

Chapter 2

Social Contagion Theory

Contagion Theory looks at the social events and conditions that make crowd behavior possible. The theory is most closely associated with three writers: Gustave LeBon, Robert Park, and Herbert Blumer. LeBon focused on the situational factors at work in a crowd setting. He established the roots for what became the first sociological theory of collective behavior. However, LeBon was a historian and philosopher, not a scientist. His work is loaded with his own social and political opinions. Park, a trained sociologist, restated LeBon's ideas in more social-psychological terms and explained how contagion occurs socially, within the dynamics of a group. A few years later, Blumer expanded on Park's writings and applied the concept of contagion to a broad range of group behavior. These three forms of Contagion Theory all share the basic premise that people can be made temporarily insane, irrational, or illogical within a crowd, and that they will return to normal as soon as they leave the situation.

The word "contagion" refers to a rapidly spreading infection, such as a plague or flu. It was first used in 1546 by Giralamo Fracastor, who was writing about infectious diseases. A somewhat old-fashioned term, it is now used as a metaphor for anything that spreads quickly from person to person. The first modern theory of collective behavior used contagion to describe the transmission of thoughts, ideas, or behavior from one individual to an entire group of people. Contagion theorists refined the concept, using the slightly more specific term "social contagion" to refer to this process.

The Contagion Theory of collective behavior is based upon the idea that moods and thoughts become contagious within certain types of crowds. Once infected with these thoughts, behavior becomes irrational or illogical and people do things that they normally would not do. Any individual in the crowd who already has the idea becomes the carrier. Under the right circumstances, other members of the crowd become infected. This process of contagion is not instantaneous and it can only occur under certain circumstances. First, a crowd of people must focus attention on the same event, person, or object. Crowd members begin to influence each other as soon as this common focus occurs. As excitement grows, individuals lose their self-consciousness, enter into something like a frenzy state, and cease to think before they act. Once crowd members have reached this condition, any idea or behavior offered by any member of the group is almost certain to receive support from all other members of the group. In this way, the entire crowd is reduced to the level of what LeBon called “its lowest members.”

Gustave LeBon

Gustave LeBon published *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* in France in 1895. The book is a timely account of how the entire social structure in France had irreversibly changed in almost every way over the prior one hundred years. The book became an important first step in the development of a working theory of collective behavior for several reasons. First, LeBon looked at crowd behavior in a general sense. He attempted to explain why all crowd events occur, rather than focusing on the unique, specific details of any one particular episode. Further, he included social and social-psychological factors in his writing. He did not assume that crowd members were psychologically disturbed or abnormal before they took part in the event. Instead, he focused on the factors that occur within any crowd that make it possible for normal people to engage in abnormal or even barbaric behavior. Finally, although LeBon discusses politics at great length, for the most part he does not consider it an important part of his analysis. Most writers prior to LeBon focused entirely on the details of particular episodes, blaming the event on either unique political conditions prior to the episode, or on the psychological makeup of the crowd itself. LeBon kept his analysis general and theoretical. This makes it possible to apply his ideas to any collective episode in virtually any culture.

The history of France prior to 1895 was extremely violent and tumultuous. LeBon was writing at a time when the basic structure of French society had been repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt (Harvey 1968). The French Revolution, far bloodier and more violent than the American Revolution, began in 1789, and it was not until the late 1800s that order began to be restored. During that time, France saw the rise and disintegration of numerous political leaders and governments. The final blow was the defeat of Napoleon

III by Prussia in 1870. Yet another French government was created. This new government was the beginning of true popular democratic rule in France, a time LeBon called “a period of transition and anarchy.” For the first time in French history, ordinary citizens held some political rights and power. The violent history of France and the new role of common citizens in the operation of French society led LeBon to consider the force of what he called *the mass* as an important factor in world history.

