

Chapter 1

Introduction to Collective Behavior

Collective behavior can be fascinating, terrifying, and amusing. It can be violent and deadly, or silly and harmless. Episodes of collective behavior have been reported as long as there has been a written record of human activity. Throughout history, crowds of people have engaged in behavior that struck observers, and sometimes the participants themselves, as unusual, bizarre, deviant, unexpected, or just plain odd. This book will introduce readers to a broad range of collective behavior and some of the theories that have been created to help understand and explain such behavior.

What Is Collective Behavior?

What is collective behavior? Are screaming fans at a football game taking part in collective behavior? What about participants in a riot? What exactly determines whether or not an event is considered an episode of collective behavior?

In the most general sense, *collective behavior* is any event during which a group of people engages in unusual behavior. ("Unusual" in the sense that it is not expected, not what people normally do in that setting, and not what those people normally do.) Collective behavior falls outside of normative

expectations for the situation and/or participants. It goes against the standards of conduct or social expectations of a given group or society. It is a group form of deviant behavior. Attempts to formulate more specific definitions all ultimately fail because they exclude some forms of collective behavior.

There have been many different definitions of collective behavior over the years. Originally called “mob behavior” or “mass hysteria,” collective behavior was once believed to occur when people lost their ability to reason and became temporarily insane (see “History of the Study of Collective Behavior,” below). Researchers have since realized that many different types of unusual events do not at first glance seem to possess the frightening, irrational qualities of a riot, a lynching, or other forms of “mass hysteria.” These include fads and crazes, rumors, miracles and religious sightings, UFO sightings, millennial movements, and social movements.

All of these forms of collective behavior involve groups of people doing things that they would not normally do. They all occur much more often than the examples of mob violence and brutality that originally drew researchers to the study of collective behavior. Most cause little or no harm to participants. They occur in similar ways and for similar reasons. All of them can be examined using the same theoretical frameworks.

Collective behavior can take many forms. Some are obvious, and some are not. For example, football fans who cheer when their team scores a touchdown are not engaging in collective behavior because their behavior is expected within the setting (a sporting event) and for the participants (sports spectators). Cheering is routine behavior. However, if a large number of fans suddenly ran out onto the field and disrupted the game, then this unusual and unexpected behavior would qualify as collective behavior. The participants have deviated from the norms of the situation and engaged in behavior that is neither accepted nor expected under the circumstances.

Understanding collective behavior can be even more complicated, though. If this new behavior becomes ritualized, and every time a winning touchdown is scored the fans rush the field, then it becomes routine and expected. Once it becomes a ritual, it ceases to be collective behavior. Others may find the behavior annoying and disruptive, but it is not collective behavior because it is expected within the setting.

Collective behavior is always relative to the social rules and expectations. Those rules and expectations change over time. Therefore, no list can ever capture all potential forms of collective behavior, and any collective behavior can be transformed into ritual or routine behavior over time. It is the unusual, unexpected nature of collective behavior that makes it so interesting and also so difficult to study. This book will explore, examine, and analyze several different types of collective behavior in later chapters. By the time a reader reaches the end of this book, he or she will have a firm sense of what makes collective behavior different from other forms of group behavior.

Is Collective Behavior Really “Odd”?

Some researchers argue that referring to an episode of collective behavior as “bad” is value-laden. They believe that judging the episode in any way precludes objective, empirical understanding. However, there is an important difference between calling an *episode* “violent and terrible” and calling the *participants* “violent and terrible.” Most collective behavior theories start with the assumption that participants are normal people, and all of them recognize that the behavior would not have occurred under different circumstances. Riots *are* terrible: They almost always result in the destruction of property and the injury or death of participants and bystanders. There is no reason to pretend otherwise. However, only someone who does not understand the sociological perspective would then confer that same judgment upon the participants themselves. The same is true for episodes that are unusual but not harmful: Fainting for no reason is not normal social behavior. Participants who pass out because they believe they are victims of a non-existent toxic gas are not behaving as they normally would. The event stands out because it isn’t typical behavior.

