In Birmingham, politics was also heavily tied to economic control. By the early 1960's, Birmingham's economy was floundering leaving white and black residents disillusioned. Even those who supported segregation began to recognize it was bad for Birmingham's economy. (Kimerling, 2012).

In March 1962, a group of mostly black and some white students joined together to for a pre-Easter boycott of downtown department stores. Despite the commission rescinding money for the food surplus allocation that benefited mostly black citizens, Easter department store sales dropped by twenty percent increasing support among white business owners to join the effort desegregation. On November 6, 1962, a referendum to change the city's government structure passed with the aid of a small, but important group of black voters. Several organizations and individuals had been working hard to increase black voter registration despite the many efforts by white supremacist leaders to prevent the black community from organizing politically.

Scare tactics and other measures, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, had been used for years to circumvent the voting rights afforded by the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments. Black voter registration efforts were crucial to securing support to change the commission structure to a mayor-council structure. The unofficial coalition of black and white voters set the stage for the 1963 mayoral election. On April 3, 1963, Birmingham elected moderate Albert Boutwell as the city's first mayor. Black voter registration drives paid off as Boutwell's victory was attributed to the roughly 8,000 black citizens who showed up to vote. The true transformative moment had occurred the previous November when Birmingham citizen's voted to change the commission structure thereby ousting "Bull"

Connor, big industry leaders, and segregationist policies. As *The Birmingham News* proclaimed, a new day had dawn on Birmingham. (Kimerling, 2013).

Citizens challenged the social structure on three separate occasions; the referendum to change the city government structure, the election to oust Bull Connor, and a vote that rejected reinstating the city commission. In following with structuration theory, micro-level human agency and macro-level social structure exist in relation to one another, thus repeated actions from individuals create the structure. In turn, the traditions, norms, moral codes, and institutions can be altered when people ignore and replace the structure (Jabri, 1996). Birmingham voters, most of whom were white, changed the social structure by voting out Bull Connor and segregationist ideology.

Shortly after the mayoral election and ousting of Connor, the Civil Rights Movement boiled to a head. Two opposing figures, George Wallace and Martin Luther King, Jr., would take center stage to battle over Civil Rights with Birmingham as the backdrop. Wallace had cemented his stance as a staunch segregationist in his gubernatorial address proclaiming “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever”. Birmingham may have appeared divided by public perception, but no other American city could claim such a major electoral win. Black and white voters had made it clear they did not want their city identified by racial segregation and discrimination. Citizens voted for social progress. They wanted better schools, more jobs, and economic diversity.

Connor and the commission refused to step aside without a fight. The newly elected Mayor Boutwell and City Council were sworn in on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1963. Connor and his fellow commissioners refused to vacate the office leaving Birmingham with two governments. Simultaneously, Birmingham gained more national attention as Martin Luther King, Jr. and

Fred Shuttlesworth launched a series of demonstrations aimed at ending segregation. Shuttlesworth knew the combination of King's presence and Connor's persona would draw national media attention and hopefully prod President Kennedy into action over civil rights legislation. King sent a series of correspondents to President Kennedy about his plans to take the movement to Birmingham, and he reminded Kennedy " 'a virtual reign of terror is still alive in Birmingham, Alabama. It is by far the worst big city in race relations in the United States' " (Kimerling, 2013). King focused on demonstrations while Connor was still in office knowing Connor would likely respond in a violent confrontation. Connor took the demonstrations as an opportunity to show the depth of his opposition to desegregation and civil rights despite Birmingham citizens voting him out of office.

On April 3, Reverend Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights issued the "Birmingham Manifesto" in which they declared an oppressed people can exercise patience for so long. It pointed out that blacks in Birmingham had been "segregated racially, exploited economically, and dominated politically, [and] victims of repeated violence" (Kimerling, 2013). It also pointed to broken promises by white business leaders to work together to end segregation. That same day, 20 citizens were arrested for lunch counter sit-ins, and in the following days, hundreds more were arrested after marching on Good Friday in violation of a Jefferson County Circuit Court injunction. Dr. King was among those arrested, and he penned his "Letters from a Birmingham City Jail" during that time. The movement had lost momentum by the time King was released eight days later prompting King to use schoolchildren in marches and demonstrations.

