MSc Thesis

Exploring Public Opinion Research of Social Movements: The Case of BLM

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Image: June 2020 BLM demonstration on Malieveld in The Hague. Credits: Robin Utrecht (DutchNews, 2020).

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration aiming to bridge the dissonance between public opinion and the methods through which we explore the perceptions of people about social movements. It relies on the premise that we live in a world of multiple realities, and as such the generalisation of much social science research is only practical in certain contexts. It forefronts the researchers' onto-epistemological standing as an integral part of *doing* research. Specifically, this thesis will investigate the case of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and explore how people's perceptions of this are shifting to a less consistent understanding. Especially when considering the BLM as a catalyst of awareness or as an organisational entity. This research takes an inventive methods approach to its methodology that allows for the respondents to build the research rather than relying on the researcher to procure it. At the same time, personal experiences, thoughts, and biases of the researcher will also be acknowledged and used rather than subverted. This thesis aims to bridge the gap between social science – sociology – research around the way we, as sociologists, make contributions to the field and the world in which we live by also acknowledging the body of the researcher.

Keywords: Activism research; Black Lives Matter (BLM); Public Opinion Research; Inventive method; Social movement research.

"Remember you can always change your mind, because you can."

- Kadija Mbowe

Introduction

For many of us, 2020 was a very impactful and momentous year; one of crisis, pain, loss, and perseverance. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only had many consequences on its own, but within our context, it has exacerbated and maybe even enlighten ongoing social issues and injustices (DISD, 2020; Peters, 2021; Seignette, 2020;). While a pandemic is not necessarily a new occurrence, one to this extent and in the world run by social media it presents a new context through which much can be analysed. Additionally, it has become clear that in our contemporary world 'the social' and social analyses are not a monopoly over which sociologists – or other such humanities disciplines – preside (Back, 2012, p. 19). Therefore, it is important to explore new-found systems, knowledge, and methods in order to see what *is* rather than what *might* or *could* be.

Specifically, in the realm of social movements, the research surrounding this topic is often based on public opinion or public support (Cohn & Quealy, 2020; Rim, Lee & Yoo, 2020). All of these terms, to some extent, dismiss the personal and unique relationships which many people and groups have with these movements. By speaking of 'support for' movements in such general terms it can miss out on interesting findings and analyses that could emerge. This distortion is what has inspired this thesis.

An example that illustrates this dissonance is from the June 2020 New York Times article by Cohn and Quealy (2020). While they do not necessarily provide in-depth research, their article

Figure 1: Chart from Cohn and Quealy (2020) showing the public support for BLM over the years.

does contain a graph that shows the "Voter net support for Black Lives Matter". With the support being negative at first and slowly rising until it grows exponentially in the Spring/Summer of 2020. While, at first, this may just seem like a clear and simple graph, its simplicity is actually what raises more questions. What is 'support' and how is this classified? Such a simple conceptualisation is what causes many common methods biases – where a respondent may answer differently to the same question at different times or in different contexts (Podsakoff et al., 2003).
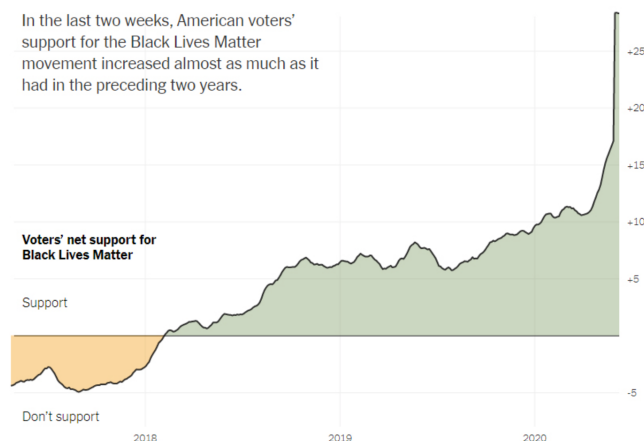
Problem statement

While this thesis does not pose a specific research question, since it is an explorative study, I will, instead, aim to participate in exploring the way we do research, and more specifically how we view social science research in practice. This thesis will be divided into two parts: (1) delving deeper into the onto-epistemological stance at the forefront of a clear study and as a way of highlighting the importance and biases that follow the use of certain research methods, and (2) applying an inventive and explorative method to the case of BLM. I mainly aim to bridge that gap in the literature that social movements are becoming more and more digital and individualised – i.e., people in their personal experiences – rather than a centralised movement. So why is it then that most of the studies looking at 'support for BLM' look at net support or some sort of generalisable data? What does support for BLM entail? These are all questions that will be explored.

Framework

As mentioned in the problem statement, this theoretical framework will tackle two things. Mainly since the aim addresses a need for a critical and in-depth understanding of the onto-epistemology of social science research I will outline how this thesis addresses this. Additionally, previous literature and theories about social movements, and how they have evolved in the age of digitalisation of media will also be outlined and conceptualised in the context of this thesis. Specifically, due to the nature of this research aiming to situate both the researcher, the methods, and the analysis together, the theoretical framework boundaries and line between the theoretical and onto-epistemological framework and the methodology of this research project will also appear to be blurred.

Onto-Epistemological Understandings and importance and inventive methods approach

The inventive methods approach is a way to break down the existing social structure in order to uncover what lies below them (Garfinkel, 1964; Marres, Guggenheim & Wilkie, 2018). This thesis will mainly focus on the advice and explanation given by Mason (2011) about what constitutes an inventive method approach. This approach, also dubbed 'Facet Methodology' (Mason, 2011) concerns itself with the idea that there are different ways of seeing things and that an inventive method approach – which shies away from the traditional social science research approaches – can also create "flashes of insight" (p. 76).

When speaking of the 'traditional social science research approaches' I am not only talking about the methods themselves but also these methods as a way of coloniality of power (Bhambra, 2014). Academia and research are highly dependent on the politics of context and the contexts and politics of our world are deeply rooted in colonialism seeing as they are mainly presided over by 'old white men' (Baboeram, 2020, June 3; Bell et al, 2021; Bhambra, 2014; Prinsloo, 2016; White, 1989).

"This coloniality of power, expressed through political and economic spheres, Quijano continues, was strongly associated with a coloniality of knowledge (or of imagination), articulated as modernity/rationality. This was predicated on a belief that knowledge, in a similar way to property, ought to be considered 'as a relation between one individual and something else', not as an intersubjective relation for the purpose of something. The individuated form of knowledge production has as its correlate the 'radical absence of the "other"' and a

denial of 'the idea of the social totality'. This enables Europeans, both individually and collectively, to affirm their sense of self at the same time as making invisible the colonial order that provides the context for their 'self'-realization […] the emergence of the idea of Europe is an admission of identity in that it emerges through a process of differentiation from other cultures. Yet there is little reflection within European social and political thought on how those other cultures constitute the ground of European self-realization (in both senses). Rather, most discussions of Europe are oriented towards endogenous explanations of who Europeans are and what Europe is. Against this dominant conception, Quijano argues that the modernity that Europe takes as the context for its own being is, in fact, so deeply imbricated in the structures of European colonial domination over the rest of the world that it is impossible to separate the two: hence, modernity/coloniality." (Bhambra, 2014, p. 118)

Therefore, toward looking at a way to deconstruct this in social science research, this paper will not only push my creative and imaginative boundaries of *doing* social science research, but I will also be taking inspiration from indigenous social science research such as Law and Joks (2019) 'Indigeneity, Science, and Difference: Notes on the Politics of How' and Prussing (2020) 'Through a Critical Lens: Expertise in Epidemiology for and by Indigenous Peoples'.