A wide variety of horribly violent episodes occurred before, during, and after the first French Revolution, including countless episodes of mob violence against individuals with little or no political power. LeBon gives detailed accounts of some of these events, including a three-week episode known as “the September Massacres” in which ordinary French citizens took it upon themselves to execute, one by one, over one thousand prisoners (mostly clergy and nobles) in Paris. He reprints eyewitness accounts of ordinary individuals hacking helpless men to death day after day, all of whom returned to their normal daily routines after the prisons had been emptied.

LeBon was trying to figure out how seemingly ordinary people could take part in such tremendous violence and then apparently revert to their normal selves within hours or even minutes. He concluded that it must be caused by the transmission of mental infection, a “contagion,” similar to the deadly plagues which had swept through Europe in 1347, 1350, 1665, and 1721 (Karlen 1995). Such epidemics were still common in LeBon’s time, so readers in 1895 would have been familiar with the concept and clearly understood the idea that LeBon meant to convey by using the term “contagion.”

LeBon’s Contagion Theory

To put it simply, LeBon believed that any time a crowd of people formed, all members of the crowd would be reduced to the level of the least intelligent, roughest, and the most violent member of the group:

The whole of the common characteristics with which heredity endows the individuals of a race constitute the genius of that race. When, however, a certain number of these individuals are gathered together in a crowd for purposes of action, observation proves that, from the mere fact of their being assembled, there result certain new psychological characteristics, which are added to the racial characteristics and differ from them at times to a very considerable degree. (1982 [1895]:v).

In other words, people act differently when they are in crowds. LeBon called this the “unconscious activity of crowds,” believing it to be beyond individual control. He argued that we rarely understand exactly what we are doing, or why, and in some situations this leads to what he called “the extreme mental inferiority of crowds.” Crowds are quick to act, do not take time to reason, and can be quite powerful. For LeBon, it is important to study crowds in order to understand how little they are affected by laws and how

greatly they are affected by any opinion loudly expressed by a member. He argued that crowds are led by emotion, not reason or ideas of fairness. A collective mind is formed, and the “psychological crowd” becomes a single entity capable of sudden and dramatic behavior.

LeBon states that a psychological crowd can be formed by people who are not in the same place at the same time. However, he never really explains how this can happen and does not give any specific examples. The only hints are some vague references to speculative crazes such as the Dutch Tulip Bulb mania of 1634 to 1636, which has since become heavily overanalyzed (see Mackay 1980 [1841] for information, see Blumer 1969 [1939], Smelser 1962, Turner and Killian 1957 for examples of analysis, see Miller 1985 for discussion of the overanalysis and misinterpretation of the mania).

The rest of LeBon’s discussion of crowds focuses entirely on groups of people collected together in the same place at the same time. The process of becoming part of a psychological crowd has three components:

1. The individuals feel invincible and anonymous.
2. Contagion occurs.
3. Members of the group enter a state of suggestibility.

First, the individuals feel *invincible and anonymous*. This allows people to engage in behavior that they would normally repress out of fear and self-consciousness. Anonymity also allows behavior without worrying about the personal consequences. Those who are normally timid become brave, feeling the power of numbers on their side. Those who are normally law-abiding might openly flaunt the law, believing that they will not be caught or punished.

Second, *contagion* occurs. In this “hypnotic phenomenon,” sentiments and actions become contagious to the extent that individuals are willing to sacrifice personal interest in the name of collective interest. For example, they might be willing to charge into a line of armed police officers or soldiers. This type of behavior does not occur because crowd members aren’t thinking, but because the welfare of the crowd as a whole becomes more important to them than their own personal comfort or safety.

LeBon does not explain how this contagion takes place. He seems to believe that it is something like mass hypnosis, although at times he describes it more as a simple reduction of all members to their “lowest common factors.” At least once, he indicates that the infection is literal, mentioning that madness is transmitted like any other infectious illness. This inability to account for how contagion occurs is the weakest aspect of LeBon’s work.