Civil Rights leaders anticipated Connor would not hesitate to arrest schoolchildren, and they also expected Connor's brutality would draw even more international focus to

Birmingham. For twelve days in May, demonstrations were held, thousands were arrested, and police dogs and fire hoses were used against citizens. Governor Wallace sent state troopers to assist Connor, and they launched tear gas and heavy artillery at citizens. King reached out to the white business elite to negotiate an agreement, and in return, the demonstrations would cease. A deal was reached on May 10 between white business owners and Civil Rights leaders. The agreement included: desegregation of dining establishments within 90 days of the Alabama Supreme Court's ruling on the validity of the new government; removal of "white" and "colored" from drinking fountains and restrooms within 30 days; desegregated department store fitting rooms; and retail employment opportunities for blacks would be increased. Mayor Art Hanes said white business leaders who participated in the negotiations were traitors. For white supremacists, it can be understood as an assault to white, racial identity which values white superiority and a complete separation of the races. White voters had already broken with the social structure of white supremacy by ousting Connor and his segregationist followers. Now it seemed the white, business community was also breaking ties.

A shift in cultural attitudes was clear. White citizens may have identified as part of the white racial group, but they no longer identified with white supremacist ideology. Ashmore, Jussim, & Wilder (2001) note the importance of self-categorization in social identity. Identity entails boundaries and an assertion of sameness and difference. Self-categorization is the can be used when measuring social identity. Self-categorization is "identification *as*" meaning one sees a place for themselves in a group. "Identification *as*" differs from "identification *with*" which implies a positive feeling towards others in the group. As mentioned earlier in Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory, awareness of group



membership causing more positive feelings towards the group; however, member and psychological attachment to a group are not the same (as cited in Ashmore, et al., 2001).

One can identify with a minority group without categorizing oneself as a member of that group. Birmingham's white citizens did just that when they decided to oust Connor and desegregate the city. White citizens and business leaders could identify with black the community and agree they deserved more access to jobs, institutions, and political power. The difference between "identification *as*" and "identification *with*" underscores the racial dynamics in Birmingham. By the early 1960's, many white Birmingham residents no longer "identified *with*" the customs, values, and expectations of white supremacist ideology and pushed for changing cultural norms.

Birmingham responded in May 1963. On May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled against Connor and the old commission forcing them to leave City Hall for good. The new mayor and council immediately went to work instituting a biracial committee on July 16<sup>th</sup> to oversee the city's progress on integration. The following week all Birmingham's segregation ordinances were repealed, and lunch counters were desegregated on July 30<sup>th</sup>. Even President Kennedy acknowledged a shift in attitude many parts of Alabama. He praised the peaceful acceptance of two black students at the University of Alabama's campus. The integration of the university was where Governor Wallace made his famous "school house stand" and lived up to his inaugural promise to defend segregation and state's rights. While Kennedy demonized the actions of Wallace, he praised the good conduct of the University of Alabama students. Kennedy's observations conveyed a broader cultural shift was taking place throughout the state, not just in Birmingham. Progress was being made, but the violence did not end (Kimerling, 2013).

By summer of 1963, Birmingham was a volatile powder keg of racial tensions. Over the next few months, the city would erupt into violence and live up to its nickname Bombingham. Wallace would continue to pick at racial tensions and challenge a federal court order requiring school desegregation by September. Wallace was vocal about “state sovereignty” and used every opportunity possible to exploit old racial fears. He compared the Civil Rights movement and its leaders to Communists, the Kennedy administration to Hitler and the Nazis, and declared the president had abused his power by sending the National Guard to integrate the University of Alabama. He emboldened the Klan to action when he proclaimed, “it is the destiny of the people of the South to help save the nation” (Kimerling, 2013).

At the start of the new school year in September, Wallace sent state troops to block the opening of schools, while thousands of white citizens showed up at City Hall demanding schools be closed rather than integrated. Riots broke out on September 4<sup>th</sup>, Civil Rights attorney Arthur Shores’ home was bombed for a second time, and the Birmingham City School Board voted to close the newly integrated schools until the following week. Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard to enforce integration. Wallace said the President had “taken complete control” (Kimerling, 2013). The Cahaba River Boys, a violent faction of the KKK, received Wallace’s words as a call to action.