All collective behavior deviates from the norm to some extent. The more extreme the episode, the more obvious the gap between participants’ behavior during the episode versus their behavior at other times. It is as unusual to participants as it is to observers. They are not “barbarians,” “deviants,” “suckers,” or “idiots,” even if the behavior itself seems barbaric, deviant, credulous, or inconceivably foolish in hindsight. Collective behavior can be bizarre. It can be ugly. It can be amusing. It is not wrong to say so and does not compromise one’s status as a scientist. One can objectively study a particular event and conclude that the behavior was horrific. To pretend that distinctly unusual behavior is normal and commonplace does not aid the pursuit of knowledge. However, to make foolish statements like “I would never act that way” is another thing entirely. Learning to separate evaluations of the behavior from feelings about participants is an important step for any researcher. Some never learn the difference between the two. As a result, they condemn collective behavior participants with impunity or they pretend that killing strangers is perfectly normal social behavior. Neither position helps our understanding of collective behavior.

Why Study Collective Behavior?

Most of the time, people do what they are supposed to do. Most crowds do not turn violent. Restaurant diners don’t usually run for the exits. People don’t typically attach themselves to a rubber band and throw themselves off of a bridge. When these things do happen, they attract our attention because they are unexpected. Why, then, should we bother to study something that usually doesn’t happen? There are several reasons.

1. It is important for individuals to understand why such terrible (or silly) things happen. The more we understand about such events, the less likely we are to get caught up in collective behavior. Understanding the dynamics that make a rumor spread and gain acceptance makes one less likely to accept them. Knowing the pattern that riots tend to follow can allow one to leave a situation before it becomes dangerous. Even more importantly, one individual can often steer a crowd away from potentially destructive behavior. Knowledge leads to better decisions.

2. It is important for researchers to understand why such terrible (or silly) things happen. Deviant behavior is a huge specialty within sociology. Researchers dedicate their entire careers to understanding why some people violate certain social norms, how those norms are created, why they change, and so on. Collective behavior is a type of deviant group behavior. We want to know why a mob turns violent for the same reason that deviant behavior researchers want to know why some individuals kill—so that we can keep it from happening in the future. Few would disagree that the world would be a better place without lynchings, riots, and other forms of mob violence. The more scientists understand why collective behavior occurs, the more likely we as a society will be able to avoid it in the future.

3. It happens more often than one might think. Although collective behavior doesn't occur every day, it does happen with alarming frequency. There are riots, rumors, fads, etc., year after year after year. These episodes are unusual when compared to normative social behavior but not uncommon. While nowhere near as common as normative behavior, collective behavior happens too often to ignore. It would be foolish to dismiss collective behavior as being too rare to bother understanding.

4. It is interesting. We all know that people normally stand and wait for a bus, or wait in line for their turn at a store checkout line. It is difficult to understand why people might suddenly start tearing down a bus stop and throwing rocks at cars, or why they might begin running, kicking, and screaming, trying to force their way to the front of a line. These things attract our attention because they don't happen every day. There is nothing wrong with wanting to learn more about something just because it seems interesting.

5. It may reveal information about common social behavior. Understanding why people sometimes do "odd" things may also help us understand why they typically do "normal" things. Thousands of researchers study typical, everyday behavior. A few scientists specializing in the "odd" stuff isn't going to hurt. Learning about human behavior under unusual circumstances can expand our understanding of society in general. Studying the breakdown of social order is an excellent way to increase understanding of social order.

There are undoubtedly other reasons to study collective behavior. Early pioneers within the field seem to have simply wanted to understand how seemingly normal, rational people could engage in such seemingly abnormal, irrational behavior. In exactly the same way that meteorologists started out

trying to understand hurricanes and tornadoes, the early collective behavior scholars tended to focus on the most extreme forms of collective behavior. They paid particular attention to the destructive and deadly forms, such as riots and lynch mobs, because they wanted to understand behavior that frightened them.

The History of the Study of Collective Behavior

Collective behavior has been with us as long as there have been groups of people. However, scientists have only focused their attention on collective behavior for about the last century or so. In that time, several different perspectives and specific theories have been developed.