Prussing (2020) aims to redefine political and social determinants of indigenous health since the most established determinants are usually more useful in non-indigenous contexts and peoples. Thus, in a way, adapting the 'guidelines' of social science research to the realisation that there is a divide in political and social determinants of indigenous versus non-indigenous contexts and peoples. On the other hand, Law and Joks (2019) give an elaborate account of the salmon fishing policies in the Scandinavian subarctic region where such policies harm the practices of the Sámi peoples. They highlight the difference between the Sámi's nomadic way of life and the capitalist western life: "we explore the political and analytical whose, what's, and how's of a colonial controversy: the imposition of state rules to limit salmon fishing in a Scandinavian subarctic river" (p. 425). They come together in three main claims – which they base on Science and Technology Studies (STS) research: "(1) that realities are enacted in practices; (2) that since there are different practices, there are also different enacted realities; and (3) that these practices and realities overlap and weave together to generate ontological multiplicity" (Law & Joks, 2019, p. 425; Mol, 1999). While I would not classify my research as STS research, I believe that these claims are still significant, especially

when questioning and thinking about the colonisation of categories, academia, and research. This is highlighted by both these indigenous orientations to *doing* social science research.

The main ontological tenant that should be highlighted here is the idea that we live in a world of multiple truths and realities. Additionally, the clarification of James' (1907) explanation, in the pragmatic approach, to this point is the distinction between truth and fact, where "truth marries old opinion with new fact" (p. 61). In a sense this disagrees with the western, often positivist, approach to research (Smith, 2012). And while decolonial research is often about decentring the researcher, I argue, that it is also important to explicitly acknowledge the researcher and their biases as part of the research; especially as a way of deconstructing the larger coloniality of knowledge that is rooted in the larger tradition or *doing* research (Best, 2003; Bhambra, 2014; Collins, 2002; Law & Joks, 2019; Prussing, 2020).

Social Movements in the Digital Age

Currently, technology is a big part of our world today. This can also be seen throughout the sphere of contemporary social movements. To begin the discourse around social movement research it is important to discuss current theories about social movements. Buechler's (1995)[1] outlines New Social Movement (NSM) Theories as: (1) a "symbolic action in civil society or the cultural sphere as a major arena alongside instrumental action in the state or political sphere"; (2) the "importance of processes that promote autonomy and self-determination instead of strategies for maximizing influence and power"; (3) "emphasis on the role of postmaterialist values in much contemporary collective action, as opposed to conflicts over material resources"; (4) a tendency "to problematize the often fragile process of constructing collective identities and identifying group interests, instead of assuming that conflict groups and their interests are structurally determined"; (5) stressing "the socially constructed nature of grievances and ideology, rather than assuming that they can be deduced from a group's structural location"; and (6) recognising a "variety of submerged, latent, and temporary networks that often undergird collective action, rather than assuming that centralized organizational forms are prerequisites for successful mobilization" (p. 442). A common theme that is emerging from much social movement research – including Buechler (1995) – is that social movements are becoming increasingly more individualised; meaning that social movements are more focused on the stories of individuals and a decentralised body rather than

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[1] While this paper is a relatively old publication it is still heavily referenced and used a form to describe the most contemporary age of social movements such as Extension Rebellion, LGBTQ+ movements, and BLM.

a centralised union[2] (Bennet & Segerberg, 2011; Rogers & Marres, 2002; Wilkin, 2018). And while Buechler (1995) makes many dichotomies in his classification of social movements – as either political or cultural for example – I, instead, argue that these dichotomies and lines are becoming more and more blurred. This, in combination with the rise of digital media and technologies, may intensify this trend.

Since technologies and online media are quite contemporary tools used in social movements there has been much interest to discuss this aspect. From the use of hashtags to the new dynamic it creates – mainly since 'news' now spreads more through the masses rather than through traditional media networks such as newspapers – in the cycle of public knowledge production and formation (Caren, Andrews & Lu, 2020; Chenou & Cepeda-Másmela, 2019; Rogers & Marres, 2002; Wilkin, 2018). The way in which this new media is used is the object of many interpretations, but one example can be #NiUnaMas hashtag. While initially intended to only raise awareness on the issue of violence against women it became a movement in and of itself by creating a culture of denouncing violence against women (Chenou & Cepeda-Másmela, 2019). They even found that 'male violence' for example meant different things to different people, and as such showed – like many other studies – the highly individualised and personalised perceptions and positions on social movements. So, this brings us again to the question: if social movements – especially with the help of online media – are becoming ever more individualised, why do public opinion studies such as Cohn and Quealy (2020) still rely on data of generalisable research results?
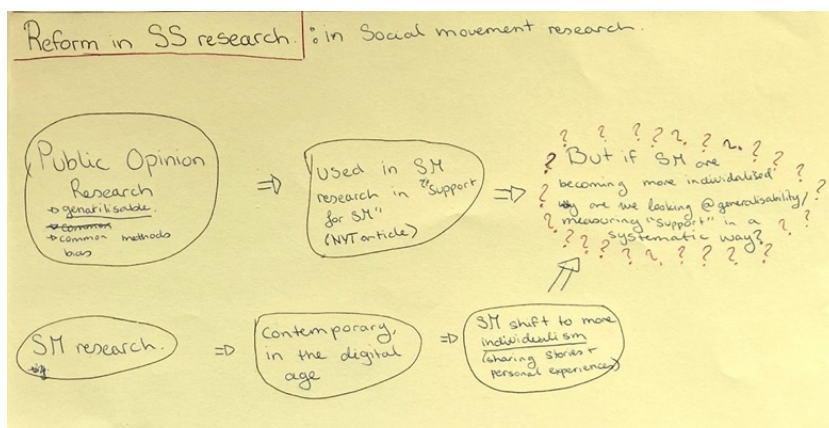

Figure 2: Mental flowchart depicting the gap between Social Movement (SM) research and the nature of social movements.

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[2] For example, the labour movement.

The case of Black Lives Matter

While this research project mainly focuses on the question 'How is BLM perceived?' it is still good to outline a general outlook on the creation of the BLM movement for the reader as well as the reason this was chosen as the case study for this thesis project.

The #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) hashtag was originally created in 2013 by three black women after a white man who killed the black teenager, Trayvon Martin, was not indicted. However, the hashtag began to take off after a similar situation occurred in Ferguson when a US police officer shot an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown (Black Lives Matter, 2020; Caren, Andrews & Lu, 2020). It is important to mention that the BLM movement began as a hashtag and therefore as an online social movement, which makes it an especially good case to investigate in the contemporary context – due to social media – of this thesis. Furthermore, BLM originally began as a way to battle racism in police brutality, however, it could be argued that BLM has adopted multiple meanings, goals, outcomes, and discourse regarding the topics of race and discrimination (Black Lives Matter, 2002; Ho, 2021, January; Rickford, 2016; Szetela, 2020; Taylor, 2016).