The following week, a tragedy occurred that would scar a city’s image for decades and rouse the American consciousness of the Civil Rights Movement. On Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, four young girls -- Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley – were killed when a bomb exploded inside Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Connor’s words and actions may have inspired the attack,

but the major tragedy belonged to Birmingham's power class who had not fully understood the need to dismantle Jim Crow segregation. Although most citizens did not support Wallace, but the white elites passive acceptance of the social structure ensured the values and norms remained in place. A delegation of prominent community members was sent to Washington to the White House at President Kennedy's invitation. The overarching theme of the meeting was the unfair national opinion of Birmingham, and a request to let Birmingham handle desegregation without federal involvement. In retrospect, the white power structure failed to realize their passive acceptance of the social structure contributed to past and future events. All of the violence that had occurred and was still to come was a resistance to change. The passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act legally ended segregation and outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The events in Birmingham played a significant role in the passing of the landmark civil rights legislation. But change comes slow, and Birmingham still had a long way to go over the following decades to mend the damage of racial segregation (Kimerling, 2013).

### **Contemporary Research of Regional and Racial Identity**

Researchers Ashley Thompson and Melissa Sloan (2012) interviewed a diverse sample of black and white southerners to understand the connection between regional identity and race in the south. Race is inextricably linked to the south, but according to Thompson and Sloan, most scholarly work has focused on the white experience essentially equating "Southern" with white. However, polls from the 1990's found that blacks are slightly more likely to claim a southern identity. Research has shown that roughly 78% of African Americans, versus 75% of whites, claim a southern identity after Jim Crow. Historian Edward Ayers (1996) argues this sense connection for African Americans is

linked to a “moral geography” (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p 73). Ayers (1996) argues that African Americans see the south as a homeland because they are connected to the land by sweat and sacrifice. African American’s are physically connected to the land and homes in the South. The blood, sweat, and tears of African Americans helped build many corporations that still prosper to this day. Douglas A. Blackmon (2008) wrote about the convict leasing program and how many whites profited from exploiting black southerners (as cited in Thompson et al., 2012, p 73).

Certainly this is the history of Alabama and Birmingham. Slaves handpicked cotton in the fields for no pay while white plantations owners amassed tremendous wealth. Birmingham’s mining and steel industries used free labor through a convict-leasing program to keep workers in line and wages competitive. Most convicts were black so it was a legal way to continue exploiting blacks as slaves. With such a long history of racial discrimination and exploitation, it is interesting that blacks still have a strong sense of Southern identity.

After the Civil Rights Movement and legal end of Jim Crow, there was a re-emergence of blacks reclaiming their southern identity. In the 1990’s, there was a clash between whites and blacks over cultural symbols. White southerners have always had statues and confederate flags as symbols of their identity. Confederate symbols were a source of pride and history for white southerners. For African Americans, it represented hate, racism, and exploitation they experienced for over a century. In the 1990’s, blacks began challenging southern identity and fought to remove Confederate flags from state capitals, alter flags that incorporated the Confederate flag, and challenge the use of public money for the upkeep of Confederate monuments. At the same time, James C. Cobb (2000)

wrote about white southerners feeling their identity was under attack, and the cultural conflict over symbols has led many whites to hold onto symbols of their Confederate past even stronger (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012).

Thompson and Sloan (2012) questioned if the history of racial conflict had created a different “South” for whites and blacks. Their interviews showed a notable difference between blacks and whites on the importance of regional identity. Of the participants who identified themselves as “southern”, Thompson and Sloan then asked how important it was to them to be southern. Of the 65 residents interviewed, 54 identified as southern. There was a notable difference between black and white responses on the importance of southern identity with regards to race. Roughly 63 percent of African Americans said southern identity was mildly important while 56 percent of whites said southern identity was mildly or very important.

Thompson and Sloan (2012) looked at the link between racial and southern identity to understand the difference in identity. They asked respondents who claimed southern identity was important, what made it an important part of their identity. Most white respondents and roughly half of African American’s noted the culture, norms, and values of the region. There was a noticeable difference in responses to the history of the region. Most white respondents focused on the positive aspects of southern history and disassociated themselves from the negative. Almost all respondents did not explicitly mention race while almost all black respondent incorporated race into the importance of their southern identity. White respondents focused on the history of the south as a hobby or interest. For example, Mark Hobbes of Marion, NC (38, white) noted a sense of pride about southern history aside from the Confederate heritage. Hobbes mentioned the railroads, Industrial

Revolution, textile mills, and the importance of the Tennessee Valley Authority to rural electricity. Hobbes notes the important role the south has played in history that often gets overlooked but never mentioned the history of racial turmoil that is also a part of the region's history (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p. 79).