Finally, the group enters into *suggestibility*. At this point, people are not conscious of their own behavior. Their attention becomes focused on the same object or event. Those members who disagree with the impulses of the crowd are unable to resist because they feel outnumbered. Even if they try, they are ignored by the crowd unless they can provide an attractive or satisfying alternative. Crowd members are now acting without thinking and may engage in

behavior that they would find appalling in more thoughtful moments. They may also engage in heroic behavior that they would normally be afraid to try, but LeBon argues that crowds are almost always destructive.

Crowds can believe almost anything because they rely on their imagination and impulses, rather than logic. Their behavior becomes a simple reaction to emotional images that they find terrifying or attractive. They may even collectively hallucinate. For example, thousands routinely gather in places around the world and collectively “see” miracles that dispassionate observers cannot detect. LeBon cites a case where an entire ship’s crew clearly saw a large number of men floating on wreckage and waving for help. When they got closer to the “wreckage,” it turned out to be some tangled tree branches and leaves. As LeBon puts it, a “fact simultaneously verified by thousands of witnesses” is always wrong. People are most likely to perceive things incorrectly when in the presence of many others and when all members of a crowd agree on something, because their individual intellect is suppressed. Crowd members interpret things according to their expectations, not reality. Crowds cannot be led through logic or reasoning. Those who guide the crowd do so through startling images which strike the imagination of the crowd. The leaders of the various French revolts did not carefully argue their points. They declared their intentions with short, emotionally charged phrases like “death to them all!” that led to such useless but emotionally significant events as the charging of the Bastille. As LeBon points out, the Bastille held no prisoners at the time of its “liberation.” Revolutionaries stormed it because it was an emotional symbol of tyranny to many people.

Situational variables such as time of day, temperature, terrain, etc., which LeBon called *immediate factors*, only have an effect in relationship to *remote factors* such as the attitudes, beliefs, and predisposition of the crowd members. People in a crowd setting will happily ignore clear evidence which contradicts their beliefs, preferring to pretend that they are right rather than face uncertainty or admit that they might be wrong. Perhaps most important of all, the apparent approval of other crowd members can make absolutely any action seem honorable. Even when engaged in criminal behavior, participants do not think of themselves as criminals. Participants in the September Massacres boasted of having taken part, and several later demanded medals of honor for their act of “patriotism.” Under crowd circumstances, participants believe that their actions are not only justified, but glorious.

Summary

LeBon is much more of a philosopher and historian than a scientist. *The Crowd* relies on thought and conjecture rather than empirical study. Some of his concepts are quite outdated. For example, LeBon frequently uses the term “race” in a way that is much closer to our current use of such terms as culture, temperament, or ethnicity. He also refers to “women, children, and sav-

ages” as being illogical, irrational, and fickle. Such views seem horribly sexist and racist to a modern reader. Further, portions of the book focus much more on politics and revolution than on collective behavior. In spite of all this, LeBon managed to create a theory that was still in use until at least the 1950s, and which is the basis for a perspective that is still used in collective behavior research today. The next step in the development of Contagion Theory did not take long to emerge.

Robert Park

Less than ten years after the publication of *The Crowd*, Robert Park, an American studying in Germany, published his dissertation, *The Crowd and the Public* (*Masse und Publikum* 1904). Park’s ideas were later refined in “Collective Behavior,” a chapter in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* that Park co-authored with Ernest Burgess in 1921. With a writing style much more concise than LeBon’s, Park restated LeBon’s key points while also making them more empirical and much more social-psychological. The most obvious example of this is the concept of contagion. LeBon believed that people literally catch mental illness from each other, and claimed that “numerous” physicians had contracted madness from working with deranged patients. Park ignores this aspect of LeBon’s writing and instead developed a sociological explanation for how ideas spread rapidly through crowds. People imitate and reinforce each other’s behavior, and this *circular reaction* produces the effect of social contagion.

