

Chapter 3

The Emergent Norm Perspective

In 1957, Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian published what they called an incomplete theory of collective behavior. Following closely in the tradition of Robert Park and particularly Herbert Blumer, *Collective Behavior* aimed “more at assembling existing ideas than at innovation” (1957: v). Turner and Killian were perhaps too modest. Their book, which has been revised twice since the original edition, is an attempt to explain virtually all facets of collective behavior from a social-psychological perspective. They managed to retain almost all of the theoretical elements of Contagion Theory while letting go of the assumption that crowd members become irrational, illogical, or temporarily insane. Their “Emergent Norm Perspective” is based on the premise that collective behavior participants remain rational. This seemingly small change dramatically increases the usefulness of the theory.

The Emergent Norm Theory can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Collective behavior can occur whenever people find themselves in a situation where they are confused or don't know what to do.
2. When people don't know what to do, they look around to see what other people are doing.
3. As soon as any member of the group engages in any behavior, all other members of the group wait to see what will happen. If there are no negative reactions to the behavior, then they all assume the behavior is ac-

ceptable within the group and become likely to engage in that behavior themselves. Through this process of circular reinforcement, new group norms emerge.

4. Because most people conform to the norms of their social surroundings most of the time, they will follow the group's new, emergent norms. They engage in unusual behavior not because of any mental deficiency, but because it seems like the right thing to do under the circumstances.

Turner and Killian begin by defining "collective behavior" as instances in which "change [rather than stability], uncertainty [rather than predictability], and disorganization [rather than stable structure]" are characteristic (1957: 3, brackets in original). By 1987, they elaborated on this, defining collective behavior as "those forms of social behavior in which usual conventions cease to guide social action and people collectively transcend, bypass, or subvert established institutional patterns and structures" (1987: 3). According to Turner and Killian, social life usually operates smoothly but conditions sometimes arise where the standard norms do not apply. New norms emerge in these situations. People follow these *emergent norms* just as they usually follow social norms throughout their day. This statement sums up the basis of the Emergent Norm Perspective: People generally conform to the norms of any given situation and when the situation calls for the creation of new norms, they simply follow the new guidelines. Turner and Killian shift their focus onto the process that allows new rules for behavior to quickly develop.

The idea that the group exhibits normative constraint over the individual throughout collective behavior episodes clearly distinguishes the Emergent Norm perspective from Contagion Theory. Turner and Killian argue that group norms drive individual behavior during collective events just as they do in most other situations. It is the norms themselves that are different. Contagion theorists would argue that a man engages in violent crowd behavior because he has lost his sense of who he is and throws rocks without thinking because he has been infected with the idea and cannot resist. Turner and Killian would argue that the same man is throwing rocks because it is what everyone else in the situation is doing and therefore it seems to him like the right thing to do in that situation. Collective behavior is caused by conformity.

Emergent Norm theory is firmly grounded in Symbolic Interactionism, a social-psychological perspective that focuses on the importance of meaning and interpretation as driving forces behind human behavior. According to Symbolic Interactionists, we all interpret our surroundings and base our behavior on whatever meaning we attribute to those surroundings. When we are around other people, we all work together to socially define what is going on. This *definition of the situation* is important to us, and dictates our behavior.

Turner and Killian apply this perspective directly to collective behavior. Rather than starting with the assumption that there is something wrong with participants, they began by assuming that the social circumstances

themselves must have allowed individuals to engage in odd or unusual behavior without feeling as if they were doing anything wrong. Individuals will not engage in every behavior that is suggested. Instead, they can be guided only in directions that match their attitudes or already-chosen course of action. Crowd behavior is partially influenced by participants' motives but is most strongly guided by norms that emerge as an event takes place.

The component of Turner and Killian's theory most often used by researchers today is their five-part classification of participants. They argue that there are five different reasons for taking part in a collective episode, and therefore up to five different types of participants present at any event. This schema can be applied with the Emergent Norm perspective and with other theories as well.