Jennifer Dartmouth of Nashville (54, white) mentioned the interesting history and language, while William Lancaster of Marion, NC (46, white) says being a southerner is cool because of the reenactments of Confederate battles. All three respondents have similar reasons for the importance of southern identity. History is an interesting hobby and a matter of heritage and pride. None of the white respondents address the moral question of the south's racial past because white privilege affords the luxury of ignoring the harsher realities of southern history.

In contrast, almost all of the black respondents included race in their responses because they do not have this same luxury, particularly those who experienced Jim Crow segregation first hand. Shonda Murphy (57, black) of Baton Rouge talks about her pride as a southerner but also a difficult and painful history:

I think that being reared in the South I've had to overcome some things. I've had to deal with issues that other people chose to run from. You know a lot of people left the south because they did not want to deal with the issues of racism, or things not quite being equal. I remember my first job I ever had in Jackson, Mississippi, when I went to school there. It was at a café ... I was right out of high school, and they hired me on the spot. And I only [thought] that the place had one side. I didn't know it [had] a white and black side ... until I went to the kitchen, and I went past, and then I went through another part, and it was the white section ... You might not want it to be that way, but you don't allow that to demean you to the point of saying, "Well, I'm less than." (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p. 80).

Murphy's experience is more than a hobby or interest in history. Her experience is a fundamental part of her consciousness and identity formation, which is proud to claim.

Larry Carpenter of Nashville (55, black) shares Murphy's thoughts on southern history and its importance to his identity. Carpenter says:

[Being southern] is very important, because I think its part of my identity. And it's part of my culture, and my cultural understanding. My sense of peoplehood, and my sense of who I am, and my ancestry are all rooted in the South (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p. 82).

Carpenter also mentioned the importance of the Civil Rights Movement to his regional identity. He believed the movement was more personally meaningful and gave African Americans in the South "a deeper consciousness" to fight the social structure (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p. 82). The interviews conducted by Thompson and Sloan (2012) suggests a greater racial consciousness for African Americans in the South as opposed to whites. The collective structure to overcome racial oppression gives a sense of pride and strength creating an identity for many. Even respondents who did not personally experience the Civil Rights Movement express a sense of unity and connection to the region's history, and the movement represents a significant event for many of younger generations. Rebecca Laster (23), a young black woman from Nashville, talks about the South's history and the impact it has on her:

The South has a lot of history. It's kind of odd. I'm saying, I'm black. I'm like, "Oh, the South has history," and my people were oppressed here, but we do have history here. Even, you know, black history here. The Civil Rights Movement was here. It was started here, with our people. So I think that makes me special (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p. 82).

The research by Thompson and Sloan showed a pattern of intersection between regional, individual, and racial history for black southerners more so than white respondents.

Others, such as Griffin and Bollen (2009) observed the same pattern suggesting southern history is not just "white" history (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012). For many African

Americans, southern history is black history, and this history is important to personal identity.

I conducted a survey on race and identity with Birmingham residents. Considering the racial history of the South and Birmingham's specific role in the Civil Rights Movement, I suspected there would be a correlation between identity and race. My findings confirmed my thought that African American respondents would include race when asked to describe their self-identity. All 5 African Americans surveyed included black or African American, and one respondent, who considered herself biracial, still said race was a part of her identity. Even more interesting, all 5 out of the 6 who identified as "black" or "African American" listed race first in response to the question, "How would you describe your self-identity?" Clearly there is a strong connection between race and identity for African American respondents. Although my sample is smaller and focused on one specific city, the responses mirror those of the participants in Thompson and Sloan's (2012) survey on identity.

Interestingly, Thompson and Sloan found that regional identity, in terms of everyday life, was different for white and black respondents. 7 out of 30 black respondents were initially uncertain whether they were southern, while 8 said they never think about being southern. In contrast, none of the white respondents said they never think about being southern. This suggests that southern identity may not be as prominent for black respondents as whites. The data asserts that white respondents thought in terms of regional identity more than black respondents, and thus, southern identity is more conscious in their thought process and active part of their regional and American identity.