Park’s Contagion Theory

Park bases his theory on *emergent interaction*. He argues that people engage in “intense interaction” during periods of stress or disorder. Through this emergent interaction, individuals are more actively attuned to each other than they normally would be. Their behavior is social because their thoughts and behavior are influenced by the actions of every other member of the crowd. It is collective because each person acts under the influence of the group’s mood. They behave in accordance with norms that all members unconsciously accept and reinforce in each other. This interactive effect on each member by all other members leads individuals to think and act alike. If one person acts decisively, others will imitate him or her. This reinforces the behavior, making the first person believe that their action was correct and simultaneously convincing others as well. Soon, every member of the crowd has adopted the behavior. This *circular reaction* produces contagion. People reinforce each other’s behavior by mimicking it, until everyone is acting the same. They all believe that it is the correct or desirable behavior under the circumstances, because that is what everyone else is doing.

Robert Park was the first person to name collective behavior as a distinct specialty within sociology. Unfortunately, his definition of collective behavior in *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* is vague: “the behavior of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common and collective, an impulse, in other words, that is the result of social interaction” (1921: 865). This makes it sound as if almost all social behavior is collective behavior. If, for example, a large number of people decide to go to the beach because the weather is hot, few sociologists would argue that this is collective behavior even though it seems to be behavior based on a common impulse. Later in the same book Park redefined collective behavior as “the processes by which societies are disintegrated into their constituent elements and the processes by which these elements are brought together again into new relations to form new organizations and new societies” (1921: 924–25).

These obtuse definitions fail to make Park’s position clear. It is apparent when reading his work that Park’s conception of collective behavior is simple: Crowd members behave the same because they lose their ability to think clearly and rationally. Once that happens, they mindlessly imitate other crowd members. In this way, every member of the crowd becomes as violent as the most violent member, as impulsive as the most impulsive member, as irrational as the most irrational member, and so on. Park points out that at any time any member of the crowd can act as a leader or instigator simply by acting decisively. The role may pass throughout the crowd continuously, with no one person holding the position for long.

The crowd suppresses differences among members. Members all focus their attention on some event or object. They stop critically weighing alternatives before acting. They become emotional and highly suggestible. Park clearly considers crowd members irrational. Like LeBon, Park believes that crowd formation is dictated by social factors within the group. It is when members start to influence each other that they begin to form a psychological crowd. Park points out that this influence can occur even when the individuals are not in the same place at the same time. As long as individuals are somehow aware of each other’s behavior, and this directly influences their own state of mind and subsequent behavior, a crowd mentality exists. This *collective mind* comes about through the disappearance of individual self-consciousness, when feelings and thoughts of members all move in the same direction. Once this collective mind forms, a crowd exists.

As mentioned earlier, this process occurs through social interaction. Whatever other crowd members do is defined as right, and everything else is defined as wrong. Person A imitates B who imitates C who imitates A. A feedback loop is created, with all members of the group forming a sort of circle in which the behavior of each individual becomes the model for all others. This continues until the behavior is unanimous. If everyone else is throwing rocks, then throwing rocks seems like the only acceptable behavior.

Park specifically states that crowds form much more readily during times of social instability. People engage in “something akin to the milling

process in the herd” of animals (1924: 226). Park meant *milling* to refer to aimless behavior. People are agitated or excited but have no direction or purpose. It is during this stage that contagion occurs and sets the stage for suggestibility. Members of the crowd engage in mindless behavior (milling) instead of quietly thinking about what is going on. Soon, their behavior becomes impulsive.