The Emergent Norm Process

As mentioned earlier, Turner and Killian define collective behavior as specific instances in which traditional norms and/or patterns of behavior seem inadequate or inappropriate to those individuals within the situation (see Figure 3.1). Key to this conception of collective behavior is what Turner and Killian call *crowds*: short-lived, loosely knit, and disorderly collectivities. Crowds are required for collective behavior to occur. A collectivity has formed once new norms that contradict or reinterpret the norms and/or organization of society begin to emerge. Therefore, to Turner and Killian the study of collective behavior is the study of collectivities. This is important because they simply treat collectivities as a special category of small social group and

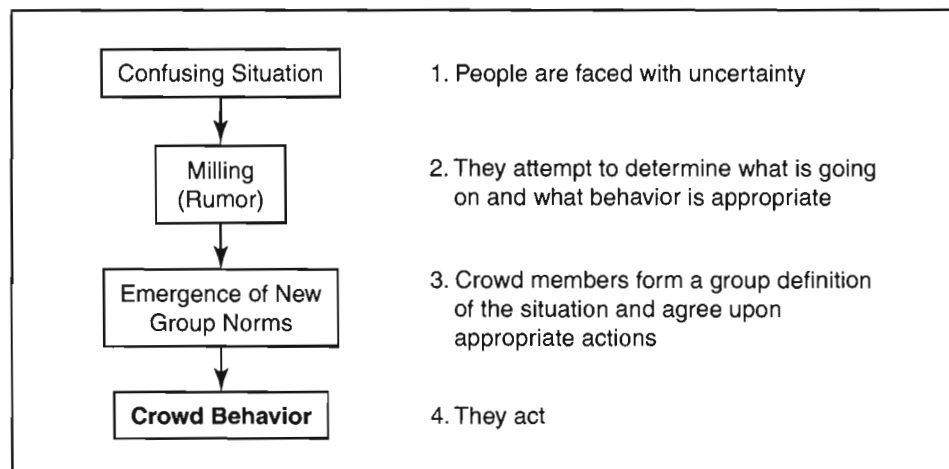


Figure 3.1 Development of Collective Behavior from the Emergent Norm Perspective

apply small group theory and research to a wide spectrum of collective behavior events. In fact, they trace their own roots to Emile Durkheim and his work on the effects of groups on individual thought, as well as Gabriel Tarde, who studied people's imitation of other humans. They combined this with Park and Blumer's interest in the influence of the group on the individual to form the basis of the Emergent Norm Perspective.

Our behavior in any group setting is heavily influenced by what seems to be appropriate in that particular situation. We tend to be quieter at funerals than at concerts, for example. We often judge our own behavior by comparing it to those around us. We use other people as *reference groups* to determine correct behavior. However, crowd members develop new norms that may be totally at odds with the norms of the dominant culture. The other people in the situation act as a temporary reference group, and their behavior seems to indicate that standard cultural norms do not apply.

It is important to remember that the people in the situation perceive the new norms as appropriate under the circumstances. They do not engage in behavior that would normally seem bizarre just because they want to; they do it because it seems like the right thing to do at that time and in that setting. If you were walking in a park and saw someone in a pond calling for help, you would probably assume that the person could not swim and try to help. However, what if there were ten other people pointing at the individual and laughing? Would you still dive into the water, or would you guess that the person was simply joking to amuse his or her friends? The behavior of others always gives us important clues that help us define what behaviors are correct. How do you think you might behave if you were in a movie theater and everyone else suddenly ran to a fire exit? Other people aren't just sharing space with us, they are constantly shaping our social environment.

Individuals normally have little or no influence over group norms. One person cannot redefine appropriate theater behavior simply by running toward the exit. However, under emergent norm circumstances the entire group may define the situation based on the behavior of one individual. If the theater is filling with smoke, running toward an exit may signal to all others present that they are in danger. Although it takes a careful reading of Turner and Killian's work to pick up on this, it is the participants' definition of the situation that most heavily influences their chosen course of action. If they believe they are in immediate danger, they may behave in a way that seems shocking to those who later read about individuals injured in a mad rush for the exits. The definition of the situation is heavily influenced by any individual behavior that seems to confirm what crowd members already suspect or believe to be true.