Thompson and Sloan's (2012) research suggests racial identity is more prevalent in daily life for black southerners. Approximately 89 percent of black respondents said race was an important aspect of their self-identity, while only half of white respondents listed race as important to their identity. My research on identity in Birmingham showed a similar pattern. The majority of black respondents listed their race as a part of their self-identity while only 2 white respondents listed race. Of the white respondents who identified as white, they added that society would consider them to be of "Caucasian" descent suggesting that their view of their racial identity is more influenced by societal restrictions of race rather than their own personal connection to being white. Jon Paolone (white male #2, personal correspondence, January 29, 2014) describes himself as "Italian-American or American ... [and doesn't] truly identify with the 'white' race", but "living in Birmingham – the Deep South in general – one can't escape race and identity". Another Birmingham resident (white male #3, 2014) also did not consider himself white, but "superficial appearance forces [him] to identify with Caucasian ... [and has] significance in [how he considers] history and culture". He does not explicitly claim a "white" identity and seems to imply societal norms force him to identify as "white". There is also a subtle admission of white privilege by acknowledging his Caucasian ancestry influences his views on history and culture. Two other respondents acknowledge privileges of being white. Allan Burton (white male #1, personal correspondence, January 10, 2014) does not mention his race in describing his self-identity. However, when asked to describe his connection, if any, with race and identity, Burton says:

[I] grew up in an entirely white community (seriously) for 18 years, with the exception of 3 years when I was a minority. Therefore, I have done my best to identify more fully as an adult with ideas and people who have been disenfranchised by both my culture and myself, though

unintentionally...most of the time – women, blacks, folks from the South and East, and those with non-traditional sexual identities.

And Suzanne Martin (white female #3, personal correspondence, January 21, 2014) says:

[I have] an awareness that I am “white” and that being white affords privilege – something that I did not earn and that for the most part, I don’t think much about on a day-to-day basis. I am aware of it, and have experienced “white guilt” over the years, learned to talk about categories of race, identity and privilege after I began to come to grips with my own.

When Burton mentions those disenfranchised by his culture and himself, I believe the culture he is referring to is the white race. By saying it is unintentional, Burton seems to recognize that white privilege may have inadvertently caused harm to non-whites and other minority groups. There is a perhaps a conscious, but distant, admission of guilt about being white. Martin certainly has awareness of her white privilege and has experienced guilt for privileges she says she is afforded without merit because she is white. She also mentions while she has recognized her privilege and experienced guilt, she does not think about either on a daily basis.

Black respondents in Thompson and Sloan’s (2012) interviews spoke about the experience living as a minority adding extra emphasis to the role of race in their identity. Darren Winters (Baton Rouge, 39, black), Nick Godfrey (39, black), and Fred Clump (38, black) all listed race and the fact they were black as important to their personal identity (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012). The opening quote of this paper, mirrors the sentiments collected by Thompson and Sloan. A young, Birmingham resident I interviewed said “race [has] been a significant part of [his] identity ... [and] defines [his] identity” (black male #1, 2014). Race has permeated all aspects of his life informing the way he views and relates to people. 17 out of 26 African American respondents Thompson & Sloan (2012) interviewed

said they were aware of their race on a daily basis, in contrast to only 2 white respondents. White respondents who listed race as important to their identity did so in “abstract and distant manner” (Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p. 85). This suggests a white privilege and race has played a less significant role in shaping the white respondents identity as opposed to the black respondents. Kolchin (2002) claims because whites still represent the majority in America, it creates a “color blindness” about their race (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012). White is considered the norm so being white is not considered as a race unless whites find themselves in a situation where they are the minority. For example, eating in a Korean restaurant may make a white person more aware of their “whiteness” but on a day-to-day basis, race is not a conscious element. By claiming they are “white” it implies they are part of the normative majority but also not special or interesting enough to be considered a race. Thompson and Sloan (2012) found white respondents tended to include their regional identity in their racial identity. Brent Jacobs (Nashville, 57, white) described himself as a “southern American” when asked about his racial identity, and Paul Madison (white, 48) said he was a “Confederate Southern American. Not Caucasian” (Thompson & Sloan, 2012, p. 88).

Many social psychologists have noted individuals achieve positive self-esteem and sense of value from social group memberships. Henri Tajfel (1986) is perhaps one of the most well-known and referenced scholars on social identity theory (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012). Tajfel (1986) defined social identity as having two components: knowledge of membership in a group and the value attached to that membership (as cited in Ashmore, Jussim, & Wilder, 2001). The respondents in Thompson and Sloan’s (2012) research all expressed a strong sense of group identity particularly a southern identity. However,

African American respondents claimed race as more important than regional identity while white respondents claimed regional identity. Historian David R. Roediger (1991) claims the focus on regional identity rather than racial can be viewed seeing “white” as the cultural norm and a hegemonic power (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012). In contrast, sociologist Mary C. Waters (1999) said her white respondents identified more with their ethnic identity (such as Irish, Scottish, Italian) because explicitly claiming “whiteness” is not socially acceptable in the U.S. (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012). Water’s observations fit with Thompson & Sloan’s (2012) research. Claiming a “white” identity is either not special or makes respondents uncomfortable to claim in publicly, a southern identity can provide white southerners a sense of differentiation from other Americans and a sense of belonging to a community (the southern culture). This fits with Tajfel’s (1986) assertion that social identity has two opposing needs of inclusion and differentiation (as cited in Ashmore, et al., 2001). Results from Thompson and Sloan’s (2012) research, show racial identity is expressed as regional identity.