The BLM movement was chosen for this project seeing as the movement itself has now almost become a decolonial project in itself. The BLM participates in a movement to deconstruct the colonial knowledge authority. Especially in the last year, I personally became much more aware of this specific movement and the idea of the 'colonised mind' (Baboeram, 2020, June 3; Black Lives Matter, 2020; Leazenby & Polk, 2020; Prinsloo, 2016).

In addition to this, it is important to keep in mind that while the case concern BLM as a whole, the context will most likely focus on the past years' wave. The fact that this wave occurred during the Covid-19 Pandemic exacerbates the 'online' part of the movement and information sharing seeing as most people were confined to their homes and gathered with large groups of people – as marches and protests usually are – was less common. Due to the wide audience that this wave saw – which also included audiences outside of the US – that were becoming aware of and participating in the movement, were also becoming more aware of this within their own contexts (Cohn & Quealy, 2020). Therefore, while my research might stray away from this specific time frame, it would be safe to assume that this wave has influenced the perception of my participants.

Methodological Framework

Social science research is often based on rigorous standards and parameters. Such an approach may be useful to simplify and be able to conceptualise, measure, and study certain topics or research questions; I, instead, argue that while such methods can be useful in developing the realm of social science academia, this can become dissonant from the world in which we live, and as such, the world in which us sociologists want to *know* about. In the field of public opinion or public perception research, the aims of researchers are usually to uncover a generalisable result, which dismisses the intricacies of personal perceptions, opinion creation, and knowledge formation (Mayssa, 2020). Therefore, my goal will be to construct a way through which I could employ these ideas into practice while, at the same time, 'translating' this thinking into a cohesive social scientific research project. Specifically, regarding the ever-growing personalisation of social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011), research on these topics calls for research that can ascertain individual interpretations as well. Thus, rather than studying, in this thesis, I will be *exploring* the considerations in social science research while also acknowledging that such research will only tell us something and nothing at the same time.

Such abstract onto-epistemological thoughts about research made it quite difficult to form research that could qualify as a project. And even if data would be collected, it is the way through which I, as the researcher, conducted the analysis of the research that is most important, seeing as the main premise on which this research lies is that we live in a world of plural reality. Therefore, in order to construct an academically viable way of presenting this view, the method used in this research will be mainly qualitative, and primarily seek to be an inventive method; so as to actively detach itself from traditional ways of *doing* research. An inventive method, as described by Mason (2011) relies on my job as the researcher to

Figure 3: Second brainstorming session.
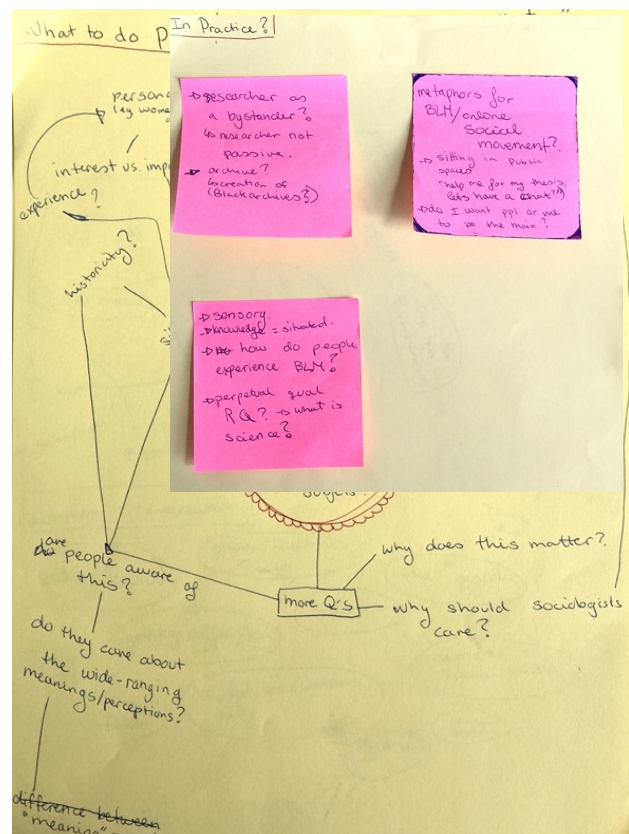
be creative, inventive, and have a "'playful' approach to epistemology, and the pursuit of

flashes of insight" (p. 76) and not to only deploy "deductive but also imaginative, inventive, creative and intuitive reasoning" (p. 80). The founding of my research, and therefore my research method approach, aims to be a creative process intending to, again, not answer, but instead explore how the BLM movement is perceived by people. This was primarily done through brainstorming sessions and looking in places other than academic research for inspiration to a viable approach.

On the other hand, I will also be incorporating small aspects of *Black Feminist Epistemology*, such as described by Collins (2002) "Instead of removing the scholar from his context in order to dissect the rationality of his thesis, my students demanded facts about the author's personal biography" (p. 265). Or in other words, the researcher taking an active role in the research and mainly also foregrounding transparency to the reader, the participants, and also – to the best of my abilities – myself. I think this is important because for a sociologist to study the social we need to be able to acknowledge ourselves as part of this world. I primarily did this by also keeping a journal throughout my data collecting planning and after. This I called my 'Research Journal'.

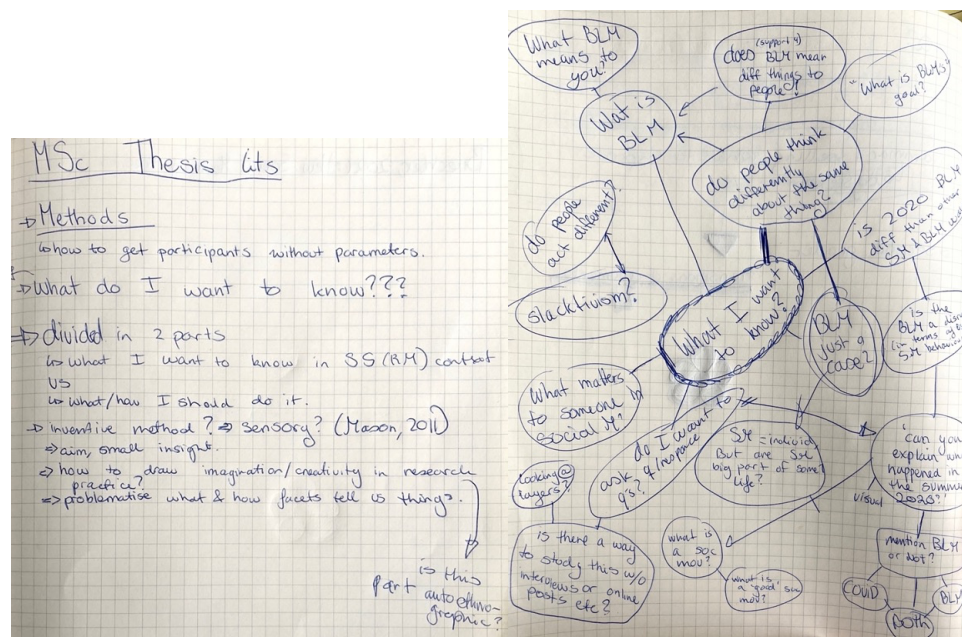*Figure 4: Short thoughts, questions, and considerations which arise throughout my days.*

Figure 5: First two brainstorming sessions.