The only concept that Park introduces that cannot be traced directly to LeBon or other writers is that of “ecstatic” or “expressive crowds.” These are crowds that do not engage in any purposeful behavior. They do not form a goal. Instead, they may engage in such behaviors as dancing, shaking, shouting, and so on, in an attempt to express their ecstatic feelings. They engage in any behavior that makes them feel united. Some types of religious revivals are good examples of ecstatic crowds. Participants may holler, dance, jump, roll around on the ground, or speak in tongues. All engage in behavior that does not occur when they are alone. Within the ecstatic crowd setting, the behavior is its own goal. A more extreme form of expressive crowds are celebratory riots. Large crowds of sports fans might destroy a stadium out of sheer joy over winning an important game. Tearing down goal posts and ripping up bleachers is not intended to produce any social or political change; people engage in the mass destruction as a way of expressing their joy.

Summary

Although trained as a philosopher, Robert Park went on to become an important force in social psychology. His writing, while circular and at times seemingly confused, clearly brought LeBon’s concept of the psychological crowd one step closer to being a solid theory of collective behavior. It is Park’s emphasis on the social nature of crowd formation and the role of interaction in contagion that sets *The Crowd and the Public* a step ahead. Perhaps more than any other theory within sociology, Contagion Theory has progressed the way that scientific theories are supposed to occur: in small steps, each scientist cutting out more and more excess while fine-tuning those concepts that turn out to be useful. The final stage of fine-tuning can be found in the writings of Herbert Blumer.

Herbert Blumer

Like Park, Blumer is an American sociologist primarily interested in small-group interaction. His conception of collective behavior is much more specific than Park’s, and includes “crowds, mobs, panics, manias, dancing crazes, stampedes, mass behavior, public opinion, propaganda, fashion, fads, social movements, revolutions, and reforms” (1969: 67). Although still a bit unfocused, Blumer’s list allows us to finally reach an idea of what all forms of collective behavior have in common from the contagion perspective: groups of people doing

things that they would not normally do because they are not thinking clearly. This makes it fundamentally different from normal group activity.

Unfortunately, Blumer's writings can easily confuse most readers. For example, he uses the term "collective behavior" to refer to normal group behavior *and* collective behavior. In "The Field of Collective Behavior" (1969), normal group activity is called "collective behavior" and crowd behavior is referred to as "*collective behavior*" (italics in original), "spontaneous collective behavior," and finally "elementary collective behavior." He then uses the term "collective behavior" to refer to the study of these types of behavior! Once the reader gets past this confusion and learns to make sense of Blumer's writing, the theory itself turns out to be a straightforward elaboration of Park's theory.

Blumer's Contagion Theory

Blumer's is the most advanced version of Contagion Theory. From Blumer's perspective, all that matters are the mechanisms that allow people to collectively break through established rules and routines of group life. Under normal circumstances, people engage in what he calls *interpretive interaction*. They interpret the words and/or actions of others and base their behavior on those interpretations. However, in a crowd situation people engage in *circular reaction*, where they react without thinking or interpreting (see Figure 2.1). Like LeBon and Park, Blumer assumes that individuals reach a point where they cease to think rationally about their behavior. The mechanisms that allow this to occur are milling, collective excitement, and social contagion.

Blumer's conception of *milling* is much more developed than Park's use of the term. Blumer believed that any collective episode begins with people behaving in an aimless and random manner. Their attention has been drawn