For African American respondents, the opposite was true. Regional identity and racial identity were explicitly connected. Racial identity is far more important to express because of the history and ancestral roots that link African Americans to the South. Curtis Slocum (Nashville, 25, black) says:

If [you’re] a black person ... you will always be from the South ... your bloodline will never be truly a northerner, a westerner, an easterner, or whatever. You will always be a person from the South, as far as your bloodline is concerned (as cited in Thompson & Sloan, 2012).

Slocum claims all African Americans have roots in the South because of their bloodline and therefore are Southern. The history of racial oppression, slavery, Jim Crow, and Civil Rights is black history, not just southern black history. Jim Sidanius and John R.

Petrocik (1996) echo Slocum's remarks saying the history of abuse and oppression by institutions, particularly in the South, makes it reasonable that African Americans would feel a stronger connection to communal, or racial, identity over national or regional (as cited in Ashmore, Jussim, & Wilder, 2001). Tajfel (1986) also emphasized the psychological connection to a group in terms of social identity (as cited in Ashmore, Jussim, & Wilder, 2001). Based on research by several scholars (Thompson & Sloan, 2012; Sidanius & Petrocik, 1996; Roediger, 2001) there is a strong connection to racial identity for African Americans, particularly those living in the South, because of a psychological attachment to the history of racial oppression. Even those who do not live in the South feel a connection to their ancestors who did live and work in the South.

### **Current Perspectives in Birmingham**

Fifty years after the history passing of the Civil Rights Act, many Alabamians are still disillusioned with the sociopolitical and economic structure. So how much has truly changed? The major issues during the Civil Rights Movement in 1963 are the same issues plaguing Birmingham and Alabama as a whole today. The state is still heavily segregated along racial lines, which further exacerbates the socioeconomic stratification. People living all over Alabama, not just in Birmingham, want access to quality education, better healthcare, lower sales tax, more government transparency, better wages and economic opportunities. These are issues that across the racial divide and affect black and white families and communities. With Alabama still ranking at or near the bottom in poverty, economy, healthcare, and education, it is clear these are state issues not just issues of race or identity. The state as a whole is still struggling to progress beyond the grip of "Old South" ideology. Birmingham native, Anthony Johnson questions those who wish to forget

about the 1960's and move forward. He asks if we can both acknowledge the events and use them "as a point of healing and strength?" (Johnson, 2013).

Johnson (2013) has said Birmingham's past and present can be summarized with the closing line of the pledge of allegiance. "Liberty and justice for all", says Johnson (2013), describes accurately the past and current struggle for civil and human rights that has occurred in Birmingham. Johnson is a third generation civil rights leader, and he believes "Birmingham's best days are ahead".

I conducted interviews with several current Birmingham residents to gauge current perspectives on racial dynamics and progress in Birmingham. Considering the long history of racial discrimination and other research on identity in the South, I believed there would be a strong correlation between race and self-identity, particularly for African Americans. Julie Lockette (black female #4, personal correspondence, February 21, 2014) said, "race is [my] identity, or lack thereof, [because] ... [I am] too much of a white girl to be black, [and too black] for the comfort of whites". The young man quoted at the beginning of the paper considered race significant because he is black and believes "race defines one's identity" (black male #1, personal correspondence, December 21, 2013). Racial dynamics still heavily influence identity in Birmingham.

When I asked about current racial dynamics in Birmingham, all twelve respondents said there was still obvious segregation and huge socioeconomic divisions mostly along racial lines. One respondent described Birmingham:

... like a Vietnam vet [that is] far too scarred to forget [what] it has seen [and] done, but forever changed, opened, and stripped of the comfortable blinders of [the] small town South because of it. Birmingham went to war long ago but will never outlive that experience and is therefore inherently more dangerous and yet more forgiving than [other] cities ... race is its largest scar, cut deep, right

across the face and the one it is proudest of surviving (black female #4, personal correspondence, February 21, 2014).