The Beginnings of the Study of “Mass Hysteria”

Charles Mackay’s *Extraordinary Popular Delusions & The Madness of Crowds*, originally published in 1841, is arguably the first modern work focusing on collective behavior. *The Madness of Crowds* gave many people their first glimpse into the odd and often silly world of collective behavior. This book is still considered something of a classic today. However, Mackay was not a social scientist. He approached the topic much as a historian or journalist would. His book provides what seem to be accurate and well-researched accounts of collective behavior, but he does not make any serious attempt to explain *why* the episodes occurred.

In 1895, Gustave LeBon published *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Unlike Mackay, LeBon did not simply describe collective episodes for the amusement of readers. His book was a serious attempt to provide a theoretical explanation for the terrible mob violence that took place in France during and after the French Revolution. LeBon, a psychologist, tried to explain how ordinary citizens could engage in such bloodthirsty behavior and then return to their normal lives. He created what has come to be known as Contagion Theory.

The basic premise of Contagion Theory is that episodes of mob violence, riots, lynchings, and so forth, are driven by animal instincts within us. LeBon believed that these animalistic urges spread throughout a “maddening crowd” like an infection. The members of a mob or crowd are all reduced to the level of the most violent and animalistic member of the group through this contagion.

The Crowd was heavily weighed down with LeBon’s own social and political opinions. However, the study of collective behavior rapidly grew once sociologists and psychologists in the United States were exposed to LeBon’s ideas. As a result, several different branches of contagion theory have developed over the decades.

Theories of Collective Behavior

Robert Park, an American studying in Germany, wrote his dissertation on crowd behavior in 1904. Park's work, later published in various collections (see Park 1967a, 1967b, 1972), stripped away most of LeBon's political views while retaining most of LeBon's insights into mob behavior. This led to a well-defined theory of collective behavior. Park, along with Ernest Burgess, further refined Contagion Theory in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921). Here the term "collective behavior" was first used. Park and Burgess referred to social unrest, crowds, publics, sects, social contagion, mass movements, the crowd mind, propaganda, and fashion as forms of collective behavior.

Herbert Blumer, a sociologist who studied under Park, combined LeBon's and Park's ideas into his own version of Contagion Theory in 1939. The key to Blumer's version is the "acting crowd," an excited group that moves toward a goal. Blumer identified five steps that turn a collection of individuals into an active crowd: social unrest, exciting event, milling, common object of attention, and common impulses. All three versions of Contagion Theory are examined in depth in Chapter 2.

The Death of "Mass Hysteria"

Contagion Theory assumes that the individuals lose their ability to reason or to think rationally during a collective episode. When applied to mob violence, as the early studies often were, this provides us with the comforting idea that participants were "hysterical," "temporarily insane," or "hypnotized." This perspective allows episodes to be viewed as temporary aberrations, and one can find comfort by looking for the conditions that allowed this irrational behavior to occur. However, sociologists began to realize that not all forms of collective behavior involve irrational, hysterical, or violent behaviors.

For example, fads began to gain attention in the United States during the 1940s and '50s. Were the people who bought Hula-Hoops™ or crammed themselves into telephone booths under the grips of mass hysteria? Had they somehow "caught" insanity? Contagion Theory just didn't work well when attempting to explain these relatively mild and harmless events. Parents did not go to a store for a gallon of milk, fall prey to a milling crowd, and suddenly act out an irrational urge to buy their child a Hula-Hoop.™ Children asked (or begged and pleaded with) their parents, who went to the store and bought one. These types of harmless, silly collective behavior were not new, but sociologists had never focused their attention on them before. Clearly, a new theoretical perspective was needed. Several have been created.

The Emergent Norm Perspective Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian introduced what they called the "Emergent Norm Perspective" in *Collective Behavior* (1957). The basic premises of the emergent norm perspective are fairly simple: Most people follow the norms of any situation most of the time. However, when a group of individuals find themselves in a situation where their

do not know what to do, they must create new norms for the situation. Once everyone believes they know what behaviors are appropriate, they engage in those behaviors. This process is rational and logical. The behavior only seems hysterical or insane in hindsight.

Further, not all behaviors within a collective behavior episode are the same. Turner and Killian created a classification schema that places participants into different categories based on their reasons for taking part in an episode. Participants may be ego-involved, concerned, insecure, curious spectators, or exploiters. Each of these individuals have their own reasons for taking part in an episode, and none of them are irrational or insane.

