

How Black Lives Matter Gained Traction in the Midst of a Pandemic: Utilizing Metaphorical Blending and Frame Bridging in Analysis

Dr. Erik Aasland M.P.H.

Introduction

In the midst of a pandemic, various factors vie for attention. Yet, the sense of injustice over George Floyd's passing at the hands of the police served to crystalize societal sensibilities and heighten the interest in the Black Lives Matter. I will utilize metaphorical blending and frame bridging approaches to explore this shift.

Where I live in Los Angeles County up near the Angeles National Forest the changes could not be overlooked. After the death of George Floyd and as the public outcry swelled, "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) was proclaimed with front yard signage, emblazoned on car rear windows, and etched on posters in protest marches. The Governor of California put citizens on lockdown, but allowed them to protest in response to George Floyd's death.

The Narrative of Racial Injustice

In 2013 the hashtag BlackLivesMatter was introduced as a reaction to George Zimmerman being acquitted in the death of Trayvon Martin. Why did this Twitter hashtag gain such traction in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic? The topic is especially intriguing when we put two historical events side by side:

2014 Death of Eric Garner

- ▶ Black man is assaulted by police for an alleged minor offense.
- ▶ He cries out that he can't breathe and dies at the hands of the police.

Just after this, Twitter saw an increase in postings of #BlackLivesMatter, but the count did not go up as high as it would after the acquittal of the police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in the Michael Brown case (Anderson 2018) in the following months.

2020 Death of George Floyd

- ▶ Black man is assaulted by police for an alleged minor offense.
- ▶ He cries out that he can't breathe and dies at the hands of the police.

Protest marches on a scale that has not been seen in decades (Schuppe 2020).

In 2020 it was the death of George Floyd that crystalized public consciousness. Particularly, his words “I can’t breathe” became emblematic. Now, we could look back to 2014 and the death of Eric Garner as a comparable situation. However, the analogous narratives lead to considerably different results. An editorial on the death of Eric Garner focuses on his statement “I Can’t Breathe” (Journal 2014) whereas another editor after George Floyd’s passing makes the corporate declaration “We Can’t Breathe” (Board 2020). I will argue that with the passing of Floyd the phrase operated metaphorically and served as frame bridging discourse to energize a societal movement. In order to understand this transformation, we will need to consider the narrative of life in the pandemic.

Shared Experience / Narrative of Pandemic

As the pandemic unfolded, the list of related symptoms expanded. Still, difficulty breathing remained a central symptom. Using the Coronavirus Corpus as developed by English-Corpora.org (Davies 2020), I found that “breath” and “breathe” from a list of Covid-19 related conditions had one of the highest frequencies.

Symptoms of COVID-19 (CDC 2020)

fever or chills 29,391
cough 24,781
breath or breathe 15,996
new loss of taste or smell 7,418
sore throat 4,691
fatigue 4,363
nausea or vomiting 3, 544
muscle or body aches 2,933
headache 2,847
congestion or runny nose 2,235
diarrhea 2,268

I would argue that the shared societal effort to “flatten the curve” had as its goal allowing fellow citizens to breathe. Face masks and ventilators became the symbols of this new societal discourse. In a markedly individualistic society, the message was repeated through public services announcements, editorials, and interpersonal interaction that during the pandemic we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. Thus, the words that were among George Floyd’s last, “I can’t breathe”, became doubly significant in public discourse.

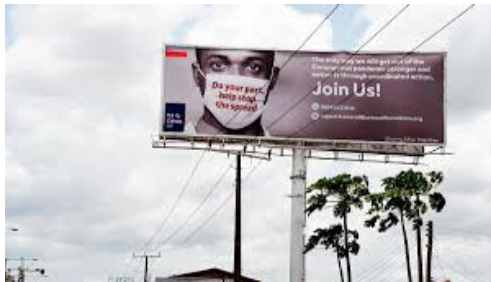


Figure 1

The time of pandemic has been a time of shared focus. My wife points out that when we experience hardships we become more open to hearing of others’ hardships (K. Aasland 2020). Misery love company – especially during the quarantine. I don’t want to overstate things and say unity because the actual practices have varied considerably from state to state and community to community. However, there has been an evidence of change even in newly crafted terms such as “quaranteam”. Here the reworking of “quarantine” serves to highlight the opportunities to work and live together in the midst of crisis.

