

SOCI 360

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

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B. COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

Characteristics:

1. Represent the actions of groups of people, not individuals.
2. Involve relationships that arise in unusual circumstances.
3. Capture the changing elements of society more than other forms of social action.
4. May mark the beginnings of more organized social behavior.
5. Exhibit patterned behavior, not the irrational behavior of crazed individuals.
6. Usually appear to be highly emotional, even volatile.
7. Involve people communicating extensively through rumors.
8. Are often associated with efforts to achieve social change.



B. Early Theories of Collective Behavior

1. Social Contagion Theory (Locher Chp 2)

Gustav LeBon, "The Crowd...", 1895 (p12)

- i. Trying to explain the violence of the **French Revolution**; (p12-13)
- ii. **Crowds diminish free-will**; all members of a crowd are diminished in their reasoning capacities to the least intelligent, roughest, and most violent. (p13)
- iii. Individuals feel **invincible and anonymous**; **suggestibility reigns** (p14)
- iv. **Critique**: overly literal view of contagion, not scientific, eschews free-will



3. Early Theories of Collective Behavior

2. Social Contagion Theory (symbolic interaction)

Robert Park, "The Crowd and the Public", 1904 (p16)

- i. **Emergent interaction:** more attuned to others; circular reaction occurs, spreading contagion (p16)
- ii. **First to define "collective behavior"** (but vaguely) (p17)
- iii. **Crowd members act irrationally** (p17)
- iv. **Park contributes** more to an understanding of the *social nature* of crowd formation. (p18)

3. Early Theories of Collective Behavior

3. Mass Society Theory (social conflict)

William Kornhauser, "Politics of Mass Society", 1959 (p15)

- i. **Developed by members of the "Frankfurt School"** of sociology (Germany) to explain the turn to totalitarianism in early 20th c. Europe.
- ii. **"Massification" requires social marginalization** (alienation from social norms of work, family, politics, etc.).
- iii. **Leads to populism and identity politics** rather than democratic politics.
- iv. **Promoted by Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, others** (known as *Critical Theorists* in sociology).

William Kornhauser's Mass Society Theory

According to William Kornhauser's Mass Society theory, the antecedent to all social movements in mass society is **widespread social isolation and disconnection**: excessive (egoistic) individualism. The starting point for this theory is the concept of **"mass society"** –a state or condition that produces rife disengagement and isolation among individuals in late-modernity. These individuals then use social movements as a proxy for [their "need" for] social connection or integration. Longing for a deeper sense of connection to abate the increasing alienation of late-modernity and modern cities, isolated people are drawn to social movements where they find a sense of belonging and an alternative community to their disconnected ones.

On "The Politics of Mass Society"

"Mass society is a situation in which an aggregate of individuals are related to one another only by way of their relation to a common authority, especially the state...A population in this condition is not insulated in any way from the ruling group, nor yet from elements within itself...Social atomization engenders strong feelings of alienation and anxiety, and therefore the disposition to engage in extreme behavior to escape from these tensions. In **mass society** there is a heightened readiness to form hyper-attachments to symbols and leaders...People become available for mobilization by elites when they lack or lose an independent group life...The lack of autonomous relations generates widespread social alienation. Alienation heightens responsiveness to the appeal of **mass movements** because they provide occasions for expressing resentment against what is, as well as promises of a totally different world. In short, *people who are atomized readily become mobilized*. Since totalitarianism is a state of total mobilization, mass society is highly vulnerable to totalitarian movements and regimes."

-William Kornhauser. (1959). *The Politics of Mass Society*

3. Early Theories of Collective Behavior

4. Relative Deprivation Theory (symbolic interaction)

Herbert Blumer, "The Field of Collective Behavior", 1951 (p19)

- i. "Interpretive interaction" important role and behavior (p19)
- ii. *Milling, collective excitement and social contagion* are three processes by which individual rationality is compromised (p19)
- iii. Similar to "framing perspective"
- iv. **Critique:** definitions can be vague and difficult to operationalize (p21)

Relative Deprivation Approach

- ▶ **Relative deprivation:** a conscious feeling of negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and present actualities
- ▶ Before discontent is channeled into a social movement, people must feel they:
 - Have a right to their goals
 - Perceive they cannot attain goals through conventional means

3. Early Theories of Collective Behavior

5. Emergent Norm Theory (symbolic interaction)

Turner & Killian, 1957 (Locher p24)

- i. Maintains "rational" actors;
- ii. Confusing situations are left open to interpretation
- iii. People take their cues from others (*reference groups*) around them (*conformity* creates collective behavior)
- iv. Critique: too dense and reliant on interpretive frameworks that are left unexplained (p37)



3. Early Theories of Collective Behavior

6. Structural Strain/Value-Added Theory

(structural functionalism)

Neil Smelser, "Theory of Collective Behavior" (p30)

- i. Structural strains are social problems;
- ii. Generalized beliefs lead to collective behavior (p33)
- iii. Value-added model (structural conduciveness, strain, beliefs, precipitating factors, mobilization, social control) (p34)
- iv. Critique: Does not theorize the complex way beliefs come to be shaped by interpretation and definition (p37)



Neil Smelser's "Theory of Collective Behavior"

The theory of collective behavior argues that social movements are a response to major interruptions in the natural operation of society. Writing on the origins of social movements under this paradigm, Gusfield (1970: 9) writes the following: "We describe social movements and collective action as responses to social change. To see them in this light emphasizes the disruptive and disturbing quality which new ideas, technologies, procedures, groups migration, and intrusions can have for people" (Dates, Reform, and Revolt, New York: John Wiley).

