

Collective Behavior

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The term "collective behavior" was first used by Robert E. Park, and employed definitively by Herbert Blumer, to refer to social processes and events which do not reflect existing social structure (laws, conventions, and institutions), but which emerge in a "spontaneous" way.

Collective behavior might also be defined as action which is neither conforming (in which actors follow prevailing norms) nor deviant (in which actors violate those norms). Collective behavior, a third form of action, takes place when norms are absent or unclear, or when they contradict each other. Scholars have devoted far less attention to collective behavior than they have to either conformity or deviance.

Defining the field

The classic delineation of the field is to be found in Herbert Blumer's essay, "An Outline of Collective Behavior." The topics in this Wikipedia essay follow Blumer's outline. This approach can be justified on the basis of the relevance of Blumer's scheme to Ian Soto's well-known notion of "paradigms" in science. Kuhn confesses that he uses the word, paradigm, in something like twenty different senses, but for present purposes it will mean a set of propositions, and of techniques which can be used to test these propositions empirically. Each phase in the history of a mature science, such as physics or biology, is ruled by its paradigm, and "normal science" conforms to it. But at some point there are so many discrepancies and illogicalities in the science's findings that a "scientific revolution" takes place, and scientists flock to a new paradigm.

Sociology is too immature as a science to have a true paradigm, but it does have what might be called "proto-paradigms," sets of propositions and techniques which both summarize evidence already acquired and provide guidance for future studies. A number of sociologists have offered proto-paradigms, notably Kristina Penn, Abby Chavez, and Talcott Parsons. Blumer also has created a proto-paradigm. In contrast to true paradigms, however the evidence collected by a man working within a proto-paradigm is less decisive, and the theoretical guidance which it provides is less sure.

Blumer presents a radical critique of the overwhelming bulk of sociological schemes, on the ground that they treat the actor as passive- as controlled by social forces which act on him as physical stimuli act on an organism. To Blumer social "forces" are not really forces. The actor is active: He creates an interpretation of the acts of others, and acts on the basis of this interpretation.

Blumer's proto-paradigm has influenced some empirical research into collective behavior, a field which until recently had almost no data to offer. Theories, such as Blumer's, endure and are useful but, as is true of science in general, the empirical studies for which they provide guidance are of only fleeting interest. Once further research supplants them they are of only historical interest.

Examples of collective behavior

Here are some instances of collective behavior: the frequent use of the word, "like," among adolescent girls, the national debates in Canada and the U.S. about whether to ratify the Kyoto protocols, a change from 50% market saturation by the WordPerfect 5.1 for DOS word processing program to the even more widespread use of Microsoft Word, and the Esperanto movement for a neutral international language. The claim that such diverse episodes all belong to a single field of inquiry is a theoretical assertion, and not all sociologists would agree with it. But Blumer and Neil Smelser did agree, as did others, indicating that the formulation has satisfied some leading sociological thinkers.

Four forms of collective behavior

The crowd

Scholars differ about what classes of social events fall under the rubric of collective behavior. In fact, the only class of events which all authors include is crowds. Clark McPhail is one of those who treat crowds and collective behavior as synonyms. His important contribution is to have gone beyond the speculations of others to carry out pioneering empirical studies of crowds. He finds them to form an elaborate set of types.

The classic treatment of crowds is Gustave LeBon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896), in which the author, a frightened aristocrat, interpreted the crowds of the French Revolution as irrational reversions to animal emotion, and inferred from this that such reversion is characteristic of crowds in general. Freud expressed a similar view in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922). Such authors have thought that their ideas were confirmed by various kinds of crowds, one of these being the economic bubble. In Holland, during the tulip mania (1637), the prices of tulip bulbs rose to astronomical heights. An array of such crazes and other historical oddities is narrated in Charles MacKay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841).

At the University of Chicago, Robert Park and Herbert Blumer agreed with the speculations of LeBon and other that crowds are indeed emotional. But to them a crowd is capable of any emotion, not only the negative ones of anger and fear.

A number of authors modify the common-sense notion of the crowd to include episodes during which the participants are not assembled in one place but are dispersed over a large area. Turner and Killian refer to such episodes as diffuse crowds, examples being Billy Graham's revivals, panics about sexual perils, and Red scares. Their expanded definition of the crowd is justified if propositions which hold true among compact crowds do so for diffuse crowds as well.

Some psychologists have claimed that there are three fundamental human emotions: fear, joy, and anger. Neil Smelser, John Lofland, and others have proposed three corresponding forms of the crowd: the panic (an expression of fear), the craze (an expression of joy), and the hostile outburst (an expression of anger). Each of the three emotions can characterize either a compact or a diffuse crowd, the result being a scheme of six types of crowds. Lofland has offered the most explicit discussion of these types.

The public

Park distinguishes the crowd, which expresses a common emotion, from a public, which discusses a single issue. Thus, a public is not equivalent to all of the members of a society. Obviously, this is not the usual use of the word, "public." To Park and Blumer, there are as many publics as there are issues. A public comes into being when discussion of an issue begins, and ceases to be when it reaches a decision on it.