Turner and Killian stress that throughout this process of perception, definition, and action, members of the group do not act "as one," as earlier scholars of collective behavior had asserted. Instead, the members of the group act as individuals, but choose similar behaviors for similar reasons. The group does not have a mind, a conscience, self-control, or a sense of self-

esteem. However, each individual member of the collectivity does possess these things, and these influence their behavior. More importantly, different roles may be assigned as the group forms. Observation, photographs, film and video evidence all show that members of a group almost never act exactly the same as every other member, but most of them do behave similarly to each other. In a riot, for example, it is rare for all individuals to throw rocks at the police. Some throw rocks, some yell or gesture, some loot and steal, and others merely watch the events unfold. Behavior in a group setting is not just caused by attitudes toward an object (such as a police car). They are also guided by attitudes toward one's self, the group, and so on.

The idea that social groups sometimes develop new norms quickly in times of confusion or doubt points to another key difference between the Emergent Norm Perspective and Contagion Theory. Turner and Killian maintain Park and Blumer's idea of circular reaction or circular reinforcement, but consider contagion an unimportant factor. Circular reinforcement, as discussed in the previous chapter, refers to the tendency of all people in a situation to simultaneously imitate and reinforce each other's behavior. Any behavior that does not elicit social disapproval becomes defined as acceptable within that situation. Others become likely to engage in the same behavior. Turner and Killian argue that the circular reinforcement which occurs in crowds is the process that makes the emergence of new group norms possible, and also explains why it can happen so quickly. They do not believe contagion is an important part of this process. The reinforcement and reaction may occur quicker in an emergent situation than in normal everyday life, but that is only because the circumstances call for quick decisions.

This is a complicated way to state a simple idea: You cannot understand collective behavior without understanding the effects of the group on individual attitudes and behavior *and* the effects of the individual on group attitudes and behavior. Prior to the publication of the first edition of *Collective Behavior* in 1957, most theorists focused entirely on one or the other.

Turner and Killian also make it clear that collective behavior is not particularly irrational. For example, they note that lynchings (which are often used to illustrate the purely "irrational" nature of violent group behavior by earlier theorists) can serve as an effective tool to maintain social stratification. If the goal of the individuals involved is to maintain fear and compliance on the part of a specific social group, then the participants may decide to take part for reasons that are quite rational. The fact that we do not like or understand the behavior, no matter how horrifying, does not qualify it as irrational.

Regardless of the type of collective behavior examined, communication is a key factor. If communication breaks down, the normal coordination of social roles begins to collapse. People are not certain that they can count on others to do what they are supposed to do. Different group members may develop different understandings as to what is expected of them and lose confidence in their expectations of others' behavior. The result of this confusion can be a

new set of normative expectations for what had previously been a typical situation. It is when members of a collectivity communicate at least partially with each other but not with those outside the group that new norms may emerge.

Ambiguity leads to the spread of rumors because individuals are all trying to define the situation at hand. Information, definitions, and directives for action cannot be validated through normal channels of communication. Decisions about what to do must be made quickly. There may be confusion over what to do even when the situation seems clear. When the situation is unclear, this confusion becomes greatly magnified.

Although Turner and Killian do not state their theoretical ideas in clearly delineated terms, they do spell out the six conditions necessary for the development of a crowd and therefore for the occurrence of collective behavior:

1. Uncertainty of potential participants as to appropriate behavior within the situation.
2. Urgency; a feeling that *something* must be done, soon.
3. Communication of mood and imagery within crowd.
4. Constraint; the sense that one should conform to the norms of the crowd.
5. Selective individual suggestibility; individual acceptance of mood and imagery consistent with the crowd.
6. Permissiveness; attitudes and behaviors that are normally inhibited in society may be expressed within the crowd.

Uncertainty

Turner and Killian argue that people hate confusion and would rather believe something negative or dangerous rather than face doubt. In times of uncertainty, many want to be told what to do because it gives them guidelines to follow and alleviates the confusion, doubt, and anxiety created by the circumstances. To support this point, Turner and Killian discuss famous conformity studies (Sherif 1936) demonstrating that people, faced with a question to which the answer is impossible to know, adjust their answers to match those around them. People all assume that the group answer is better than their own. This experiment illustrates a point that Turner and Killian consider crucial to understanding collective behavior: More uncertainty leads to more suggestibility from others. In a situation where correct responses are unclear, most rely on the judgement of others. In situations where people are confused by those around them, they seek certainty. Acting confident (even if totally wrong) places one quickly into a position of leadership.