No matter which of these categories a participant belongs to, his/her behavior will be rational and consistent as long as the individual remains in that situation. The participants are doing what they always do: obeying the norms that dictate behavior. The Emergent Norm Perspective is the focus of Chapter 3.

The Value-added Theory In 1962, Neil Smelser published *Theory of Collective Behavior*. Like Turner and Killian, Smelser did not characterize collective behavior as mass hysteria or irrational mob behavior. He argues that collective behavior is a reaction to social conditions and circumstances that lead to unusual behavior. The behavior seems rational to the participants at the time. People don't stop thinking; they adjust their thinking to the situation they find themselves in.

Value-added Theory provides researchers with a set of circumstances required to "assemble" an episode of collective behavior. Like the manufacture of material goods, if one of the steps is missing, the final product cannot be produced. Each step is necessary, but none is sufficient to produce collective behavior. These steps are: structural conduciveness, structural strain, generalized belief, precipitating factors, mobilization of participants, and the actions or reactions of social control agents.

Smelser views collective behavior as episodes of group behavior that relieve some social strain. Participants are rational and sane. They may be fully aware of what they are doing and may be doing so for reasons that seem perfectly logical according to the generalized belief accepted by those within the situation. The behavior only looks irrational to outsiders who do not accept the generalized belief. Chapter 4 takes an extensive look at the Value-added Theory.

The SBI/Sociocybernetic Perspective Since the early 1970s, Clark McPhail has been accumulating a body of work that centers on the "SBI" (symbolic interactionist/behaviorist) or "Sociocybernetic" perspective. It is behaviorist in the sense that it focuses on the organization of convergent behavior within gatherings. It is interactionist in the sense that this convergent behavior is viewed as the result of meaningful interpretations or instructions for response supplied by participants and others. This perspective focuses on the

ways in which people regulate their own behavior. It also looks at how people directly influence the behavior of others.

For McPhail, collective behavior is just another form of group behavior. The perspective follows an extremely broad definition of collective behavior, one that includes routine and ritual behavior. For this reason, most SBI studies focus on events that other sociologists would not consider collective behavior. Further, much more emphasis is placed on analyzing exactly how a crowd comes together, behaves, and disperses. Unlike the earlier theoretical perspectives, little emphasis is placed on understanding why the episodes occur in the first place. The theory is useful for description and analysis, rather than understanding and prediction. The evolution of McPhail's theory is examined in Chapter 5.

The Individualist Theories A completely separate strain of collective behavior theories developed not too long after Contagion Theory appeared. Called "Convergence Theory," "Learning Theory," and "Social Identity Theory," the individualist theories all assume that collective behavior comes from within the individuals. Collective behavior reveals innate tendencies, learned patterns of behavior, or identity-based yearnings that the participants more or less possessed before they entered the collective event. Collective behavior is viewed not as normal people doing abnormal things, but as potentially abnormal people expressing their inner tendencies or desires.

Floyd Allport began this tradition in 1924 with *Social Psychology*. In that book, he spelled out a Convergence Theory that essentially argues that certain kinds of people tend to gather (converge) in certain kinds of places. If people with violent tendencies converge, the situation is ripe with potential group violence. If gullible people converge, the situation may develop into mass delusion or odd flights of fancy. The behavior of the crowd tells us all that we need to know about the participants.

Neil Miller and John Dollard expanded on this basic idea in *Social Learning and Imitation* (1941). Their Learning Theory also assumed that people arrived at the scene of collective behavior with certain tendencies already in place. Unlike Allport, they argued that these tendencies were learned, rather than innate. Prior responses to various situations had taught people to behave in certain ways under similar circumstances. Once people with similar interests began to pay attention to the same cues, they were likely to engage in similar behaviors in response.

The most recent addition to the individualist approach to collective behavior comes from Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams. They published *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* in 1988. Many of the assumptions of their Social Identity Theory seem quite similar to Learning Theory. People with similar self- and group-identities are likely to focus on similar issues and events. Under some circumstances, large groups of these people may decide, out of a sense of group identification, to engage in unusual behavior. Collective behavior, then, is

driven by the individual participants' personal characteristics. The individualist theories of collective behavior are examined in Chapter 6.