Methodology

The exploration of a suitable methodology for my data collection began with a certain set of needs. Mainly, because my approach intended to explore the different perceptions which people have about BLM my parameters were very broad[3] since I was *exploring* 'people'. I aimed for my respondents to *not* be procured by me explicitly and get as much of a free-roaming sample[4] as I could. I did not want to limit my sample in regard to age, gender, background, or qualifications, however, I can safely say that – as a MSc student who has limited resources, time, and capabilities – the respondents will most likely be limited to people being in the Netherlands and specifically Rotterdam[5].

As previously mentioned, the main research strategy was a creative process in conjunction with a highly qualitative and exploratory method. I brainstormed often in an effort to detach myself from the traditional research approaches that I have been taught throughout my academic career. This process allowed me to see how things could potentially connect, offering a creative way for me to explore how certain respondents think of social movements – such as BLM – in their respective ways.
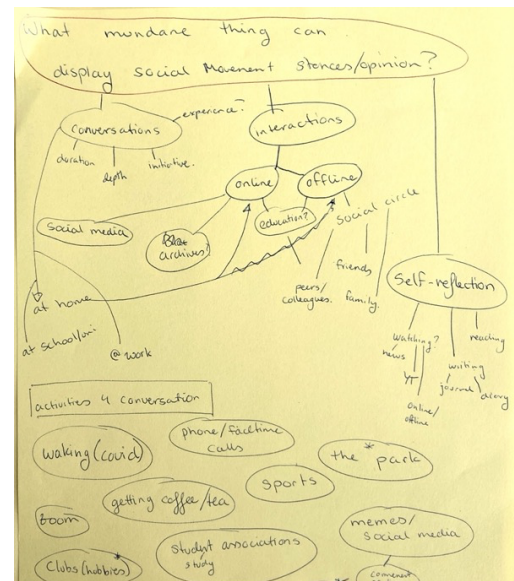

Figure 7: Brainstorming session about where I could explore my project.

Sample and data collection strategy

While my openness to respondents does allow for the most free-roaming sample of participants, the greatest struggle that I then faced is how I would be able to find these respondents. Through this issue, I did another brainstorming session (see *Figure 7*). While most of these places in this session might not automatically seem like a viable place to conduct interviews or ask people to sign informed consent forms, they do all have something similar in common, they also suggested using a public space to collect my data. So how then can I make use of such spaces to find people that are willing to participate in exploring the themes I posed in this thesis? I thought back to my hometown of the Hague, where I often saw a pop-up poet

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[3] I would say 'non-existent' but of course, this could only be true to a certain extent considering my body – which will be discussed later – and also considering my language and cultural limitations.

[4] Meaning a sample not explicitly procured or sought out by me.

[5] The brainstorming process about finding a space where I could find such a sample can be found in *Figure* 7 and will be further elaborated on in my 'sample and data collection strategy'.

– after a quick google search, I found his name to be Sjaak Kroes – who I used to see sitting near central station and other parts of the Hague with a table, two chairs, a typewriter, and a sign inviting anyone passing by to sit down with him so he could write them a poem (Hoogland, 2020). This inspired me to think about whether I could do the same for this project.

The set-up

When thinking about taking inspiration from Sjaak Kroes there were, of course, some important consideration that I would have to think about – especially in this time where the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing.

Firstly, there were several logistical considerations that I needed to think about when following this data and sample collection strategy. What follows are those considerations and how I tackled them

(1) Corona guidelines. I tried my best to follow these by having the interviews take place outside, buying sanitiser, providing disposable face masks, and keeping 1.5-meter distance as much as possible (see *Figure 8*).

(2) Audio recording, while the decision to record my conversation is mainly an ethical consideration it also became a way through which I would be able to hold the 1.5-meter distance rule as I used a small clip-on microphone and sanitised it each time.
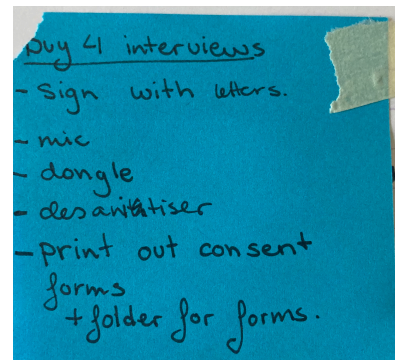
Figure 8: Post-It 'shopping list' of things I needed in order to be corona safe.

(3) Language consideration. Due to my being trilingual, I am fluent in both Dutch and English which allowed me to not only easily switch between these two languages if respondents wish to do so, but also allowed me to have options for respondents to choose to speak to me in the language they feel most comfortable in. A good example of this is in conversation #5 where one respondent preferred Dutch while the other preferred English, and still – throughout the conversation – they both switched between these two languages[6].

(4) My geographical location. As I mentioned before I wanted the location to be in a public space. However, choosing a certain neighbourhood would, of course, more directly narrow down, for example, the socio-economic background of respondents. Thus, similarly to

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[6] This specific conversation was of a couple, but this will become clearer in *Table 1*.

Sjaak Kroes, I placed myself near Rotterdam central station and decided to sit in the exact same spot for the duration of my data collection (see *Figure 9*).

Figure 9: Panorama picture taken on the first day of collection at the exact location where I had placed myself, between central station (left) and the city centre (right).

(5) The sign. Similarly to Sjaak Kroes, I wanted to make use of a sign – as opposed to approaching people myself – mainly as another way to limit my influence on 'picking' or procuring the sample; as well as this being able to show the initiative on the side of the respondent to start a dialogue. The next thing that I had to think about was what my sign would say. As mentioned before, I was able to have conversations in either Dutch or English and so my sign would have to reflect this; I wrote one side in English and the other in Dutch. Additionally, what the sign would say was also something I had to think about. Would it mention Black Lives Matter or would it be more nuanced than that? Eventually, I decided that, since my informed consent form included the topic which we would discuss – i.e. Black Lives Matter and any other such themes or topics. I keep my sign simple and clear, while at the same time keeping it in line with what I am actually doing. I wrote – in both Dutch and English – "Want to participate in my thesis?" (see *Figure 10*). This also allowed me to observe whether there might be people who were willing to converse with me but choose not to do so after knowing we would be talking about Black Lives Matter. I held the sign so that people on both sides of the street[7] could see what was written on the sign on both sides.

(6) The time and weather. While this might seem a bit too thought out, I
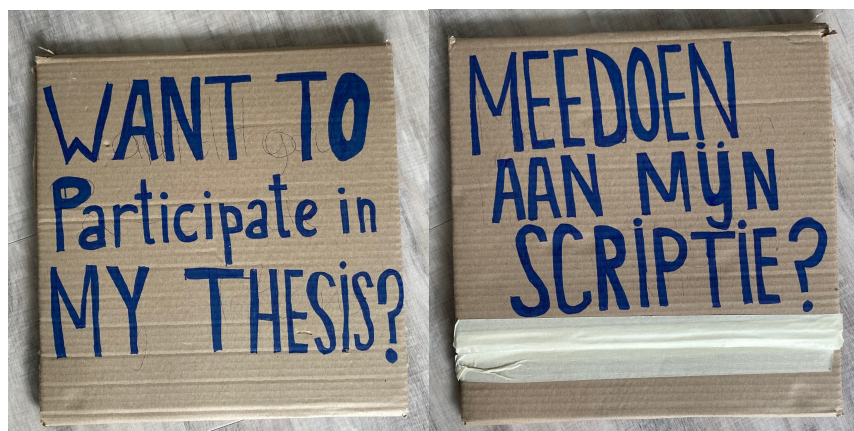

Figure 10: English and Dutch sides of my sign.

