

Theory Application Paper: Fruitvale Station

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The film *Fruitvale Station* is based on the true events that occurred on January 1st, 2009 at the Fruitvale Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Station. The film follows 22 year old Oscar Grant in the last 24 hours of his life on New Year's Eve, before he was shot and killed by a BART police officer on the Fruitvale Station platform at 2:15am on New Year's Day. The events leading up to Oscar's death can be viewed from a variety of different perspectives and each would provide a different explanation for why his death occurred. Systems theory, as well as conflict theory will be examined in this paper and, even though both theories are concerned with viewing the person in his/her environment, each will come to a different conclusion for why Oscar's death occurred and what purpose it served.

Systems theory is based on the principle that human systems and their environments are intricately connected and interdependent on one another. Social systems attempt to protect their survival through adaptation, which occurs in order to maintain equilibrium in the system. More specifically, one subset of systems theory is structural functionalism, which was introduced by sociologist Talcott Parsons (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2012). Parsons theorized that "the structural stability of a social system at any given time also depends on the extent to which all elements of the system can share the same value orientation (Robbins et al., 2012, p.29). This means that if everyone in the system values the same major principles, such as power, wealth, family etc., then everyone will work toward accomplishing those values. However, not everyone in the system will have the means in order to accomplish what they seek, and those that do not have the means, will turn to delinquent behavior in order to work towards achieving what that culture values.

For Oscar, he sought what everyone else seeks; he wanted to be able to provide for his family. Nonetheless, he did not have the financial resources to be able to do so, which led him to participate in delinquent behavior, such as selling illegal drugs. Oscar came from a working class family and he had a child of his own when he was very young, which meant he would have trouble reaching the same cultural goals as others in his society. Some additional barriers that existed for him was the fact that he was African American and that he appeared to come from a single mother household. Given these factors, Oscar may have felt forced to turn to a path of delinquent actions because he sought to reach the same cultural goals that others were reaching, but he himself did not possess the means to get there.

Moreover, structural functionalism, under systems theory, states that the system adapts in order to stay in equilibrium. However, in order for balance to exist, not everyone can be on top. Some members of the social system must be on the bottom and remain there, which is why the phrase “positive functions of poverty” exists. For example, having a lower class of laborers benefits the entire system because they can perform “menial, dangerous, and undesirable work” (Robbins et al., 2012, p. 31). Likewise, having poverty provides jobs such as loan sharking and social welfare, which further perpetuates the idea that people in poverty are deviant and that they should work towards the same cultural goals as everyone else. In Oscar’s case, he was trying to turn in life around. He was no longer participating in selling drugs on the streets and he was focusing on his family more. He dreamt of marrying his daughter’s mother and was making connections with individuals in a higher class than himself. One could argue that he potentially was on his way upwards and turning his life around, which could disrupt the social system.

Viewing Oscar’s death from a systems theory perspective, one may argue that he was killed as a result of the social system maintaining order. He was beginning to view his life

differently and he had begun to take responsibility for his actions. He told his girlfriend that he had been lying to her about having lost his job and he was becoming a more positive role model for his four year old daughter. However, his past came back to haunt him when he was on the BART train and he saw a rival that he used to be in prison with, who was Caucasian. He got into a fight with this man, which led to him being detained on the Fruitvale Station platform, where he began arguing with BART police officers about why he was being arrested. However, the Caucasian man with whom he fought with was not detained nor was he arrested, even though he was the one who began the altercation. Oscar continued to argue with the officers and used language and arguing tactics that were aggressive and arguably telling that he came from a lower class background. Moreover, all of the officers were Caucasian and they appeared intimidated by Oscar and his friends, who were all African American. The altercation escalated and one police officer shot Oscar in the back, which resulted in his death a few hours later.

Oscar was never given the opportunity to see if he could move upwards in society. It was almost a cruel twist of fate that when everything appeared to be getting better in his life and he was making great efforts to not partake in delinquent behaviors, that he was thrown into an altercation with someone from his past, which led him to behave in delinquent ways that led to his untimely death. The social system may have been sending Oscar a message that balance was to be maintained and he was who he was and could not be anything more.

