MASS HYSTERIA

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1. Core Definition

Mass hysteria is defined as a "psychic epidemic" wherein psychological distress, symptoms, or beliefs spread rapidly through an entire population or closed community. The term is applied to specific collective disorders that have historically swept through societies, often manifesting as bizarre or compulsive physical behaviors. Authorities such as Arieti and Meth (1959) emphasize that these disorders should not be classified as collective psychoses, but rather as **psychoneuroses of a hysterical nature**. This distinction is crucial because the condition is generally induced by the influential effect of the crowd or collective atmosphere upon a predisposed individual, rather than stemming from inherent psychotic breakdowns shared across the group. The environment, characterized by elements such as **superstition**, **ignorance**, and **intense religiosity**, serves to heighten susceptibility among unstable individuals, facilitating a form of collective hypnosis that allows the disorder to propagate seamlessly.

2. Historical Manifestations: Dancing Manias

One of the most widely documented forms of collective hysteria is the phenomenon known as the dancing mania, which occurred across various parts of Europe between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries. Historical records trace the appearance of these manias as far back as the tenth century in Italy, where individuals would congregate near religious sites to sing and dance for prolonged periods, often days and nights, until they suffered convulsions and lost consciousness.

In Italy, this condition was termed **Tarantism** (or Tarantulism), a name popularized by Baglivi. The participants believed that their symptoms were the result of a bite from the spider *lycosa tarantula*, which induced great fear and excitement, necessitating continuous, frantic movement. Coincidentally, they believed that vigorous music and dancing served as an effective antidote; this belief gave rise to the distinct, fast-paced folk music and dance form known today as the "tarantella." Some historians speculate on the similarity between the dancing manias and the orgiastic rites of ancient Greece, suggesting that secret gatherings may have preserved the customs after they were banned by Christianity. Over time, however, these rites lost their original spiritual significance and degenerated into symptoms of emotional distress or extreme reactions to the severe socio-economic stresses of the period (Gloyne, 1950).

The mania spread dramatically north, becoming known in Germany and the Flemish regions as **St. Vitus' Dance**. This name is believed to have been adopted following a tragic incident in Utrecht in 1278, where a large group of people danced violently on a bridge over the Rhine, causing it to

collapse and resulting in numerous fatalities. Those who survived were reportedly treated at a chapel dedicated to St. Vitus. A physician's report cited by Sigerist (1943), describing the affliction in 13th-century Italy, paints a vivid picture: the afflicted, believing they were stung by the tarantula, would run out into the streets and marketplaces, dancing wildly in queer attire, sometimes tearing off their clothes, losing modesty, or engaging in violent acts such as mimicking fencers or beating each other with whips. Others exhibited stranger compulsions, such as rolling themselves in the dirt like swine, while consuming large amounts of wine and behaving as if intoxicated.

3. Historical Manifestations: Lycanthropy

A second major type of collective disorder observed historically is **Lycanthropy**, a condition wherein the afflicted individuals genuinely believe they have been transformed into wolves or other animals. This disorder occurred predominantly in isolated areas, and isolated cases continue to be reported occasionally in mountainous villages, particularly in Italy. During historical epidemics, individuals under this delusion sometimes committed violent crimes, leading to severe judicial responses; during one documented epidemic in France, a judge is reputed to have condemned six hundred lycanthropes, or "werewolves," to death.

The severity of the delusion is highlighted by historical accounts, such as the case cited by Stone (1937) from 1541. A lycanthrope, apprehended by authorities, privately insisted that he was, in fact, a wolf, but explained that his skin appeared smooth because his hairy coat had somehow turned inward. In a horrific attempt to dispel this conviction, his captors amputated his arms and legs, yet he died tragically, still convinced of his animal transformation.

4. Underlying Psychological Mechanisms

While some victims of lycanthropy may have genuinely suffered from underlying psychiatric illnesses, specifically **schizophrenia**, Arieti and Meth suggest that the majority were likely affected by collective hysteria. They point out that the belief in human-to-animal transformation is deeply ingrained in ancient mythology, citing examples such as Nebuchadnezzar's belief that he was a wolf, and the legend of St. Patrick transforming the King of Gallia into a wolf.

The authors propose that the disorder may originate from a profound, internal sense of **guilt and unworthiness**. This powerful emotion makes the individual feel undeserving of membership in the human race, thereby generating an acute fear of metamorphosis. The afflicted person subsequently acts out this fear by imitating animal behavior. This mechanism is crucial to the spread of the disorder: when susceptible individuals witness others engaging in animalistic behavior, their own internalized fears are triggered and externalized, causing the disorder to spread readily through imitation and suggestibility from one person to the next within the vulnerable group.

5. Other Collective Epidemics

Collective epidemics have also been reported in highly restrictive environments, most notably in convents where nuns suddenly abandoned their religious discipline to engage in bizarre and compulsive actions. These episodes demonstrate that psychological contagion can occur even in regulated, confined settings, often manifesting existing repressed desires or tensions.

A notable example from the fifteenth century involves a German nun who developed a compulsive urge to bite her associates. This mania rapidly gained traction among the other nuns, spreading through the communal nature of the hysteria. Within a few months, the unusual compulsion had propagated to convents across Germany, Holland, and Italy (White, 1896). Another historian, Ferrio (1948), documented a similar episode around 1700, describing nuns in a convent near Paris who began to mew loudly, as if they had been transformed into cats. Such convent cases are frequently interpreted as another sociological or psychological expression of the underlying mechanisms associated with lycanthropy or related severe hysterical reactions, often reflecting the severe strictures placed upon the inhabitants.

6. Significance and Terminology

The collective disorders discussed, including the dancing manias and historical lycanthropy, firmly support the use of the term **Mass Hysteria** rather than "collective psychosis." The source content repeatedly stresses that these were induced psychoneurotic states, often triggered by environmental factors and the emotional influence of the crowd on susceptible individuals, rather than true shared psychotic breaks. The phenomenon underscores the immense power of collective suggestion, particularly when amplified by a highly charged social or religious atmosphere, to manifest severe and unusual physical and behavioral symptoms across a population.

7. Modern Psychiatric Context

In contemporary psychiatry, the term **lycanthropy** is generally reserved for extremely rare clinical cases of schizophrenia or paranoia. In these modern contexts, the patient suffers from an outright and fixed delusion that they have been physically transformed into an animal, usually without the need for a collective trigger. These delusions are typically severe and often isolated, such as the recently reported case of a four-year-old boy who labored under the delusion that he was a dog, crawling on all fours, barking instead of talking, and refusing to eat unless his food was placed in a bowl on the floor. While the symptoms mirror historical presentations, the underlying pathology is classified differently in the context of modern diagnostic criteria, typically indicating a primary psychotic disorder rather than a mass hysterical contagion.

Further Reading

Mass hysteria (Wikipedia)
Tarantism (Wikipedia)
Clinical lycanthropy (Wikipedia)
Dancing Plague of 1518 (St. Vitus' Dance) (Wikipedia)