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[7] i.e., those walking towards central station versus those walking away from it, into town.

believe that the time and weather during which I collected my data is very important. The days – three in total – that I sat at the location were not rainy and not too cold. It was also during midday – not in the morning when people need to be getting somewhere, nor in the evening when people probably want to have dinner or be getting home – especially since the second and third day of my data collection was on a public holiday.

(7) The informed consent forms. While the informed consent form is always a very important part of doing research I believe that it was especially important to make it clear for this set-up for a few reasons. Firstly, seeing as I made the decision not to include BLM on the sign, it was important that I made the respondents very aware that this is the main theme we would be discussing. Secondly, I needed to make it very clear that while I intended to explore perspectives on Black Lives Matter, this did not have to be the main focus of the interviews. This can be seen very clearly in conversation # 6, where the respondent did not know what Black Lives Matter was. Thirdly, while the informed consent form is a more 'official' and administrative part of the interviewing process I believe that this can already be used as a starting point to build rapport. That is why I also included in the form that I mainly aimed to explore the experiences and thoughts of people on BLM "and any other themes that will arise" (see *Appendix A*) – keeping the outlook on our conversation fairly open and unrestricted.

My body

Within this process and this methodology, it is important to also acknowledge how my body might influence how others see me, whether they would approach me, and how they would communicate with me. While in the next section I will discuss what I did to seem as approachable as possible, however, there is only a certain extent to which I can accommodate for what my body stands for and represents. My perceived gender, female; my ethnicity, white; my perceived age; young; and even my socio-economic status, being able to spend the middle of the day on the street to be able to talk to these people. All show a certain degree of privilege and thus affect how others act and behave when interacting, or even choosing to interact, with me (Best, 2003). First by choosing to approach me, but after also choosing to talk about BLM with me.

My interviewing style

In this following section I will discuss what I did in order to seem as approachable as possible, to the extent that I could.

Firstly, I tried to be as friendly as possible in my attitude, however, due to COVID-19 restrictions I did wear a mask whenever I was collecting data. It is unsure if this made me seem more or less approachable seeing as my facial expressions could perhaps not much influence someone's choice to approach me. I also dressed as neutrally as possible with a black loose t-shirt, loose jeans and sneakers, a black raincoat when it got cold, and a plain white tote bag.

Secondly, and as discussed before, I tried to use the consent form as a way through which I could build rapport. Not only on the form itself but also by explaining the form verbally and answering any questions or concerns they had prior to signing the sheet.

Thirdly, having the conversations recorded helped me to be more engaged in the conversations, keeping eye contact and often nodding and responding with 'uhu' which could possibly encourage people to build on their statements and feel 'heard' and engaged in the conversation as well.

Fourthly, I used a semi- to un-structured interviewing method. This means that I did have some themes and questions laid out that I asked most respondents, but I often also tried to engage deeper into the stories that people were telling me, even though they may not always align with the themes on my paper. This allowed the conversations to be more about what the respondents wanted to talk about, reflect on, and express rather than dominating the discussion myself. Additionally, often when people asked me to clarify questions, I would do my best to be as vague as possible like saying 'whatever you think' or such things. This, hopefully, allowed them to express and explain what they felt was important to say and how they wanted to say it, without feeling pressure to say the 'right thing'.

Lastly, in order to conclude the conversations, and add a bit more structure across my conversations, I decided to include a word association game where people would say the first thing that came into their head when I said a term. In addition to this being a less abrupt ending to my conversations, I also think that doing this game may somewhat have given more chance for true thoughts and feelings – rather than responses that were perhaps filtered by the respondents' thought processes – than in the rest of the conversation. And while some people found this game to be challenging[8], it also makes the pauses of thought more visible.

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[8] In terms of 'quick thinking' and 'thinking on the spot'.

Questions and themes

As mentioned before, the main aim is for people to share what, how much, and how they want to share their thoughts, perceptions and perspectives. Thus, the semi- to un-structured interview approach allowed for the conversations to be as free-flowing and honest as possible. However, I did write down some questions and themes that I was willing to explore with most participants to allow for a starting point of the conversation, especially seeing as I was mostly talking to strangers. Lastly, I added the word association part at the end where I ask participants to say the first thing that comes to mind when I say these certain words (see *Figure 11*), in most cases these words were also said in the same order.

Figure 11: Picture from my notebook that I used to conduct my conversations.

Additionally, since I did not know whether I would have any respondents with my chosen data collection set-up, I decided to also keep track of three other options[9] that could happen if people did not participate in my study: looking without approaching, approaching without sitting, and specifically not wanting to discuss BLM (see *Figure 12*).
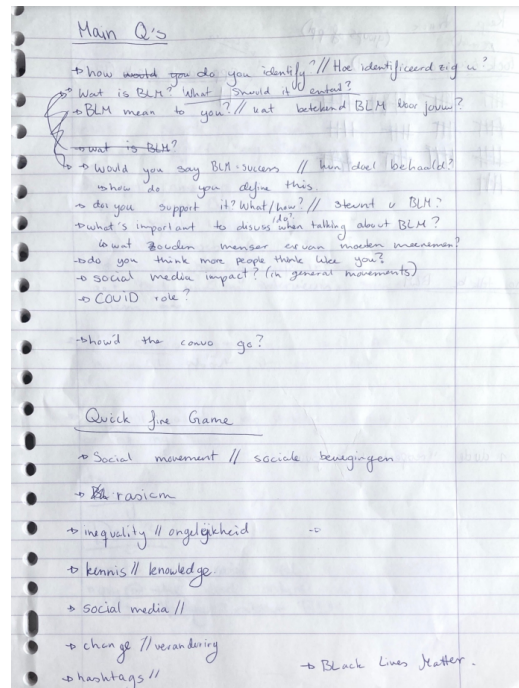
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[9] This will be further elaborated on in the next section.