Jon Paolone said, "... One can't escape race and identity ... living in Birmingham". It is evident the history of racial strife has made a permanent impression on Birmingham, and it is a visible scar that cannot be ignored (white male #2, personal correspondence, January 29, 2014). However, the depths of the struggle also make Birmingham more honest about its history and influence on the present. Another Birmingham resident said:

One thing that feeds into the racial dynamics of Birmingham is the outsider perception, based on a tumultuous and very public civil rights history; people already know about Birmingham because they rely on the mediated past, when in fact, racial dynamics in Birmingham are more complex. Even though times have changed, segregation is still an issue; socioeconomic segregation persists alongside racial segregation as well (white female #3, personal correspondence, February 2, 2014).

Several respondents mentioned the socioeconomic divides, in addition to racial segregation, that still plagues Birmingham. One woman said, "The racial dynamics are astounding ... [and] the discrepancy between the two races due to class and wealth does not suit the city well" (black female #1, personal correspondence, February 19, 2014).

Another respondent said:

Racial dynamics in Birmingham are interesting. Just five minutes from Birmingham are some of the whitest and wealthiest suburbs and enclaves in Alabama [while] Birmingham [is] mostly black, urban, and poor. The racial makeup ... has not changed much since the white flight of the 1970's. [As a result,] education, the economy, and vibrancy of Birmingham has struggled [while] Mountain Brook has prospered, [along with other] over the mountain communities (black male #1, personal correspondence, December 21, 2013).

The over the mountain communities he mentions are predominantly white and historically have always been white. These communities are where industrial tycoons built their houses, literally on top of Red Mountain, to rule over their company towns. These

corporate tycoons profited from exploiting working class whites and blacks. That legacy is still apparent, as is the racial and economic divide. However, the same respondent also said, "... many blacks do not want to see more integration, so progress is stalled ... as much by whites and distancing as it is black opposition to integration and more racial mixing" (black male #1, personal correspondence, December 21, 2013). He makes it clear he believes white and black opposition has contributed to continued segregation and prevented the city from progressing.

Johnson (2013) believes the city has made tremendous gains towards reducing racism, but more work needs to be done to eradicate the invisible lines that still permeate the city. Tara King (black female #3, personal correspondence, February 2, 2014) agrees "we have made some progress however there is an underlined racism throughout the city all the time." While the history is important, progressive thinking in the areas of commerce, economic development, and regional growth should be the focus for forward movement in the city. Even recounting the history of Birmingham, racism and segregation cannot be denied for many woes, but ultimately economic and political interests were very much tied into those attitudes, and it affected white and black citizens. A female resident said, "many profit greatly from racial divisiveness in Birmingham" (black female #2, personal correspondence, January 23, 2014).

With so much division along racial and socioeconomic line still apparent, how much has Birmingham truly moved forward since the Civil Rights Movement? Several respondents felt some progress has been made, but much more still needs to be done to address the underlying racism that still permeates the city and affects the economic prosperity of its citizens. One resident suggested "find[ing] ways to unite [Birmingham]"



with the more separate enclaves and suburbs to become one major city, [instead] of a faction of cities and towns that happen to surround the urban core” (black male #1, personal correspondence, December 21, 2013). Another resident saw “progress in the cultural awareness of the people in [Birmingham] ... [but] did not see any hope of complete removal of a racial divide in [his] lifetime” (white male #1, personal correspondence, January 10, 2014). While Tara King (black female #3, personal correspondence, February 2, 2014) agrees some progress has been made, the underlying racism throughout the city is the reason she is “leaving Birmingham this year”. King said, “There is no opportunity for progress in Birmingham”. It is unclear whether King meant there is no opportunity for personal progress or the city as a whole. Still another resident (white female #3, personal correspondence, March 1, 2014) said, “I still do not fully comprehend my racial experiences in Birmingham, and it is as though only white and black exist, which I know is not true.” It is evident from these responses that many residents still feel racial tensions, but there is not necessarily a clear answer as to how to address them in a meaningful way that bridges the divides. It will take progressive action among individuals and neighborhoods to transform the racial and economic landscape of the city.