Metaphorical Blending

How do we go from the event that we can summarize as a narrative (recounting a sequence of events) to the point of evaluating the significance of these events? Here I would suggest that we explore this process of meaning-making as what has been termed “metaphorical blending”(Fauconnier 2002). The model starts with two or more domains. Here

“domains” are categories of cultural symbols that are grouped on the basis of similarity (Spradley 1979, 94).

The adage “A rolling stone gathers no moss” has been used in numerous songs and settings across a wide range of cultures. In English there are at least three documented understandings of the proverb (E. Asland 2012, 101). I want to provide one of these perspectives as an example of metaphorical blending.

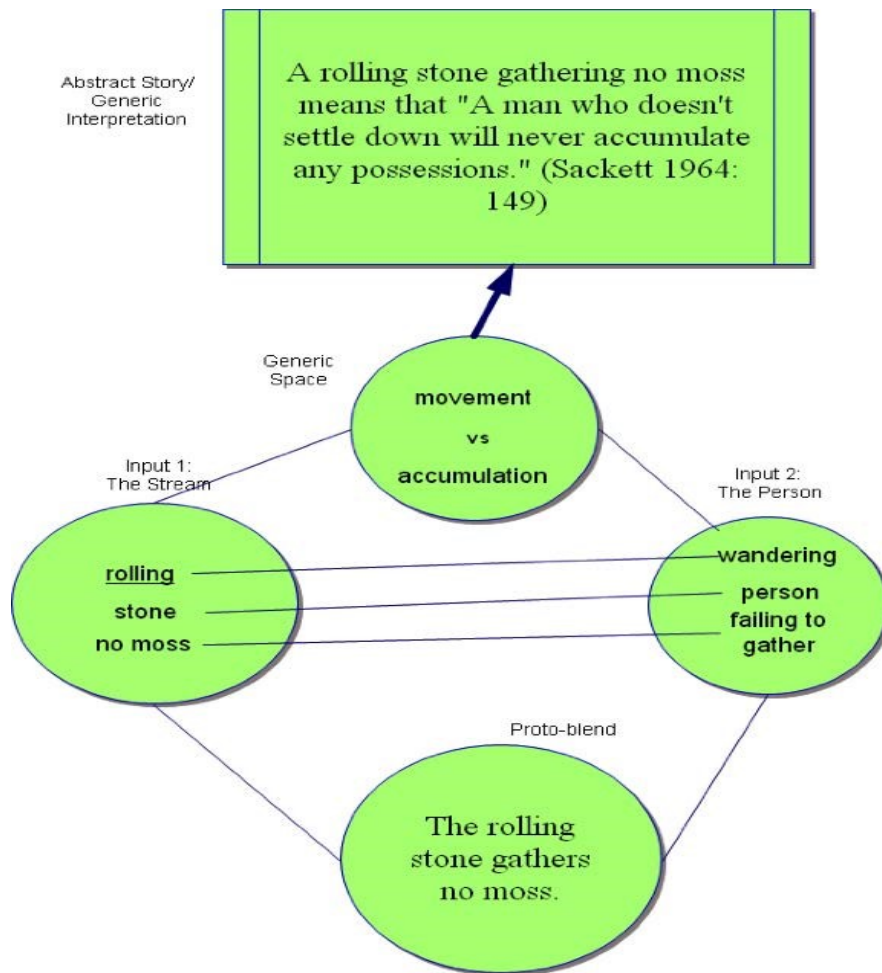
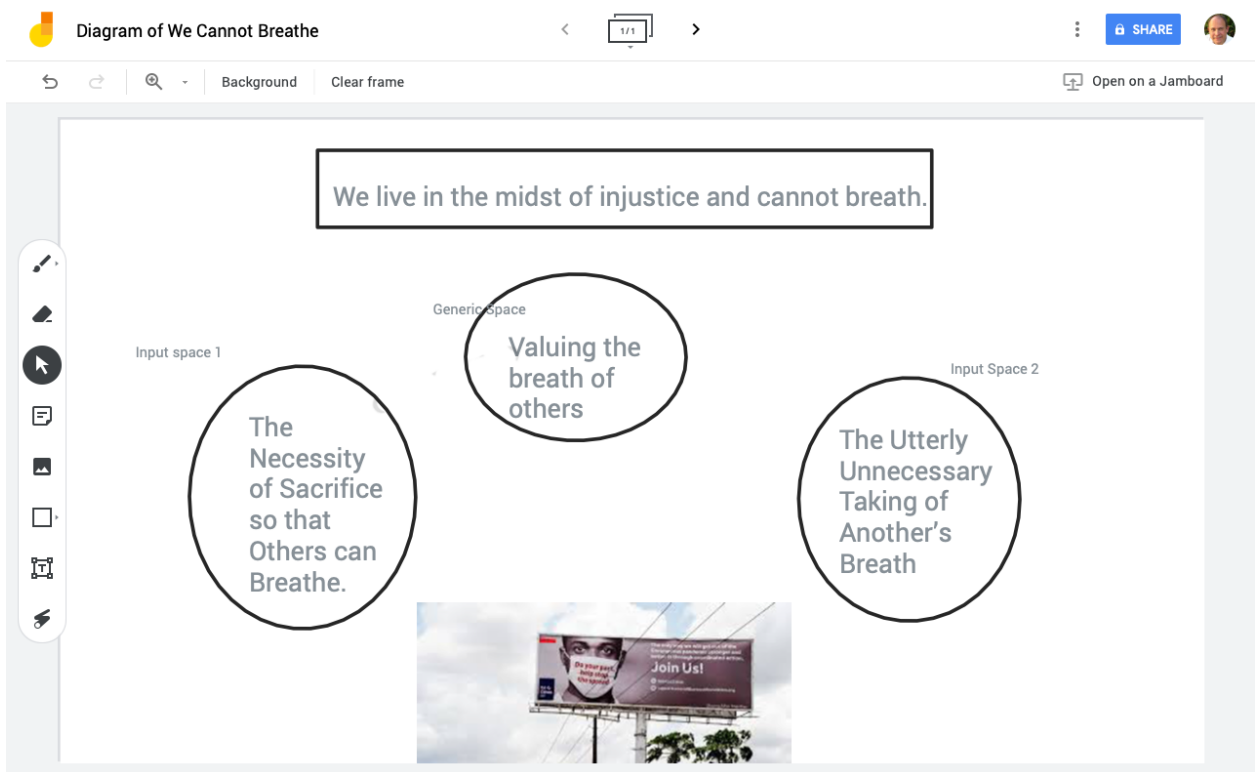