Although Turner and Killian never refer to the term themselves, social psychologists have developed the concept of informational influence (Sherif 1936) to explain what happens when people find themselves in new or confus-

ing situations. We base our own behavior on the behavior of those around us. Our basic human tendency is to look around to see what other people are doing. We use other people as a source of information, and their words and behavior guide our own thoughts and actions. In the drowning example referred to above, we use the actions of other witnesses to help us decide if the person is really in trouble or is simply playing a joke. We don't conform to their behavior because we feel pressure to do so, but also because we honestly think it is the right thing to do under the circumstances. If everyone else seems upset, then we define the situation as an emergency and behave appropriately. In this way, our own behavior becomes similar to that of others in the situation. This effect has been thoroughly documented over the years, and perhaps the most striking factor is that people walk away from the situation believing that they have engaged in the correct behavior. If many people are confused at the same time, they may all base their definition of the situation on the actions of one person who seems to know more than they do. This is how one decisive individual can end up dictating the behavior of an entire crowd, even if that person has no real idea what is going on. The fact that they *seem* to know more encourages others to follow their lead.

A part of this process frequently involves accepting rumors that make the behavior seem acceptable or even necessary. All members of the crowd believe that they understand what is going on, and they follow any behavior that seems to fit that understanding.

Urgency

This process of rumor construction is possible because groups do not cease to act when confusion sets in. Instead, they try to figure out what to do next. Having no idea what to do next produces a sense of urgency: The longer they do nothing, the more overwhelmed they become by the sense that they need to take action soon. The agreement and solidarity of collectivities does not suddenly appear, it is developed socially within the group. This often takes place during milling, the process whereby individuals behave in a restless manner.

The assumption that milling must take place for new norms to emerge makes it seem as if the theory can only be applied to collective episodes preceded by a gathering of people in a confusing situation. This is not the case. It is not the physical act of milling that is important, but rather the psychological state of confusion, agitation, and yearning for direction. Whenever peoples' behavior is influenced by the behavior of others, milling can take place. People can be separated by hundreds of miles, but if they all experience the same uncertainty about a common focus of attention, they can be said to "mill." Milling is an attempt to act in the face of uncertainty. It can be quiet, as in a church service when individuals silently look around to determine how other people are reacting to a loud noise. Milling can also be long-distance. Through telephones and the Internet, people can now communicate

with others from thousands of miles away in an attempt to acquire more information. No matter what form it takes, this urgent desire for information explains the rapid spread of rumors. Likewise, the urgent desire for direction explains the sometimes rapid spread of behavioral norms.

Communication of Mood and Imagery

Communication within the crowd indicates to each member what is happening, what is likely to happen next, and what actions and attitudes are appropriate. Through rumor and milling, the crowd participants are able to reach consensus. This communication makes it possible for each individual to form a similar definition of the situation. It also indicates what attitudes and behaviors are likely to be accepted within the crowd and which ones will be rejected or punished. Without this communication between members, individuals remain isolated from and independent of each other and a crowd cannot form. Crowd members perceive every other member of the group as a potential source of information. This increased awareness and attention toward others is one more reason why crowd members are so quick to imitate the behavior of others within the group.

Constraint

Participants' ideas about what is acceptable or unacceptable to other members of the group may be totally mistaken. Nevertheless, they are far less likely to engage in any behavior that they believe will be rejected. This leaves them with nothing to do except engage in those behaviors that they believe will be accepted by other members of the crowd. Group pressure to conform is a powerful force, and this is particularly true in the heightened state of group-awareness that crowd members find themselves in.

It is important to remember that only some behavioral patterns are acceptable to crowd members. One member of the crowd can dampen the mood of the entire group by going too far and therefore spoiling the event for others. In other words, only certain paths of behavior are acceptable to any crowd. A crowd that is rapidly becoming violent is not going to accept suggestions to sit down, join hands, and sing. Similarly, a crowd that is sitting down and singing is not going to tolerate one member who suddenly starts throwing rocks. It is not acceptable to scream or fight at the sight of a religious vision. It is not acceptable to hug and kiss strangers in a riot. Once a crowd has begun to define the situation, only behaviors that fit that definition will be tolerated.