All of the individualist theories focus on the participants as the key to understanding why collective behavior occurs. The situational and structural theories all focus on the circumstances surrounding the episode. One assumes that participants' behavior reveals something about those people, the other assumes that it reveals something about the circumstances those people found themselves in. This fundamental difference in the perspectives has yet to be fully bridged.

Social Movements

Although considered a form of collective behavior by many researchers, social movements are also considered important enough in their own right to merit a great deal of study and analysis by specialists. This book examines social movements in Part II. Social movements entail groups of individuals engaging in behavior that is outside of the norms for the situation. For this reason, they are considered a form of collective behavior by many. All of the collective behavior theories mentioned above can be applied to social movements. However, compared to other forms of collective behavior social movements are organized, generally endure over a relatively long period of time, and sometimes produce dramatic change within a society. Because of these differences, there are theories intended solely for the explanation and analysis of social movements.

Mass Society Theory In *The Politics of Mass Society* (1959), William Kornhauser argued that social movements attract socially isolated people who feel personally insignificant. Social movements are more personal than political, because they give a sense of meaning and purpose to people who otherwise feel useless. Kornhauser's Mass Society Theory argues that people with the weakest social ties are the easiest to mobilize in a social movement. Social movements are led by individuals pursuing their own psychological interests and followed by those with few social ties.

Relative Deprivation Theory Relative Deprivation Theory argues that social movements form when any group of people feels deprived of what they think they should have. "Relative deprivation," a sociological concept dating back to 1949 (Stouffer), refers to the subjective feeling that one has less than one deserves. In 1971, Denton Morrison applied this concept to social movements in "Some Notes Toward Theory on Relative Deprivation, Social Movements, and Social Change." He argued that whenever people feel dissatisfied, believe that they have a right to their goals, and believe that they will not be able to achieve those goals via conventional means, they will form a social movement organization in order to achieve those goals. People are motivated by their sense of unjust deprivation and their belief that they can change it.

Resource Mobilization Theory Resource Mobilization Theory focuses on the ability of any social movement organization to successfully acquire and manage resources. These may include money, votes, media coverage, volunteer labor, or anything else that could potentially help or hinder the success of the social movement. In 1966, Meyer Zald and Roberta Ash published “Social Movement Organizations.” They focused on the success or failure of a social movement organization and how the groups’ ability to gain and manage resources effected the organizations. Since then, Zald and John McCarthy have expanded the resource mobilization approach into a full-fledged theory. While the Mass Society and Relative Deprivation theories attempt to explain why a social movement develops, Resource Mobilization Theory seeks to analyze and potentially predict the success of a movement once it has formed. Groups that successfully mobilize available resources are likely to succeed. Those that lack such resources, or waste them, are likely to fail. Assistance and support from powerful people in society is particularly important.

Political Process Theory The Political Process Theory of social movements was first fully formulated by Douglas McAdam in his 1982 book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930–1970*. Political Process Theory considers both internal and external factors equally important. Ideology and beliefs are just as important as material resources, as are political connections and the overall social structure. The theory is an attempt to combine the best of Mass Society, Relative Deprivation, and Resource Mobilization theories together into a more historical and political perspective. The idea is to look at the social and political conditions that make individual and group action possible, likely or unlikely, and successful or unsuccessful. A movement is likely to form when people believe that something in society needs to change, that it isn’t going to change without a push from organized citizen activism, and that they can accomplish the desired changes. The movement is likely to succeed when social, political, and historical conditions are in the group’s favor and when the group takes advantage of all available means of reaching its goals. This includes assistance from those with power, but does not place as much importance upon it as Resource Mobilization Theory. Each of these social movement theories is examined in Chapter 14.

It is important to remember that all of these theories should be judged by how useful they are, not by whether or not they “make sense” or seem logical. One should always ask, “How will this theory help me as a researcher understand collective behavior?” Does it explain important aspects of the episode? Is it useful? Does it help us understand how such events could be prevented in the future? If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” then the theory fails. No matter how intrinsically appealing a theory may seem, if it does not provide scientists with a way of predicting and ultimately controlling destructive behavior, it is useless. These are the questions that one should keep in mind while reading Chapters 2 through 6 and Chapter 14.