Figure 2 (E. Asland 2012, 97)

Whereas Fauconnier and Turner had the domains or inputs as the starting point for their model, I added the proverb as a proto-blend or as forerunner to the blend. To the left and right

above this are two more green circles with the two inputs or domains. The proverb brings together things two different areas nature and human experience. Here the stone is described as rolling, stone, no moss; the person comparably is wandering, person, and failing to gather. The relationship between the domains is one of analogy and their interrelationship is summarized in the generic space in the middle above the two domains. Here it says “movement vs accumulation”. Finally we have a rectangle with the blend statement or what one could call the story: A rolling stone gathering no moss means that “A man who does not settle down will never gain any possessions (Sackett 1964, 149)”.

Now, in the case that we are looking at, we don't have a proverb as a starting point. Instead, I want to suggest that we insert the billboard presented earlier (Figure 1) as the proto-blend guiding the process to the blend. What we next are two different inputs with contrasting yet connected narratives.



There was already the understanding of “I can’t breathe” as a generalized declaration of unjust treatment based on what happened with Eric Garner. In the midst of the pandemic, the phrase took on new significance. Here we have two analogically linked contrasting narratives. The effort exerted to save the lives of others (letting them breathe) stands in stark contrast to the police brutality that took the breath and life of George Floyd.

The “blend” is the place where the inputs are brought together and integrated into story. It is represented in the diagram by the rectangle. Three key aspects of this integration process are “composition”, “completion”, and “elaboration” (Fauconnier 2002, 42-44). Composition involves new relationships that develop between elements from the inputs; Completion is added structure brought to the blend; Elaboration is imaginative additions to the blend. Blends are developed to make things more understandable. Fauconnier and Turner call this “achieving human scale” (Fauconnier 2002, 312-314). Individuals take and simplify, personalize, and condense events, actions, and situations so that they can more effectively understand and process them. We take concepts from a variety of domains and bring them together to paint a picture.

The two domains of societal action to save lives and police brutality taking a life would come together in the blend. The blend would not have to be one singular thing. I mentioned the editorial “We Can’t Breathe” above which would be one example. I would also suggest that the blend could be a ritualized action (Bell 2009, 140-141). My wife attended one protest where someone began to say “I Can’t Breathe” in a loud voice. Everyone else was silent as the protestor commemorated the words of George Floyd. I would argue that this ritualized expression is another example of a blended space. The ritualized act that condenses analogical experiences and values presents a story in and of itself.

When we achieve human scale, we can use our thinking to explore a wide range of options and possibilities. Turner calls this ability “Narrative imaging” and describes it as a technique of changing another’s thinking by means of a story. Turner presents narrative

imaging as the “fundamental instrument of thought” (M. Turner 1996, 4). Narrative imaging is also our primary technique for predicting (M. Turner 1996, 20; R.H. Turner 1969), imagining on our own or by means of dialogue the future possibilities, based on the blend.

Frame Analysis

Metaphorical blending is a process that one person or a small group can carry out. Fauconnier and Turner present their theory as a way to highlight creative formulations. In the title of this paper, I have described the process as “gaining traction”. How do we go from story or the evaluation of the event to the emergence of a societal movement?

According to Taylor (R.H. Turner 1969) in order to have a social movement the perspective needs to shift from categorizing the situation as a “misfortune” and view it instead as an “injustice”. When we see misfortune, we experience pity and welcome the petition of the other who is facing hardship. In contrast, when we observe an injustice, we see the situation as our shared issue for which redress is due. We have shifted the framework of our understanding.

Frames are ways in which we evaluate our experience and that guide our interaction (Goffman 1974, 10-11). They are diverse, scalable, and changeable over time. This means that they are operative for individuals, groups, and societies. They aren’t monolithic so there may be a change of frame that guides interaction for a time, but then the frame may shift.

Goffman set the stage for exploring the parameters for interpersonal communication by means of frame analysis. Starting in the early 1980’s sociologists and researchers in related disciplines expanded the idea of framing and carried out societal analysis. (Frickel 2005, 62; Johnston 2002). Their research was faithful to Goffman’s perspective of frames as being diverse, layered, and changeable over time, but utilized the model to investigate processes on a considerably larger scale.

What we saw in the case of Black Lives Matter after George Floyd's death was an example of frame bridging (Snow 1986, 467-469). Here individuals and groups are convinced to shift frame and take action based on the new perspective. Or as Snow describes it, a social movement organization connecting with untapped sentiment. I can say having taken part in some of these marches that those gathered were among the most diverse individual and groups that I have encountered at one time. They were brought together by the shared experience both of quarantine and the injustice of George Floyd's death.

I have argued that Black Lives Matter gained traction in the pandemic based on metaphorical blending taking us from the narrative of the events to different blends, various stories that made sense of the event as a societal injustice. This then served to provide a frame bridging opportunity to bring about social action. I see this paper as a first attempt to map out the issue and provide direction for further research. I would see next steps being collecting more examples of public service announcements as proto-blends or corpus linguistic analysis to explore the shift. Of course, this initial inquiry also gets one wondering why even greater traction was not achieved.

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