### **Conclusion**

Birmingham may not be the key to fixing all of the racial problems in Alabama, but it certainly can play a fundamental role. The events that took place here cannot be ignored either in history or for their significance. Birmingham is the largest and by far, most progressive city in Alabama. It is the most diverse, as well, so it makes sense a movement for greater social equity across racial and class lines would continue here. Signs of change continue to emerge. Growth and progress are evident as neighborhoods are revitalized and

individuals and groups strive to connect the disjointed areas of the city through collective action. The physical environment may still be segregated in many areas, but there is an emotional bond forged from tragedies of the past. Those tragedies provide an opportunity to come together and rebuild. There is no denying that Birmingham has made tremendous strides as a city over the last fifty years. While more work must still be done, I can see small, but steady signs of change taking shape across the city, and I echo Johnson's (2013) belief that "Birmingham's best days are ahead".

## Bibliography

- Ashmore, R. D., Jussim, L., & Wilder, D. (Eds.). (2001). *Social identity, intergroup conflict, and conflict reduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Glaser, J. (1994). Back to the black belt: Racial environment and white racial attitudes in the South. *The Journal of Politics*, 56(1). 21-41. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2132344>
- Griffin, L. (2004). Southern distinctiveness, yet again, or, why America still needs the south. *Southern Cultures*, 6(3). 47-27.
- Inwood, J. (2011). Geographies of race in the American south: The continuing legacy of Jim Crow segregation. *Southeastern Geographer*, 51(4), 564-577.
- Jabri, V. (1996). *Discourses on violence: Conflict analysis reconsidered*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Johnson, A. (2013, Feb 15). My view: Civil rights and Birmingham's future. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/10/>.
- Kelly, B. (2001). *Race, class, and power in the Alabama coalfields, 1908-1921*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kimerling, S. (2012, May 10). No more Bull! Birmingham's revolution at the ballot box. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2012/05/10/no-more-bull-birmingham-revolution-at-the-ballot-box/>
- Kimerling, S. (2012, July 18). Unmasking the Klan: late 1940's coalition against racial violence. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from

<http://weldbham.com/blog/2012/07/18/unmasking-the-klan-late-1940s-coalition-against-racial-violence/>

Kimerling, S. (2012, Sept. 19). 54 sticks of dynamite: the bomb at Temple Beth-El. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from

<http://weldbham.com/blog/2012/09/19/54-sticks-of-dynamite-the-bomb-at-temple-beth-el/>

Kimerling, S. (2012, Nov. 12). Transforming Birmingham. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2012/11/21/transforming-birmingham/>

Kimerling, S. (2013, Jan. 23.) Sins of the father. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2013/01/23/sins-of-the-fathers/>

Kimerling, S. (2013, Mar. 20). A lost cause and a new day. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2013/03/20/a-lost-cause-and-a-new-day/>

Kimerling, S. (2013, May 22). Twelve days in May. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2013/05/22/twelve-days-in-may/>

Kimerling, S. (2013, July 17). The stand in the schoolhouse door. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2013/07/17/the-stand-in-the-schoolhouse-door/>

Kimerling, S. (2013, Sept. 18). Read and weep. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2013/09/18/read-and-weep/>

King, P. (2012, June 13). The perfect city: Birmingham was built for production and profit. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2012/06/13/the-perfect-city-birmingham-was-built-for-production-and-profit/>

- King, P. (2012, Aug. 15). The awful legacy of Jim Crow. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2012/08/15/the-awful-legacy-of-jim-crow/>
- King, P. (2012, Oct. 17). Trying to change: how Birmingham progressives struggled against the odds. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2012/10/17/trying-to-change-how-birmingham-progressives-struggled-against-the-odds/>
- King, P. (2013, Feb. 20). The truths of Wallace. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2013/02/20/the-truths-of-wallace/>
- King, P. (2013, Apr. 17). The revolt of the moderates. *Weld Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://weldbham.com/blog/2013/04/17/the-revolt-of-the-moderates/>
- Letwin, D. (1998). *The challenge of interracial unionism*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Marx, K. (1994). *Karl Marx: Selected writings*. L. H. Simon (Ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Marx, K. (2011). *The German Ideology*. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books .
- Price, P. (2010). At the crossroads: Critical race theory and critical geographies of race. *Progress in Human Geography*, 34(2). 147-174.
- Zieger, R. H.(2012). *Life and Labor in the New New South*. University Press of Florida. Retrieved April 13, 2014, from Project MUSE database.
- [www.alabamapossible.org](http://www.alabamapossible.org)
- [www.50yearsforward.com](http://www.50yearsforward.com)