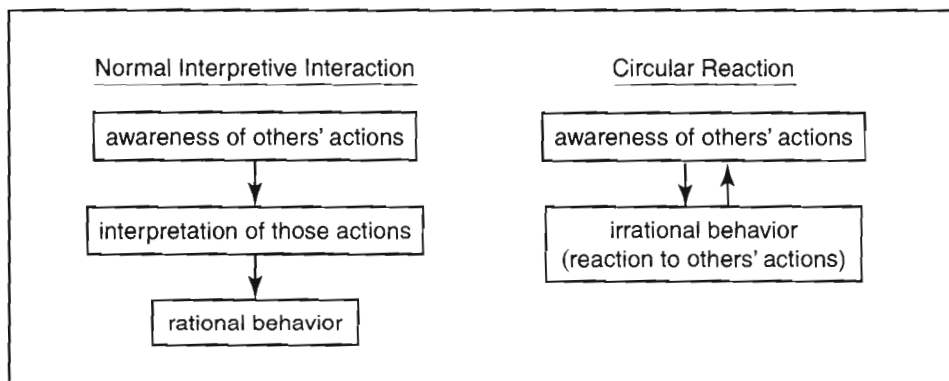


Figure 2.1 Blumer's Interpretive Interaction versus Circular Reaction

by some sort of excitement, which causes tension among the crowd. During milling, people become extremely sensitive and responsive to each other, increasingly preoccupied with each other, and decreasingly responsive to ordinary external stimuli. In other words, they pay so much attention to each other that they start to ignore the rest of the world. They respond to each other quickly and unwittingly, but do not respond to outsiders at all. This milling process prepares people to act collectively.

The next stage, *collective excitement*, is a more intense form of milling. The excited behavior of others makes it difficult to think about anything else and sets the stage for contagious behavior. People have become emotionally aroused, unstable, unresponsive to logic, and irresponsible.

At this point, *social contagion* becomes dominant. Blumer defined contagion as the rapid, unwitting, irrational dissemination of a mood, impulse, or behavior. People become so worked up, emotional, and distracted that they are unable to think clearly. Instead, they imitate the behavior of those around them. They lose their social resistance because they lose self-consciousness. They also lose the ability to interpret the actions of others. Instead of interpreting, thinking, and then acting, they quickly and blindly react to whatever goes on around them. They are more likely to follow impulses. Behavior spreads like wildfire throughout the crowd. A common focus of attention occurs, and a common set of beliefs form. This makes it possible for the crowd to act with unity and purpose (see Figure 2.2).

Blumer also introduces the concept of *the mass* as a unique type of collective social group. This is quite different from LeBon's use of the term, which refers to the general citizenry of a territory. For Blumer, a mass is different than a crowd because it is composed of anonymous individuals who do not directly interact with each other. This means that they cannot engage in milling. Instead, they are faced with exactly the opposite situation: no behavioral cues to help them decide what to do. Therefore, unlike a crowd, members of a mass tend to be extremely self-conscious. They act based in response to an object that has gained their attention and on the basis of impulses

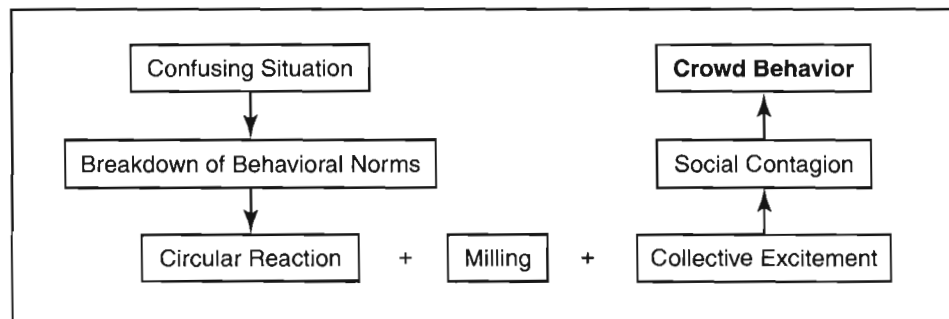


Figure 2.2 Blumer's development of collective crowd behavior

aroused by it. Examples of masses would include all the people who closely follow a murder trial on television or the individuals who decide to build bomb shelters in their back yards after watching a television documentary about communism. Masses are most often composed of detached and alienated individuals who focus on things that are interesting but puzzling. They are confused and uncertain in their actions. Although they act separately, the fact that they act in the same manner means that members of a mass can have a tremendous impact on society or social institutions. For example, if only 1 percent of the population of the United States were to decide that they needed fat-free cookies tomorrow, 2.8 million boxes of cookies would be sold in one day. This slight shift in mass taste could cause a shift in the entire food retailing industry. Each member of the mass acts to fill his or her own needs in response to vague impulses in relation to some focus of attention. It is the common focus of attention that makes the group a mass.