Turner and Killian turn here to famous experiments by Asch (1951), which demonstrated that people faced with answers that are clear but go against the rest of a unanimous social group will often give the same wrong answer as everyone else. Participants in those experiments gave the wrong answer, knowing that it was incorrect, because everyone else gave that an-

swer. They felt as if they should. They felt constrained by other members of the group, even though there was no attempt by other group members to persuade them.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of group constraint truly separates the Emergent Norm Perspective from earlier theories of collective behavior. Participants may appear to be engaged in completely anti-social behavior to a dispassionate outside observer, but within the group that behavior is socially accepted, sanctioned, and encouraged. People may even be afraid to do otherwise.

Selective Individual Suggestibility

Selective individual suggestibility refers to the tendency of individuals to become more and more polarized to the apparent attitudes held by other members of the crowd. They become more and more likely to accept any information, belief, or behavioral cue that fits the mood of the crowd. They are also increasingly likely to reject any new piece that does not fit into this mindset. Members therefore become ever more attuned to increasingly specific suggestions and behavioral cues. If the crowd seems to be angry, individuals become likely to accept suggestions for violent or destructive behavior. If individuals are being told by other members of a craze that their collectible dolls are gaining value faster than they can buy them, they become likely to purchase even more. Eventually, members of the crowd convince themselves that only one course of action is appropriate. They often believe this so firmly that doing nothing at all would seem like a failure of some sort.

Permissiveness

Permissiveness may seem to contradict constraint at first glance. After all, how can the group be constrictive and permissive at the same time? It is constrictive in the sense that it inhibits expression of any feelings out of sync with those of the group. For example, imagine being the only person cheering for the away team on the home side of the bleachers at a home football game. However, the group is also permissive in the sense that it allows the expression of attitudes and behaviors that are not accepted in any *other* setting. A similar type of permissiveness is often present at social parties: It may be perfectly acceptable to shout, yell, and get drunk to the point of passing out at a party, behavior that would be condemned in almost any other setting. This permissiveness allows some people to engage in behavior that they would do much more often if social circumstances frequently allowed it. And, just as those who like to shout and drink heavily are more likely to attend certain parties, those individuals who are predisposed to behave in certain ways are likely to seek out situations that allow the desired behavior.

Not all forms of collective behavior involve the release of pent-up feelings. It is doubtful, for instance, that participants in the goldfish swallowing

fad of the 1920s had long yearned to swallow live fish in front of an audience. On the other hand, many types of collective behavior do allow for this sort of release. No matter how much an individual hates another social group, he or she is unlikely to scream insults in public unless surrounded by a large group of like-minded individuals. Riots allow for the expression of destructive, violent, and anti-social or anti-establishment feelings. Spontaneous celebrations allow behaving in a manner that is totally out of line with one's public image. Religious revival events allow for exuberant behavior that would seem unbecoming in everyday life. Many forms of collective behavior allow participants to engage in behavior that they desire, but that is unacceptable in most social circumstances.

Classification of Participants

Turner and Killian are most well known and most often cited for their simple classification schema for collective behavior participants. Turner and Killian divide collective behavior participants into five categories. These categories are based on two factors: the motivation of the individual for joining the event and the behavior of the individual throughout the event. Oddly, the labels most frequently given to some of these categories do not come from Turner and Killian's most recent edition of their textbook. Turner and Killian do not give specific labels to these categories in the first edition of *Collective Behavior*, and by the third edition they dropped the fifth category altogether. The labels "Ego-involved" and "Ego-detached" are commonly used in the literature, although Turner and Killian have dropped those labels since their second edition. The labels used in this chapter are a blend of those used by Turner and Killian between 1957 and 1987. The five categories are:

1. The Ego-involved/Committed
2. The Concerned
3. Insecure
4. Spectators
5. The Ego-detached/Exploiter

The Ego-involved/Committed

The committed participant is deeply and personally involved with the event. He or she is motivated by a sense that some action is demanded. These individuals may be incensed, frightened, or elated. Any intense emotion related to the event will make the individual feel deeply involved at a personal level. They define the situation as demanding immediate action. Pre-existing orientations guide them toward specific action. They are emotionally involved in the event and will take a strong position of leadership, if required, in order to accomplish their goal. For example, those who are most angry or outraged at

a perceived social injustice may also be most likely to begin hurling insults or rocks at police officers.