Analysis

To begin the analysis, it is important to reiterate the key principle and scope of this project, keeping in mind that we live in a world of multiplicity where more than one thing can be true at once. As per the more in-depth findings and analysis, I will try my best not to make any generalisations, instead, I will base the sections on striking ideas which I noticed – and wrote down – during the interviews, during the transcription process, and after annotating the transcripts. In my observations, I also tried to count the people that did not participate in my exploration but were still present at the moment of
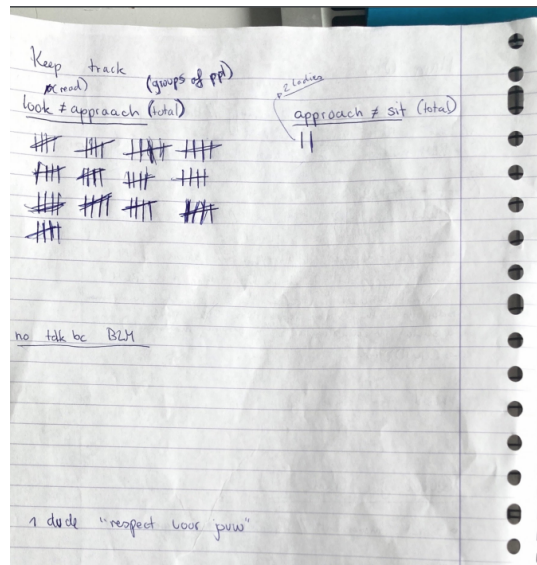

Figure 12: markings and observations during data collection.

my data collection[10]. Seeing as I was not sure how many people would sit down with me or approach me, I made a list of categories where I kept track of who looked/read my sign, who approached me but ended up not having a conversation or signing the consent form, and who of those would not want to sit down with me because I planned to discuss BLM. In the end, there were a lot of people who did not approach me but seeing as my data collection lasted around 10 hours over the course of three days, this did not particularly negatively affect my data collection. Additionally, the only people who approached me and did not sign the consent form were two women who happened to approach at the same time as someone who had just finished signing their consent form. They said they would come back later but never did[11]. Aside from this, everyone who approached me was keen to sign the consent form and have a conversation.

The respondents

Table 1: Summary of respondents and conversations.

Summary of respondents						
	Perceived or explicit stated gender	Perceived ethnicity	Age or perceived age	Perceived religion	Language spoken	Nationality or assumed nationality	Job/profession/qualification
Conversation #1	Woman	White	58-year-old	n/a	Dutch	Dutch	Teacher at Hogeschool

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[10] i.e., the people that walked past and chose not to approach are still part of my 'data collection' because their choice not to approach also tells something.

[11] Which is fine because people have their own lives.

Conversation #2	Woman	White	Young	n/a	Dutch	Dutch	Student
Conversation #3	Man	White	Young	n/a	English	German	PhD completed at climate institute
Conversation #4	Man	White	27-year-old	n/a	English	Italian	Tourist/traveller
Conversation #5	Respondent 1: woman Respondent 2: Man	1: POC/black 2: POC/black	1: 24-year-old 2: 26-year-old	1: n/a 2: n/a	1: Dutch/English 2: English	1: Curacao/Dutch 2: Curacao/Dutch	1: Hogeschool student 2: Business student
Conversation #6	Woman	POC	Middle aged	n/a	English	Indian	Homemaker
Conversation #7	Man	White	23-year-old	n/a	Dutch	Dutch	Student
Conversation #8	Respondent 1: Woman Respondent 2: Woman	1: Black 2: Black	1: 23-year-old 2: 27-year-old	1: n/a 2: n/a	1: Dutch 2: Dutch	1: Dutch 2: Dutch	1: n/a 2: n/a
Conversation #9	Woman	white	22-year-old	n/a	Dutch	Dutch	Student
Conversation #10	Respondent 1: Woman Respondent 2: Woman	1: white/POC 2: white/POC	1: 19-year-old 2: 18-year-old	1: n/a 2: Muslim (headscarf)	1: Dutch 2: Dutch	1: Dutch 2: Dutch	1: Student at Hogeschool 2: Student at Hogeschool (different from respondent 1)
Conversation #11	Man	White	Young/middle-aged	n/a	Dutch	Dutch	Employer
Conversation #12	Man	Black	29-year-old	Christian	Dutch	Ghanaian (lived 18 years in NL)	Electrical engineering degree from Hogeschool (works now)

Scope

As per the understanding of my onto-epistemological approach to this research, this study rests on the idea that we live in a world of multiple truths and that even within a person, this can mean that they perceive things through a multiplicity of truths. Therefore, the main finding of this research is that the perceptions of organisations and movement are perceived differently by everyone. This main finding is certainly true, almost all of the 15 participants had a different perception about Black Lives Matter and the themes surrounding it. However, in order to streamline this paper, the following analysis and findings will be based on some interesting themes and nuances that became more evident during this project.

The 'message' of BLM vs BLM as an organisation

When looking back at the origins and goals of BLM, according to the organisation itself, it mainly evokes the message of trying to end anti-black racism primarily through fighting police brutality against Black Americans (Black Lives Matter, 2020)[12]. The first thing that struck me throughout the conversations was people's eagerness to 'support' the 'message' of BLM but also that their idea of what BLM's message is, is (1) not necessarily what BLM claims

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[12] Even though the movement and organisation has now spread across many other countries by now as well.

and (2) without supporting BLM as an organisation. The following sections will delve deeper into this theme and explore how the 'message' of BLM was perceived, as well as how BLM is often used to signal someone's position as 'not racist'.

Often people in my conversations said that they support the message of BLM but not the organisation. This distinction, even in the realm of studying social movements is very important to make. Specifically in recent times, with BLM's decentralised nature, and with the influence of social media – adding to the input of individual narratives within and contributing to this movement – has expanded the use and meaning of BLM into less defined forms. Thus, it can be said that this, in a way, is diluting the core goals of BLM.

"*in a certain way, I stand completely behind their goal and vision* […] *I don't always stand behind their actions that come along with that*" (Conversation #9).

"*I understand the problem* [and] *what they want to illustrate; what message they want to bring* […] *but, I often have the idea that it* [turns into] *positive racism*"[13] (Conversation #2).

While personal input and individual experiences of people on social media is what, arguably, has made the 2020 wave of BLM one of the most impactful, it also muddied the perceptions that people have of what the movement is and what it stands for. And while some people do make the distinction between the BLM movement as an organisation or as a messenger, perhaps BLM is just a catalyst that opens the ground for a conversation that goes "*deeper than that*" (Conversation #5, Respondent 1 & 2; Conversation #8, respondents 1 & 2). Meaning that racism is not just something that exists, but instead is something that becomes visible. For those that do not experience this, it can only become visible through "awareness" (Conversation #5; Conversation #6; Conversation #7; Conversation #8). While BLMs' initial focus rests on police brutality, does this diluted perception of what BLM allows for more people to engage or feel engaged with these topics?

"Black Lives Matter forced everybody to open up about how they feel about the situation. And like, that kind of force my friends [to be] like 'Oh, man, I didn't know it was this hard,' because now they can see it, and they felt the injustice as

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[13] This term was described similarly as to how someone would describe affirmative action.

well. And they would imagine like, imagine if their friends were going through
something like that? How would you help? And that's also why Black Lives
Matter actually help as well, when it comes to 'social' because […] you had to
talk about it and people are gonna ask it, especially in the lockdown because you
haven't seen your friends for a while and then you see them. That's definitely
something going to ask about how did you deal with it? How did you get through
it?" (Conversation #5, respondent 2)

One way through which this can be seen is how when people say BLM, they actually
mean to signal that they do not support racism; specifically, when saying or 'supporting'
BLM's message as a way of saying that they are not racist. Supporting BLM does not
necessarily mean standing behind the organisation, or behind the movement against police
brutality specifically, but instead it is used as a stand-in to say, 'I don't support racism'. When
this argument is used in conjunction with saying they're "*not an active supporter of [BLM…]
but I do support the idea*" (Conversation #11)[14] the perception becomes even more nuanced
and conditional. The issue with this, however, is that it can distance the topic from the
individual's position in the topic[15]. Especially when connecting this observation to the previous
observation about people supporting the message of BLM but not the organisation. However,
this distinction is present and should not be disregarded or generalised for the sake of simplicity.
Specifically in recent times, and particularly with the BLM movement itself, social media the
input of individual narratives within and contributing to this movement making the expansion
of the use and meaning of BLM into less defined forms even more real.

