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Black Voices and Perspectives on Portland's Black Lives Matter Protests with Shirley Jackson

Shirley A. Jackson
Portland State University, shja2@pdx.edu

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Shirley Jackson

Welcome to PDXPLORES, a Portland State Research podcast featuring scholarship innovations and discoveries, pushing the boundaries of knowledge practice, and what is possible for the benefit of our communities and the world.

My name is Shirley A. Jackson, Professor Sociology Department PSU. My research interests focus on race, gender, and social movements. Sometimes I focus on one of those things. Sometimes I focus on two or all three. My Jedi study is meant to shed light on the perspectives of blacks in the Portland area around the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.

And in particular, I was really interested in finding out how blacks in the Portland area perceived what was happening with the protests and the responses of the police department, the mayor's office, and even the federal government.

In my project, what I am really interested in looking at. is how people who I think well intentioned and allies of the Black Lives Matter movement, were interested in participating in the protest, but did so in a way that unfortunately omitted blacks from the protest process. So what I was really wanting to have my respondents talk about is whether or not they participated in the protest and why they didn't protest if they chose not to.

And what was really interesting or what has been interesting so far is the fact that some of the respondents have pointed out that they didn't feel as though this was an authentic Black Lives Matter protest because there appeared to be a hijacking, if you will, of the protest by whites, and I think this is an instance where whites who, as I said, may be well intentioned, well meaning they may be allies, they may not understand their white privilege in the way in which they were directing the protests, and also presenting a narrative of the Black Lives Matter protest in Portland.

My primary aim for this study is to have Black voices talk about the Black Lives Matter protests in the Portland area in 2020. One of the objectives is to have Black voices participate in a discussion that up to now has pretty much focused on whites in the protests, white participation, um, in the form of, um, white activists like the Wall of moms.

Some of the activists, uh, who were participating such as Naked Athena, as well as, um, participants in the evening or the nightly, uh, protests that, uh, seemed to be, um, the folks from Antifa, uh, and not. Necessarily focusing on what black

participants were doing in the protest in other parts of the city, or why black participants, um, chose to remove themselves from the protests after perhaps attending maybe one, um, of the protests that were occurring, and then also why some of the blacks in the community chose not to participate at.

For this study, I am interviewing 50 to 75 blacks in the Portland metropolitan area. And the interviews that I'll be conducting are one-on-one interviews where I'm asking them a variety of questions, um, about the, their participation in the protests. Thoughts on the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole, and also on the Black Lives Matter protests and the Portland area.

I'm also really interested in exploring their thoughts about one of the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement as of recent, which is to defund the police. Uh, this is a. Call, if you will, that I'm finding not all blacks are supportive of, and I'm trying to gain a better understanding of how the idea of defunding the police may have actually, uh, led to blacks not wanting to participate in the Black Lives Matter protest in the Portland.

Much of the social movements literature tends to focus on black participants or black participation in movements where there is a sizeable black population. And in those studies, one, one of the things that we see is the importance of say the black. Or black community organizations, uh, that are supporting activism and activities promoting that.

Particular movement in that space. In the Portland area, it's a little bit different in that because of gentrification and the movement of blacks to areas outside of the city, uh, you have these marginalized peoples who are living on the fringes of Portland City proper. And that's one of the reasons why for my study, I actually am interviewing people who.

Blacks around the Portland area, as well as those who are in Portland. Gentrification has moved people out of the, um, previously, uh, primarily black communities or neighborhoods, if you will, in Portland to areas like Gresham. But the cost of housing has also moved people to other areas such as Beaverton and Hillsborough, and also there are blacks who've moved to areas like Tigard or even Lake Oswego.

So in looking at who I'm interviewing, I have to be really cognizant of where people are, but also. Really thinking about diverse ways of reaching out to people. So calling upon, um, organizations like the NAACP may work in those communities where you have large numbers of blacks who are involved with an

organization like the naacp, but that's not necessarily the case in this particular study.

Looking at potential study participants who are out in certain areas of the, uh, Portland metro area, connected with different types of organizations, perhaps in those cities, or people who are for the most part known in the community, um, and know other people. I'm also using, uh, them at, to help me gather what is called a snowball sample.

Um, and then drawing upon my, uh, many contacts in the community when I was chair of the Black Studies department at Portland State, and attending a number of different events in the community, but also as someone who, as a relative newcomer to the area. Getting out there and meeting as many people as I could so that I could have my own network of, um, supporters and allies for the work that I do.

And just as an individual. I hope that upon completion of my study, that those individuals who are in positions to. Respond to community concerns to respond to, um, activities in the community that might be, uh, protests are actually responding. And I say that, um, in that way because there is this impression that people were actually not responding or responding effectively to the protests that were occurring in the Portland area in 20.

Now that may seem as though it was something that all people wanted. Yes. Do you have the right to protest? But at the same time, many blacks saw the lack of response by certain community leaders as being, and when I say community leaders, I'm including the police chief. I'm including, uh, the city council, and I'm certainly including the mayor.

Many people saw that lack of response as harmful to the message of the Black Lives Matter movement because it started to, if you will, uh, confuse what was happening on the part of those individuals who were engaging in different forms of activism. That resulted in a lot of destruction where people could not quite understand.

What those activities had to do with Black Lives Matter and the actual Black Lives Matter movement and pro and protests that were taking place in and around the city. The impression that the protests were all one and the same, really, unfortunately in the minds of many. R convoluted, the message of Black Lives Matter and unfortunately intertwined it with actions that were, uh, participated in by, um, individuals connected to Antifa or, and or other groups.

And that I think, uh, for them ended up with a problematic perception of the Black Lives Matter movement on the part of the community. And community leaders, and again, local government. So this per this particular movement, um, is very interesting in that it has a number of different issues connected to it that we don't really see in other, uh, social movements of the past.

So I'm hoping that what I gain from. Um, my interviews with blacks in the Portland metropolitan area is that there can be better exchanges and understandings of the black communities ideas about what should be done, and that the government, local government acts accordingly upon those ideas that the black community is provid.

One of the things that I think is really important about this work is that it is really taking to task the idea that Portland is a progressive city. That is something that Portlanders and in particular white Portlanders take great pride in. What I am finding is, Blacks do not see Portland as a progressive city as it relates to race.

They see it as a progressive city when they do see it as a progressive city, um, as progressive as it relates to lgbtq plus area, uh, areas of policy and support and what have you. But as it relates to the black community, it is really something that. Blacks just simply are not seeing Portland in the same way, and that's problematic because you have people who are wanting to be allies of blacks and of the Black Lives Matter movement.

and who are also talking about social justice. But at the same time, they may not be understanding that their own white privilege is impacting negatively, their ability to be true allies to blacks in the community, as well as to the Black Lives Matter movement. Black activism and the goals of the Black Lives Matter protests may have been hampered, as well as hindered by white allies who adopt their own narrative of what Black Lives Matter protests should be in a way that endangers movement goals.

Cross racial coalition politics and activism are key in actualizing the movement's. I'm Shirley A. Jackson, and my goal is to understand black perspectives on protests, progressive politics and policing in white dominated spaces.