While, in systems theory, fate may have wanted Oscar dead in order to maintain equilibrium, Oscar may have died for a completely different purpose under the perspective of conflict theory. According to conflict theory, conflict is seen as a fact of social life and coercion, domination and oppression play a major role in society. According to Karl Marx, one of the founders of conflict theory, “inevitable and continual conflict is caused by inequality that results

from social class differences” (Robbins et al., 2012, p. 62). These conflicts result from exploitation of the working class by the wealthy upper class and the more that the working class feels exploited, the more they are alienated from power. Eventually, the working class will create conflict which is seen as desirable because it propels social action against oppression (Robbins et al., 2012). In the film, Oscar and his family are all members of the working class and are all ethnic minorities. In the U.S., ethnic minorities are viewed generally as less of citizens when compared to Caucasians. Inequalities exist and they are forced to live with the barrier of institutional and everyday racism. This relates to conflict theory because Oscar and his family may be stuck at the class level they are at because they are being oppressed by a higher class. For example, the job that each of the family members in the film had had to do with serving the upper class. Oscar worked at an upscale organic grocery store, serving a mostly Caucasian population, his mother worked for UPS shipping expensive packages to upper class people across the country, and his girlfriend and sister appeared to work for restaurants which most likely served the working class as well as the upper class. It goes without saying that Oscar and his family must have experienced micro aggressions and forms of racism every day at their jobs, and they probably did not do anything about it. They were a part of the oppressed class and were dominated by those financially above them as well as by people who were not racial minorities.

Moreover, the section of Oakland that Oscar lived in appeared racial and financially segregated. The film showed Oscar driving through his neighborhood and it consisted of mostly housing complexes and rundown houses. There was graffiti on the streets and abandoned buildings in the neighborhoods. However, when Oscar drove to the grocery store where he used to work, it resided in a very nice neighborhood. The customers at the grocery store all appeared to be Caucasian and the entire area was well-kept. When Oscar was in the grocery store he

seemed out of place, with his rap music playing in his old car and his oversized baggy clothes. It felt as though he did not belong. This was the world Oscar dreamed to be a part of because he wanted to turn his life around and be able to provide for his family financially. This could never become a reality for him though because he was killed by a Caucasian police officer who saw him as a threat.

On the train, Oscar was viewed as a troublemaker. The police saw him as an aggressor who was up to no good. He was seen as a threat because he was with a large group of African American men and unnecessary force and roughness was used against them. It was evident in the film that the situation at Fruitvale Station escalated quickly and it did not need to. There was no need for the officers to throw Oscar and his friends to the ground and treat them the way that they did. There were micro aggressions at play and Oscar's life was taken as a result. One could argue that Oscar's death could be viewed as a conflict that led to social action against oppression, as it is defined in conflict theory. In the days and months following Oscar's death, riots and protests broke out across the country to bring light to the injustice that had occurred. People were uniting to take a stand against racism and police brutality against racial minorities. Unfortunately, Oscar's death was not the last and there have been numerous unnecessary deaths across the country due to racism. However, as long as action is taken every time, the issue of racism will not go unnoticed and the oppression will be challenged repeatedly until it is overthrown altogether.

In the film and in real life, Oscar Grant was not a model citizen. He had experience with taking and selling illegal drugs and had served time in prison. He also lived paycheck to paycheck and had difficulty keeping a job. He had a daughter out of wedlock when he was very young and was still not married to the mother of his daughter upon his death. He lied to his

family about having a job when he was in fact fired from it for consistently being late and he lied to his girlfriend because he was cheating on her with another woman. All of these factors combined together paint a picture of a man who was not an ideal citizen or a fully-functioning member of society. However, depending on which theory of human behavior one chooses to view Oscar through, one may see what happened to him as having a different purpose. Through systems theory, Oscar's death was the result of the social system trying to maintain order. Conflict is harmful for the system and an individual disrupting the order must be eradicated. The system would have never let Oscar move upwards in society because his role was to be a member of the working class. On the contrary, according to conflict theory, conflict is vital and it leads to social action. Oscar's death, under conflict theory, was significant and it could lead to social change. His death highlighted the oppression that exists and it will fuel other oppressed racial minorities to take a stand in order for his death to be significant of a larger social problem.

While the two theories analyzed have vastly different reasoning for what Oscar's death could symbolize, both stress the importance of viewing the individual in his/her environment. Both theories are derived from the notion that a person exists as part of a social system and plays a certain role in that system. Oscar was a member of the working or lower class, which meant that he did not benefit from the privileges given to upper classes. Depending on which theory one uses to analyze the situation, Oscar was either a victim of a social system attempting to keep balance by not allowing him the opportunity to move upward socially thus forcing him to result to a delinquent mindset or he was a victim of a racist society whose death can be made meaningful by sparking social action against the oppressors. These are two vastly different conclusions, which underline the value of the importance of critically understanding theories of human behavior.

References

Robbins, S., Chatterjee, P. & Canda, E. (2012). *Contemporary human behavior theory: A critical perspective for social work* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.