So, then, to what extent should BLM be seen as an organisation rather than a catalyst?
When asked whether respondents support BLM their answers varied depending on these
perceptions and this distinction, while, at the same time, these two things are not mutually
exclusive[16]. Often people responded to this question saying that they did not financially support
BLM, through donations, which assumes that they see BLM more as an actor or organisation
rather than a catalyst of awareness. Supporting their message but not the ways through which
they to about achieving this, but at the same time having a different perception of what their

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[14] It is also interesting to note that this respondent remembered the only time he actively supported BLM was by
buying a t-shirt that said 'slap your local racist' where the proceeds went to BLM (Conversation #11).
[15] This will be built on later in the section 'perceptions of change and action'.
[16] E.g., some people who said they support the 'message' also said they do not directly support BLM because they
do not donate. `

message is, and still defining support in a monetary way (Conversation #8, respondent 1; Conversation #10).

At the same time, however, people who said they support BLM's message also commented on the hostility that is associated with some of the protests. This can perhaps be best described as supporting BLM's perceived message but not supporting the way through which the movement enacts this message (Conversation #11).

> "I think people took the whole movement really, like wrong…as in a hostile movement, but it was not like that. The whole idea is […] like a kid crying for help, actually, is like a kid getting bullied every day at school and telling the teacher I'm getting bullied. And everybody telling him, yeah, everybody gets bullied at relax. And you're like, but it's worse for us, for us, please help and people like, maybe if you stay quiet in mind your business and do what you're supposed to do. You won't get bullied, but we all know that bullies don't work like that they target you, there's something about you that they don't like. And for them, or, unfortunately, it's their skin colour or where they came from."
>
> (Conversation #5, respondent 1)

In this specific quote, this respondent in a way responds to what, for example, was perceived by the person in conversation #11. The perceived 'hostility' of the movement is not necessarily a 'bad' thing. Instead, she points out, it is a way through which this movement has become more visible. Perhaps it is not the riots and the rioting that is 'hostile' but instead the confrontation of this reality. The riots and looting were just a social response to not being heard, represented, or acknowledged. In a way, this quote directly addresses the abstract liberal form of colour-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) that many respondents conveyed.

There is no 'right' way of enacting a social movement, but especially if this distinction between a movement as a catalyst or as an organisation gets muddied. With an 'issue' such as racism, a centralised movement does not make much sense because it entails so much, yet the decentralised nature that the BLM movement has become may cause confusion for people; especially those who may not have been engaged or aware of this movement – as a catalyst or an organisation – to begin with. If people really stand for the message of the movement – in whichever way people defined this – are there ways through which they can enact this message without needing to financially support an organisation, or participate in demonstrations? So, if BLM, as an organisation, acts best as a catalyst rather

than an actor that enacts action for this movement, how else then do people think that change could happen?

Perceptions of change and action

As discussed before the perceptions of what BLM is and what their message is, as well as what supporting BLM means, is different to everyone. However, everyone acknowledges, the existence of racism, while this is to varying degrees and in various context[17]. So, if people's perceptions of BLM and its message vary, do people have any idea on how to progress the conversation about this topic?

The main idea that jumped out at me was that people perceive the issue to be about mutual respect. A sort of abstract liberal (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) idea of what racism is. However, when asked on which level– individual, community, society etc – the conversation, change, or issue lies, the responses were distinct, with some saying that the issue should be politicised by being brought to "politiek Den Haag" (Conversation #7; Conversation #8, respondent 2)[18] for anything to 'concretely' change. But, by far, most respondents laid heavier emphasis on the individual level, even if they think that society also has a big part in it.

"*yes the individual, that for sure, but also the society*" (Conversation #8, respondent 2).

"*It starts with yourself*" (Conversation #10, respondent 1 & 2).

These types of answers very much show where people think this 'issue' lies and in turn also affects how they or others take part in or take action to 'solve' it. These responses and perception play on the interest and the role that BLM can or even should have within the grander scheme of the issue. To what extent can BLM, either as an organisation or as a catalyst be expected to advance the issue and to what extent do people even expect such an issue to be 'solved'? And what effect does this have on a movement?

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[17] Even if they would not have mentioned it on their own, they would have eventually had to confront this term seeing as it was part of my 'word association game' at the end of the conversations. No one denied its existence in this part of the conversation.

[18] "Den Haag" being a metonymy for the government of the Netherlands.

"Exactly it depends how you define success. But it definitely added a lot of worth
to it. So, in that sense, to a certain extent successful." (Conversation #3).

"*It did like awaken something*" (Conversation #8, respondent 1).

"*unfortunately I don't think it was successful because I still think there is a lot of
discrimination based on skin colour*" (Conversation #9)

"*I think it is still something that happens*" (Conversation #10, respondent 1)

Many respondents were aware that the issue that BLM is tackling is a continuous conversation rather than a thing that can be 'solved' through any actions. There was, apart from the individual level, a heavy emphasis on awareness, especially when talking about BLM's success. Many respondents pointed out that BLM was not successful at solving their 'message' but was successful at starting the conversation and beginning the process of more awareness, specifically, for police brutality against black Americas, but also spilling over into other conversations related to these, for example, ethnic profiling, especially in job applications (Conversation #2; Conversation #9; Conversation #11). In this sense, it seemed that regardless of how respondents perceived BLM's message or its position as an organisation, they can also regard it, to a certain extent, as a catalyst.

A shift

Throughout the interview process, I began thinking if my doing this research in this way was doing or contributing to anything? Because I was just sitting there, nodding my head, collecting this data, but not necessarily interfering. Yet when I thought some more about it, I came to think that perhaps my "having done the interview like this is a way to create a 'disruption' of the ordinary/comfort" (Research Journal, May 17, 2020) which interestingly is also often associated with inventive research (Guggenheim, Kräftner & Kröll, 2017; Mason, 2017).

What I also noticed is that throughout the interviews the respondents shifted the understanding of their perception or maybe even their own perception. One way through which this became evident – apart from the long pauses that respondents took – was that to some questions I posed I got the response 'that is an interesting question'. Additionally, it could just

be due to rapport, or that they became more comfortable throughout our conversation, but it could also be because the interruption of our conversation led them to clarify their own thinking for themselves and being able to put it into words better by the end of our conversation. Furthermore, to some questions respondents also said, "*good question*", implying that either they had not thought of such things that I was asking or that they perhaps had not known to formulated it explicitly in the way I did.

In a certain sense, my methodology and my choices – for example, to choose not to include BLM on my sign – could be a way of enacting activism through research. My process of interviewing and interfering in this way affected a process of change.