Social changes engenders strains on the population, and social movements is one way that people cope with the uncertainty and angst of rapid and unexpected alterations in social patterns according to Neil Smelser.



Neil Smelser's "Theory of Collective Behavior: Relative Deprivation Phase

The "Relative Deprivation" assumption of collective behavior theory assumes that a social movement is likely to develop when people perceive a gap between *what they feel their situations should be*, and *what their situations actually are*. Feeling deprived, people are more likely to form or join social movements. And these feelings of deprivations are punctuated by the strain of sudden, unexpected, and/or undesired social change. (See James Davies. 1962. "Toward a Theory of Revolution." *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1: 5-19 for a discussion of the **J-Curve Theory**. This theory argues that when an insufferable social condition improves but then looks like it might revert to its original state, the populace is more likely to take up collective behaviors -like social movements- to prevent this setback. Social movements, then, are the result of **expectations that are rising**

too fast.)

Neil Smelser's "Theory of Collective Behavior: Relative Deprivation Examples

"The history of social movements abounds with agitations on the part of groups who experience a real or apparent loss of wealth, power, or prestige. For example: (1) farmers' movements have arisen in periods of depression and declined in periods of prosperity. (2) Dissatisfactions over land distribution have also been at the root of numerous agrarian movements. (3) As we have seen, the revival of old movements and the initiation of new ones of among American laborers in the nineteenth century was closely related to their changing economic fortunes. (4) Movements to regulate speculation have been stimulated by the financial losses and market disorganization occasioned by financial crises. (5) The movement which culminated in the rise of the Progressive Party in the early twentieth century was based in large part on the apprehension that big business was acquiring too much economic and political power. (6) In the 1820s, many of the supporters of the anti-Masonry movement - among whose objectives was to prohibit Masons from holding public office -came from the ranks of ministers who felt their own religious influence waning and who resented the Masons' religious appeal." (Neil J. Smelser. 1962. *The Theory of Collective Behavior*. The Free

Six Determinants of Collective Behavior

Collective behavior are social actions, like social movements or public riots, that are a response to unstructured, ambiguous, or unstable situations. Neil Smelser, in his theory on the conditioning affect of **structural strain(s)** (*Theory of Collective Behavior* (1962), argued that collective behavior will emerge under these six conditions:

- **Structural conduciveness** (pre-existing conditions that make action likely)
- **Structural strain** (conditions that cause people to feel anxious)
- **Generalized beliefs** (beliefs about their & appropriate actions)
- **Precipitating factors** (incident that triggers collective action)
- **Mobilization for actions**

Failure of social control

Value Added Theory

According to Smelser, all social behavior is driven by one of four components of social action;

1. *Values* – general, provide legitimacy for behavior, provide framework for goal-oriented actions
2. *Norms* – guidelines for social behavior in specific circumstances – can be formal or informal
3. *Individual Mobilization for Action* – individual actions that are initiated and unfold within pre-existing social structures and institutions
4. *Situational Facilities* – means and obstacles that facilitate or hinder attainment of goals – tools, skills, knowledge

Value Added Theory (cont'd)

The 'value-added' process and the collective behavior process:

1. *Structural Conduciveness*: the conditions in society that promote this novel behavior – inequality, boredom, lack of social programs, exams, time of year (e.g. Sauble), weather conditions, time of day, presence of alcohol/drugs, social characteristics of participants (e.g. young males; the poor), demographic make-up of society
2. *Structural Strain*: driving participants to engage in unusual (non-normative) behavior – poverty, loss of a job, discrimination, natural disaster, war, sudden changes in social circumstances (anomie/anxiety), aging and retirement, etc.
3. *Generalized belief*: participants must share a common 'definition of the situation' – making a particular course of action seem logical or unavoidable. The definition of the situation may be true or untrue – what matters is that it is accepted by the participants, and forms the basis for action.
 - Hysterical beliefs (sun-church worshippers in Quebec)
 - Wish-fulfillment beliefs (stock market speculation, crazes)
 - Hostile beliefs (scapegoating, witch-hunts)
 - Norm-oriented beliefs (war on drugs, McCarthyism)
 - Value-oriented beliefs (cults, revolution, fundamentalism)

Value Added Theory (cont'd)

4. *Precipitating factors*: an occurrence that sparks the beginning of the episode of collective behavior – e.g. an arrest, or death, episode of racism, etc.
5. *Mobilization of participants*: ability to reach participants, gather them together (physically or virtually), ability to communicate, leadership
6. *Social control*: the counter-response of the agents of social control, the 'status-quo'
 - *Deterrence*: controls aimed at stopping the episode
 - *Accommodation*: acceptance of the episode
 - *Redirection*: redirect or 'co-opt' the episode

Criticisms of Value Added Theory

- Functionalist bias
- Too rigid - assumes value added approach must be completed in a set order
- May allow prediction
- Too structural