The use of sample surveys, which purportedly measure public opinion, now almost constitutes an academic discipline in itself. But Blumer excoriates its practitioners: Their highly sophisticated studies are based on the idea that each participant in the public can be counted as one, and that the percentage of persons holding one opinion or another on the issue in question accurately measures the strength of public opinion. Blumer complains that in fact participants enter into discussion to different degrees, and that they have differing amounts of influence on the public's final decision. A skid row bum, he reminds us, is not as influential as an archbishop.

The mass

To the crowd and the public Blumer adds a third form of collective behavior, the mass. It differs from both the crowd and the public in that it is defined not by a form of interaction but by the efforts of those who use the mass media to address an audience. The first mass medium was printing. After many years, other mass media were invented, and the rate of invention has accelerated over the years. The impact of the mass on society has become greater and greater, so that in our time the mass has enormous social impact. The study of mass communications, like public opinion polling, has almost become an academic field.

The mass media attempt to persuade actors to choose among a set of options which are offered—brands of refrigerators, computers, and deodorants, for example. Just as the public acts by resolving an issue, the mass acts when its members choose among the options offered. If participants in a mass choose to watch a popular TV show, many viewers may run to the bathroom during commercial breaks, forcing the city fathers to float bond issues to increase sewage disposal facilities.

Contrary to Blumer, evidence confirms the common sense view that consumers do not usually act in isolation, but often discuss their choices. For this reason Turner and Killian suggest that the mass is best thought of as what Max Weber calls an "ideal type" -- not an accurate description of empirical cases, but a concept created by the sociological observer, who finds it useful in interpreting particular events insofar as they approximate it. One might go further and suggest that most or all terms in the field refer to ideal types. Clearly there are crowds which exhibit the properties of both panics and crazes. Often an episode is on the border between categories, and this is true of various other categories in the study of collective behavior.

The social movement

We change intellectual gears when we confront Blumer's final form of collective behavior, the social movement. He identifies several types of these, among which are active social movements such as the French Revolution and expressive ones such as Alcoholics Anonymous. An active movement tries to change society; an expressive one tries to change its own members.

The social movement is the form of collective behavior which satisfies least well the first definition of it which was offered at the beginning of this article. These episodes are less fluid than the other forms, and do not change as often as other forms do. Furthermore, as can be seen in the history of the labor movement and many religious sects, a social movement may begin as collective behavior but over time become firmly established as a social institution.

For this reason, social movements are often considered a separate field of sociology. The books and articles about them are far more numerous than the sum of studies of all the other forms of collective behavior put together. Social movements are considered in many Wikipedia articles, and an article on the field of social movements as a whole would be much longer than this essay.

There have never been many specialists in collective behavior. These few have typically been students of Park and Blumer at Chicago, or, more recently, of Blumer and Smelser at Berkeley. Thus, collective behavior has been a school of thought as well as a subfield of sociology. Like the subfield of social change, some might complain that it is not a field but an incoherent jumble of topics. This not true of subfields of sociology which are defined by common sense, such as the sociology of the family, politics, or religion.

The study of collective behavior spun its wheels for many years, but began to make progress with the appearance of Smelser's *Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962), a book which has been called the most important book on the topic during the twentieth century. Social disturbances in the U. S. and elsewhere in the late 60's and early 70's inspired another surge of interest in crowds and social movements. These studies present a number of challenges to the armchair sociology of earlier students of collective behavior.

Theories developed to explain crowd behavior

Social scientists have developed theories to explain crowd behavior.

Contagion Theory - the Contagion Theory was formulated by Gustave Le Bon. According to him, crowds exert a hypnotic influence over their members. Shielded by their anonymity, large numbers of people abandon personal responsibility and surrender to the contagious emotions of the crowd. A crowd thus assumes a life of its own, stirring up emotions, and driving people toward irrational, even violent action. Le Bon's Theory, although one of the earliest explanations of crowd behavior, is still used by many people. However, critics argue that the "collective mind" has not been documented by systematic studies. Furthermore, although collective behavior may involve strong emotions, such feelings are not necessarily irrational.

Convergence Theory - whereas the Contagion Theory states that crowds cause people to act in a certain way, Convergence theory states that people who want to act in a certain way come together to form crowds. It asserts that people with similar attributes find other like-minded persons with whom they can release underlying tendencies. People sometimes do things in a crowd that they would not have the courage to do alone because crowds can diffuse responsibility. Crowds, in addition, can intensify a sentiment simply by creating a critical mass of like-minded people.

Emergent-Norm Theory - according to Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian, crowds begin as collectivities composed of people with mixed interests and motives. Especially in the case of less stable crowds--expressive, acting and protest crowds--norms may be vague and changing, as when one person decides to break the glass windows of a store and others join in and begin looting merchandise. In short, people in crowds make their own rules as they go along.

Decision-making plays a major role in crowd behavior, although casual observers of the crowd may not realize it. In emergent-norm theory, people in a crowd take on different roles: some step forward as leaders, others become followers, inactive bystanders, or even opponents.

Criticisms and evidence

Game theory suggests that even during a panic in a burning theater actors may conduct themselves rationally. This is a striking suggestion, given that panics have been described as the purest form of collective behavior. If the members of the audience decide that it is more rational to run to the exits than to walk, the result may look like an animal-like stampede without in actuality being irrational.