I find it interesting that this analysis is mostly possible because of the methods I have been able to employ. Working with this inventive semi-informal method and analysis has allowed me to place more emphasis on the content of what I write rather than constricting myself to the traditional ways of *doing* research[19]. This method allowed me to find a way through which I am able to highlight the nuance of multiple truths in this world is more easily communicated, without invalidating one as better or more 'right' than the other. Especially also since, in this analysis and the process of research, I made my body part of the conversation, humbling my participation of a researcher not as having 'final say' over the findings of this project, but rather as a person who participated in the process.

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[19] Also acknowledging my body throughout this project as well as while writing this thesis (by choosing to write in first person) helps to place this methodology within the larger process of *doing* research.

Discussion

Limitations and future research

The main limitation to this research certainly has to do with the geographical and temporal environment. As a student, with limited time, resources, and experiences, I do not have the capacity to address all the shortcomings of my methodology. However, I did my best to acknowledge those shortcomings in order to foster transparency and openness.

As mentioned before, to a certain extent, my body can also be seen as a limitation. While not as reductive as the connotation of the word, if the researcher would have been in a different body the respondents would have acted differently in reaction to this. Thus, I, again, find it important to centre race and the body (Collins, 2002) rather than avoiding race and physical perceptions as part of social interactions. As shown by Best (2003) the presentation and presence of the researcher, especially within qualitative research and through interviews, evokes differing forms of experiences and conversations by both the respondent and the researcher.

Interestingly, because of the nuanced nature of this research and the approach of methods that I take, there is a lot of opportunity for application and review of this approach. But since the main premise of this thesis is centred around the ontological position that we live in a world of plurality in truth and realities, it makes it difficult to find and concrete ways in which this position itself could be revised, but rather the focus could be on the way in which it is applied and enacted through my epistemological method.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to come back to the quote of Kadija Mbowe at the beginning of my thesis.

"Remember you can always change your mind, because you can"

I think this is a fitting reminder not only to the way we view social movements and social issues but also to the way we see and do social science research. Especially in the field of social science, I believe that saying or analysing something interesting in the world and our interactions with certain subjects should not be minimised to one particular thing, or at one particular point in time. As told by James (1907) if truth "marries old opinion and new fact"

then the world and its ideas and our societies and the people in those societies' truths are ever-changing and dynamic.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM (English)

Dear Respondent,

Please read this document carefully. By signing below, you will indicate your agreement and understanding of this research and give me permission that I may conduct an interview with you and process that data.

Below I explain the nature of the investigation, the rights you have and the way in which I will monitor your anonymity and process your data in this investigation. This research is about the how contemporary social movements (specifically the Black Lives Matter movement is perceived). The aim is to analyze and understand the perceptions and experiences of individuals when it comes to this. This study aims create a free and open space so that any ideas and thoughts that I may or may not share will be valid and useful.

Below I will explain your rights and privacy as a respondent and how I will be monitoring your anonymity.

- This research is carried out by Gabie Roldán Waals, henceforth referred to as the researcher, a student at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. She can be reached at the email address 469252gr@eur.nl.
- For questions and concerns about privacy, you can contact the data protection service of Erasmus University, which can be reached at privacy@eur.nl.
- I understand that the researcher, will ask me questions about my experience and thoughts on Black Lives Matter (BLM) and any other themes that may arise from our conversation.
- I am above the age of 18.
- I understand that my identity will be protected.
- I understand that seeing as the researcher is still a student some anonymised information may be shared with a supervisor.
- I understand that the anonymized research findings may be published publicly.
- I consent to this conversation being recorded (*if not please indicate this explicitly*)
  - o These recordings will be transcribed and immediately made anonymous during transcribing. This means that your name is replaced by a pseudonym and that identifying characteristics (such as where you live, or anything else that could lead to your identity) are also not written down. No one outside the researcher will therefore be able to return your data to you.
  - o Only the researcher has access to these recordings.
- You have the right to:
  - o View the transcript of your interview (this can be sent to you digitally);
  - o Withdraw information that you have given in the interview afterwards;
  - o Discontinue from this study at any time.
  - o File a complaint with a supervisory authority.
- I understand that if the above-mentioned points are not clear, I can ask for clarification.

By signing this document you agree to participating in this study and accept the abovementioned points.

Name: ....

Signature: .... Date: ....

INFORMED CONSENT FORMULIER (Nederlands)

Beste respondent,

Lees dit document alstublieft zorgvuldig door. Bij het tekenen van dit document geeft u aan dat u alles begrijpt en mij toestemming geeft om het gesprek deel te laten maken van dit onderzoek.

Hier wordt de aard van dit onderzoek, uw rechten, en hoe er wordt omgegaan met uw anonimiteit in dit onderzoek uitgelegd. Dit onderzoek gaat over hedendaagse sociale bewegingen (specifiek hoe de Black Lives Matter movement wordt ervaren en/of wordt opgevat). Het doel is om deze opvattingen van individuen te begrijpen en te analyseren. Daarnaast wordt er in dit onderzoek ook gestreefd naar het creëren van een vrije en open omgeving zodat alle ideeën en denkwijzen die u kies wel of niet te delen geldig en nuttig zijn.

Onderstaand worden uw rechten uitgelegd en hoe er om zal worden gegaan met uw privacy en anonimiteit.

- Dit onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd door Gabie Roldán Waals, van nu af aangeduid als de onderzoeker, een Master student van het Departement van Publieke Administratie en Sociologie aan de Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam. U kunt haar via email bereiken op 469252gr@eur.nl.
- Voor vragen over privacy kunt u contact opnemen met de data protection service van de Erasmus Universiteit, te bereiken via privacy@eur.nl.
- Ik begrijp dat de onderzoeker mij vragen gaat stellen over mijn ervaringen en gedachtes over Black Lives Matter (BLM) en/of andere thema's die hieruit opkomen.
- Ik ben ouder dan 18.
- Ik begrijp dat mijn persoonlijke informatie beschermd wordt.
- Ik begrijp dat (aangezien de onderzoeker een student is) sommige informatie geanonimiseerde misschien wel gedeeld kan worden met een leidinggevende.
- Ik begrijp dat de geanonimiseerde inzichten uit dit onderzoek openbaar gepubliceerd kunnen worden.
- Ik geef toestemming aan dat dit gesprek wordt opgenomen (*zo niet gelieve dit expliciet vaststellen*)
  o Deze opnamen worden uitgeschreven en mogelijk vertaald naar het Engels. Tijdens het uitschrijven wordt dit gesprek direct geanonimiseerd. Dit betekent dat uw naam wordt vervangt met een pseudoniem en dat identificeerbare karakteristieken (bijv. Waar u woont) niet zullen worden opgeschreven zodat niemand deze informatie naar u terug kan leiden;

- o   Alleen de onderzoeker heeft toegang tot deze opname.
- Ik heb het recht om:
  - o   Het transcript van ons gesprek te bekijken (dit kan toegestuurd worden);
  - o   Informatie terug te trekken na ons gesprek;
  - o   Mijn deelnamen aan deze studie elk moment kan stopzetten;
  - o   Een klacht in te dienen bij een toezichthoudende autoriteit.
- Ik begrijp dat wanneer een van de bovenstaande punten niet duidelijk is, dat ik hier verduidelijking voor kan vragen.

Met het tekenen van dit document gaat u akkoord met uw deelnamen aan dit onderzoek en accepteert u de bovenstaande punten.

Naam: ....

Handtekening: .... Datum: ....