The Concerned

Concerned participants are not as personally involved as the committed participants. They also have less clearly defined attitudes. They believe that something should be done, but they are not personally involved enough to believe that it falls to them to decide what, when, and how action should be carried out. They are concerned about the issues surrounding the event, but not as much as the ego-involved participants. A person whose house is burning down is involved; his or her neighbors are concerned. Because they have less personal stake in the event, concerned participants are more likely to follow than to lead. Using the riot as a continuing example, concerned participants may yell or throw things, but are likely to do so only after others (ego-committed participants) have defined it as the appropriate course of action. They take part out of concern for those on the side of the conflict with whom they identify. Group loyalty is a major factor for the concerned participant. Statements like “we had to do something, they were hitting our people” exemplify this attitude.

The Insecure

The insecure participant derives direct satisfaction from participation in a crowd, regardless of the circumstances. It is the sense of power, belonging, or identity that this participant is interested in. They may not know what the issues are, and don't particularly care. Those who are of what Turner and Killian call “generally insecure status” are included in this category. There are two factors that draw insecure participants into a crowd. First, there is the sense of power and unanimity that comes with joining a large group. The crowd makes insecure members feel physically powerful, socially important, and (perhaps most importantly), a part of something. Second, the “righteousness” of the crowd itself is appealing to insecure individuals. We tend to base our personal standards of right and wrong on the norms of groups that we identify with. In an emergent norm situation, no one in the group contradicts the new norm and no one outside of the group matters at that moment. The certainty that one is doing the right thing and that everyone universally agrees is artificially created within the crowd. This provides a tremendous sense of security to socially insecure individuals.

Spectators

Curiosity is an important human trait. Spectators are often drawn to certain types of collective episodes out of curiosity about the crowd itself, not about the event that drew the crowd in the first place. They may gather to watch a

small group of individuals engage in fad behavior. They might not even know what is going on, and are usually relatively inactive. For example, at political protests curious spectators may dramatically outnumber actual participants.

Spectators are an important part of many types of collective behavior for three reasons. First, they are important because official counts often lump them in with active participants. News broadcasts may announce that over one thousand people took part in a particular protest when, in fact, several hundred of those individuals were there to watch the protest, not take part in it. Some may have been hoping to see an exciting clash between protesters and authorities. People are often drawn to a site by the presence of a large crowd of people. It is not unusual for large numbers of people to walk up to (and effectively join) a crowd and only then ask what is going on.

Second, spectators provide crowd members with an audience for any behavior. Most people do not behave the same when they are aware of being watched. Their behavior often swings to extremes: They may become much more subdued, or much more active. This applies to crowd members as well. The awareness that people are watching can magnify whatever behavioral tendencies already exist within the crowd. It also creates the illusion that they support the actions of the crowd.

The third reason that spectators are important is because they are sometimes drawn into the event and become active participants. They might find the crowd's action personally meaningful and decide to join in. They might decide that the crowd is doing something fun or exciting. They may feel outrage at the way participants are being treated, and leap to their defense. Spectators are often treated as participants by authorities in riotous situations. Those spectators who are teargassed, physically hit or pushed, or aggressively shouted at (all common police tactics for dispersing crowds) may become angry and retaliate. Within seconds they can be converted from curious spectators into ego-involved or concerned participants.

The Ego-detached/Exploiters

The ego-detached participant, also referred to as an exploiter, has only his or her own personal interests in mind. They join an event if it suits their own goals, and manipulate the event as much as possible in order to achieve them. Turner and Killian refer to these participants as "the person whose inhibitions are already down before crowd action develops," including "drunks, psychopaths, and petty criminals" (1957: 110). In other words, there are people walking around in society who generally want to engage in various forms of socially unacceptable behavior. Collective behavior episodes provide them with the excuse for doing these things.

Crowd behavior always represents some sort of deviation from ordinary social norms. Exploiters are people who jump at the chance to engage in such deviance. This may even include deliberate instigators who, with a pre-conceived plan, push the crowd in the desired direction. For instance, they may

begin shouting, or actively encourage others to engage in a particular course of action. Unlike the ego-involved participant who often leads the crowd in a desired direction, the exploiter manipulates the crowd in order to achieve some personal goal not related to the group. Turner and Killian recount an instance when older men at a riot could be seen actively encouraging younger men to fight. They literally pushed the younger men toward the fights but were careful to stay out of the scuffles themselves. The involved participant leads primarily by example; the detached instigator often leads through words alone.