Summary

Although lacking focus and discipline in his writings, Blumer did manage to assemble a more complete version of Contagion Theory. In essence, he argues that crowds and masses engage in what can be called collective behavior. In crowds, milling and contagion effectively eliminate independent thought among members. This can result in behavior that is bizarre and difficult for outsiders to understand. People engage in behaviors that they would never dream of doing by themselves. In masses, independent behavior converges through collective attention. This produces uniform behavior among individuals who interpret some object of attention in the same way and decide to engage in the same course of action. In their most extreme and enduring forms, crowds and masses can eventually lead to the development of new social institutions. Blumer considered this possibility for social change and integration the most important and intriguing aspect of collective behavior.

Discussion

Contagion Theory focuses on the factors that allow individuals to engage in behavior in groups that they would never perform when alone. Starting with LeBon, the contagion theorists were primarily concerned with explaining why terrible and violent group behavior occurred. LeBon, Park, and Blumer all believed that these events are created by the breakdown of normal critical thinking and can occur any time people gather. LeBon literally believed that this breakdown is contagious, but recognized that social factors also play a role. Park expanded on the social and psychological mechanisms that make contagion possible and introduced the concept of circular reaction. Blumer argued that circular reaction is far more important than any pre-existing attitudes among crowd members. He focused almost entirely on the psychological

changes that occur when individuals find themselves in crowd situations. Blumer also expanded the concept of collective behavior to include the mass. He argued that members of a mass operate under a different set of stresses than members of a crowd, and therefore engage in collective behavior for different reasons.

Core Assumptions

All contagion theorists assume that collective behavior occurs because of the mental state of participants. This social-psychological focus carries over into the next theory that we are going to examine in Chapter 3, “The Emergent Norm Perspective.”

The contagion theorists also share the assumption that members of collective behavior crowds are irrational, experience a loss of self-control, and act without thinking. Members are literally infected with the bad ideas of others. LeBon, Park, and Blumer all believe that the entire crowd can be reduced to the level of the least intelligent, most violent member of the group. This social contagion allows otherwise good people to do radical or terrible things.

Evaluation

The contagion theory is no longer used in modern collective behavior research for a few reasons. The theory itself is sometimes vague and contradictory. Neither Park nor Blumer ever seem to be able to develop a concise, complete definition of what collective behavior is, and both spend more time discussing exceptions than analyzing it. When using Blumer’s version, for example, researchers would be forced to choose between more than one way to classify the type of collective behavior, more than one set of specifications they should use to analyze it, and so on. This makes it difficult to use the theory at all. For example, imagine a biologist trying to study a particular insect. The first thing she would want to do is place the new species into a specific category based on particular characteristics. Now, imagine that there are several different classification schemas, and the unknown insect can be placed into different categories, depending on which schema is used. Before the insect (or collective episode) can be analyzed, it has to be placed into an understood category. This allows other researchers to understand what makes that example similar to other, known examples as well as what makes it different or unique.

In the end, sociologists relying on Contagion Theory are forced to conclude that the participants lost their ability to reason. Research has failed to support this assertion. First-hand observation by Turner and Killian (Chapter 3), McPhail (Chapter 5), and others revealed that individual behavior within a crowd is neither as universal nor as irrational as the Contagion theorists believed.

More than any other factor, however, it is the development of the Emergent Norm perspective that sealed Contagion Theory's fate. Turner and Kilian (to be discussed in the next chapter) succeeded in borrowing and modifying the most useful aspects of Contagion Theory while eliminating the assumption that participants behave irrationally. As researchers have studied more and more episodes of collective behavior over the decades, exceptions to social contagion have become increasingly obvious. In order to continue, someone had to find a way past the assumption that bad thoughts are contagious like a germ or a virus.