

Madison Kasel

Gehrts

SOC&101

22 Mar. 2021

Sociological Perspectives

Martin Luther King Jr once said that “protests are the voice of the unheard,” and to many, this reigns true in our current political climate. However, others will argue that the ‘rioting’ has gone too far and is causing more harm than change. Recently in the U.S, many have taken to the streets in protest of police brutality and racism in the United States. Black Lives Matter, or BLM for short, began in 2014 when people began noting unequal treatment of black Americans, specifically by law enforcement. The recent outrage spiked when a cop in Minneapolis put his knee against George Floyd’s neck, resulting in George’s death. The movement, however, is much larger than this, with many saying that this is just one example of a culture of racism present in our society and others viewing it as an isolated incident and not a reflection on the country as a whole. This controversial topic sparks many strong reactions and emotions when brought up because of the intense divide on the subject, especially in the US. So what’s causing this variance in opinion? Sociology explains the division through the use of the sociological concepts, functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism, and how differently they view Black Lives Matter.

So what is functionalism, and how does it relate to Black Lives Matter? Functionalism is “a theoretical approach that sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of individuals that make up that society”(OpenStax). Because of this, functionalism wouldn’t try to define the racial inequalities as good or bad, it would instead

seek to explain it, and its purpose, “In the view of functionalism, racial and ethnic inequalities must have served an important function in order to exist as long as they have”(Openstax).

Functionalism would also believe the protests to be disrupting society and claim the change is being forced to move too fast. People who view BLM through the lens of functionalism typically tend to see it as a disruption to harmony and see the ‘rioting’ as harmful. When examining Black Lives Matter, “A functionalist might look at “functions” and “dysfunctions” caused by racial inequality. Nash (1964) focused his argument on the way racism is functional for the dominant group, for example, suggesting that racism morally justifies a racially unequal society. Consider the way slave owners justified slavery in the antebellum South, by suggesting black people were fundamentally inferior to white and preferred slavery to freedom” (Openstax). This means that the concept of functionalism would usually have someone justifying the issue because of its contribution to a societal hierarchy.

In contrast, Conflict Theory would support the protests and see them as necessary to create a better civilization. It would say the power imbalance between races caused the protests. Conflict theory, which is “a theory that looks at society as a competition for limited resources”(Openstax) and believes that conflict leads to change, would say that a significant contributor to the oppression of black Americans stems from white Americans wanting to benefit from the power their oppression brings them. So far, conflict theory has proven to be right about the protests bringing about change, “the data show very clearly that where you had Black Lives Matter protests, killing of people by the police decreased. It’s inescapable from this study that protest matters—that it can generate change”(Daley). According to conflict theory, this is good, and would say the protests were inevitable. Along with the findings of lower fatality rates in these areas, they also found that “The occurrence of local protests increased the likelihood of

police departments adopting body-worn cameras and community-policing initiatives, the study also found”(Daley). People who view BLM through a conflict theorist’s perspective would say that the suffering of black Americans is because of caucasian Americans’ inherit desire for power and that the protests are due to this and will lead to positive change. “A conflict theory perspective of U.S. history would examine the numerous past and current struggles between the white ruling class and racial and ethnic minorities, noting specific conflicts that have arisen when the dominant group perceived a threat from the minority group”(Openstax); and use this to explain why many still resist the change.

However, symbolic interactionism wouldn’t necessarily see people’s reactions like this; symbolic interactionism would examine the personal reasons behind each person’s opinion on BLM based on their interaction with the topic and symbols. This is because symbolic interactionism is “a theoretical perspective through which scholars examine the relationship of individuals within their society by studying their communication”(Openstax). A large part of this concept is its relation to language and symbols. The symbol of a black fist represents black Lives Matter, and the movement is associated with the phrase, “I can’t breathe,” which were George Floyd’s last words. The contempt of symbolic interactionism would also take into account the reasons why someone would or would not support BLM, “We find that older, Republican and conservative men were more likely to oppose BLM, while blacks and individuals who perceive their local police to exhibit biases against blacks were less likely to oppose BLM”(Piqueuro). The different beliefs can be caused by environment, the media one consumes, and our personal experiences or connections. People who have experienced racism are probably more likely to view it as an issue than those who have never had any experience with it and rarely hear people they know talking about it. Another example is one’s environment. If you grew up in an all-white

area, you are less likely to have been exposed to the issues Black Lives Matter addresses. To someone who has never experienced or seen acts of racism is not aware of the issue, they would assume that it's exaggerated because of their interactions with the problems BLM discusses. Symbolic interactionism views BLM as a movement formed because of many individuals' collective experiences and would explain each individual's thoughts on BLM through their interactions with society and BLM's symbolism.

In conclusion, the way people view the controversial topic of BLM is based on their sociological perspective. Functionalism sees it as serving a purpose, conflict theory viewing it as a struggle for power from the oppressed, and symbolic interactionism as a reaction to individual experiences—this explaining why people so fiercely disagree on the topic. Ultimately your relation to the issue and outlook shape the way you think of the movement and decide what you do about it.

Citations

Daley, J. (2021, March 01). Killings by police declined after black lives matter protests.

Retrieved March 23, 2021, from

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/killings-by-police-declined-after-black-lives-matter-protests1/>

Griffiths, H., Keirns, N., Strayer, E., & Sadler, T. (2015, April 24). 11.3 theories of race and ethnicity - introduction to SOCIOLOGY 2E. Retrieved March 23, 2021, from

<https://openstax.org/books/introduction-sociology-2e/pages/11-3-theories-of-race-and-ethnicity>

Piquero, A., & Orrick, E. (2018, December 16). We are divided on Black Lives Matter and other movements. Retrieved March 23, 2021, from

<https://www.mysanantonio.com/opinion/commentary/article/We-are-divided-on-Black-Lives-Matter-and-other-13467704.php>