Those who speak first, loudest, or most vigorously may create the impression that they express the feelings of the entire crowd. These instigators usually do not take part in the action that they so loudly encourage. Often cautious and deliberate, their actions clearly demonstrate self-control.

Instigators are not the only ego-detached participants in a collective event. Exploiters are those individuals who do not take part in the primary crowd activity at all, but rather engage in their own selfish actions within the context of the group event. Two examples that easily come to mind are looters and merchants. Looters use the cover of a riot or other disturbance to steal as much merchandise as possible. The issues that unite active participants do not motivate exploiters, and their behavior only seems similar at first glance. There is an obvious and significant difference between destroying property out of rage or frustration versus stealing property for one's own personal gain or future use. Merchants or vendors are another type of exploiter that appear at a wide variety of collective events. Those who sell souvenirs such as mugs or T-shirts are clearly not involved in an event in the same way that other participants are. They do not define the situation the same way that the ego-involved and ego-concerned participants do. To exploiters, the event is simply another opportunity to make a profit.

Discussion

Turner and Killian argue that collective behavior participants behave the way they do because of the situation they find themselves in. They are following the norms of the crowd, just as almost all of us generally follow the norms of whatever situation we find ourselves in. The circular reinforcement that Park and Blumer first described is, according to Turner and Killian, nothing more than the process of individuals collectively defining appropriate behaviors within a specific situation. The emerging norms of the situation are the source of collective behavior and the most important aspect of the entire process.

Core Assumptions

Turner and Killian assert that individuals engaged in collective behavior are simply doing what they always do: following the norms of their social surroundings. They focus most of their attention on the group dynamics that

occur during several different types of collective behavior. In each, they argue that the influence of the group on the individual accounts for otherwise incomprehensible behavior.

Turner and Killian also assume that collective behavior can occur absolutely anytime any group of people are faced with uncertainty. Preexisting social or personal stress may make an event more likely, but are not necessary. Instead, it is the peculiar stress of social uncertainty itself that creates a sense of urgency within crowd members and drives them to collective behavior. Participants might be relaxed and happy right up until they enter the situation that causes confusion and leads to crowd formation.

Finally, the Emergent Norm perspective is based on the assumption that not all participants take part in collective events for the same reasons and therefore do not engage in identical behaviors. There may be up to five different categories of participants at any one event, and each is there for different reasons. Each engages in different patterns of behavior. Each hopes to achieve something different by taking part. This typology has proven to be highly useful and, as Turner and Killian intended, can be used with theories other than the Emergent Norm perspective.

Evaluation

The typology of participants is useful for sociologists working from a variety of perspectives. For this reason, it is almost always mentioned in any book about collective behavior, including introductory sociology textbooks. However, the Emergent Norm Theory itself has been somewhat neglected by researchers compared to the theory discussed in Chapter 4 (see, however, Aguirre et al. 1998, Turner 1996). This is probably because of the problems with Turner and Killian's writing (poor organization, dense writing style, etc.) and the theoretical roots of the theory itself.

As stated earlier, the Emergent Norm perspective is based on Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism concerns itself almost entirely with individual perception and small-group dynamics. As such, it is a natural for the analysis of collective behavior. However, many of the researchers drawn to the study of collective behavior come from other theoretical paradigms. They tend to focus on different issues. As sociologists look for social-level variables that create collective behavior, they may overlook this theory because it focuses on situational and personal-level variables. A more structure-oriented researcher, for example, might chose to focus on the social and political conditions that led up to a particular episode. They concern themselves with the historical precedents that "created" the event. The Emergent Norm Perspective, by contrast, focuses almost entirely on conditions within the crowd at the time of formation. This approach may lead many sociologists to disregard Emergent Norm Theory as "too psychological." Turner and Killian's theory considers the conditions of the moment at least as important as

(if not more important than) the general social conditions leading up to that moment.

As we will see later in this book, the theory is useful in examining the dynamics of various types of collective behavior. However, it might be the case that Emergent Norm Theory does not answer the social and historical questions that some researchers ask.