Theories of Collective Behaviour

From CB to SM
The Field of Collective Behaviour

• Began with G. LeBon and was developed by symbolic interactionists.

• Many theories have developed to explain both collective behaviours and social movements.
Theoretical Foundations

• **What is a theory?** An explanation for a general class of phenomena.
• In contrast to a theory, a paradigm or perspective rarely spells out issues it merely suggests how the phenomenon can be looked at.
Three Theories of Collective Behaviour

1. CONTAGION - LE BONN
   functionalism

2. CONVERGENCE - Alport (1924)
   symbolic interaction

3. Emergent Norms - Turner and Killian
   functionalism & interaction
1. **Contagion Theory**

- Developed by **Gustav Lebon** - a major precursor of the field.
- Lebon subscribed to the **law of mental unity**.
- In **The Crowd (1897)** every individual is like an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his/her own will.
LeBon: A French Aristocrat

- The Crowd
- Crowd and group mind
- The whole is greater than the sum of its parts
- Crowds take on a life of their own
- Collective consciousness (Durkheim)
Le Bon Contagion

• Le Bon’s argued **crowds foster anonymity** and sometimes generate emotion…

• "**the madding crowd**" takes on a life of its own, apart from the thoughts and intentions of members.
3 Stages

- Le Bon held that crowds existed in three stages:
  - submergence,
  - contagion,
  - and suggestion. 21
• This is quite heavily induced by the anonymity of the crowd.

• **Contagion** refers to the propensity for individuals in a crowd to unquestioningly follow the predominant ideas and emotions of the crowd.
• In Le Bon's view, this effect is capable of spreading between "submerged" individuals much like a disease.

• **Suggestion** refers to the period in which the ideas and emotions of the crowd are primarily drawn from a shared racial unconscious.
• This behavior comes from an archaic shared unconscious and is therefore uncivilized in nature.

• It is limited by the moral and cognitive abilities of the least capable members
• Le Bon believed that crowds could be a powerful force only for destruction.
• Additionally, Le Bon and others have indicated that crowd members feel a lessened sense of legal culpability, due to the difficulty in prosecuting individual members of a mob.¹
• In many ways, his ideas sound like Durkheim.

• He suggests that while crowds can be capable of disruption and chaos.

• They are also capable of lofty acts of devotion and sacrifice. (see: altruistic suicide)
• Overwhelmingly, however, LeBon emphasized the **negative side** of crowds such as riots in the streets, looting, violent strikes, revolutions etc.
• It is important to remember that LeBon was one of many autocratic, right-wing, anti-democratic thinkers who lived in France during the Paris Commune 1871.

• The Paris Commune Marx called the “first modern revolution”
• **LeBon’s theory** is not taken that seriously today.

• **Simple contagion** suggests only “a gathering of individuals” who lack a common sentiment or focus….They lose their individualities and become overtaken by group mind.
• LeBon’s theory gave rise to the transformation hypothesis in which one person or a group of person’s infect others with an intense mood.

• The result is an epidemic of collective excitement
Contagion Theory

• However, it must be noted that Le Bon often referred to the cliché of the irrational crowd,
• He tended to describe crowds as (irrational and criminal groups),
• He considered himself the founder of "crowd psychology"
Criticisms

• a. **He did not elucidate** the precise mechanism by which collectivities acquire “group mind”…
b. He did suggest that group mind has something to do with urbanization and capitalism but he was not specific.
c. It was Robert Park and Herbert Blumer (specifically Blumer) of the Chicago School who adds that group mind becomes contagious as a result of: a general social unrest that becomes reciprocal-
For Park and Blumer

• **Social unrest** gives rise to interactions such as **milling**, **collective excitement** and **social contagion**
While contagion theory makes the assumption that all like-minded individuals will be swept away by others… Converge in a crowd.
Freudian theory

• Sigmund Freud's crowd behavior theory primarily consists of the idea that becoming a member of a crowd serves to unlock the unconscious mind.
• This occurs because the super-ego, or moral center of consciousness, is displaced by the larger crowd, to be replaced by a charismatic crowd leader.
• McDougall argues similarly to Freud, saying that *simplistic emotions* are widespread, and complex emotions are rarer.
• In a crowd, the overall shared emotional experience reverts to the least common denominator (LCD), leading to primitive levels of emotional expression.
• This organizational structure is that of the "primal horde" – pre-civilized society - and Freud states that one must rebel against the leader (re-instate the individual morality) in order to escape from it.
Moscovici expanded on this idea, discussing how **dictators** such as Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin have used mass psychology to place themselves in this "horde leader" position.
Convergence theory

• ...also known as the predisposition hypothesis, holds that the way people act in crowds is an expression or outgrowth of whom they are ordinarily associated.
Developed by Floyd Allport (1924) and later expanded upon by Neil Miller and John Dollard (1941) as "Learning Theory,"
• …the central argument of all convergence theories is that collective behavior reveals the otherwise hidden tendencies of the individuals who take part in the episode.
Convergence Theory

• **Convergence theory** holds that crowd behavior is not a product of the crowd itself, but is carried into the crowd by particular individuals.

• Thus, crowds amount to a convergence of like-minded individuals.
• Being in a crowd simply gives them an excuse to “reveal their true selves”…..An early, crude version of convergence theory maintained that all people have the potential to engage in collective behaviour because in doing so, they are expressing their savage and brutal instincts.

• -young, aggressive = violence = mosh pit.
• I.e. Why do collective behaviours happen when rock concerts are cancelled and not operas.

• To Lebon, all humans are basically animals in disguise…(also see functionalism and Hobbes)
Or are there cultural aspects?

• A more sophisticated version of convergence theory holds that certain kinds of people have the propensity to engage in certain kinds of behaviour.

• I.e., Certain people who go to rock concerts. Moshpits occur among like-minded individuals.
Crit’s of Convergence

• a. it focuses on disruption and irrational examples (like contagion) ; convergence theorists have not examined the broad range of collective behaviours
b. never bothered to look at examples that contradict their views
c. assumes that ‘like minded’ people rely on crowd animinity-this has been found to be false

• Current studies find that crowds are more heterogenous than convergence theorist suggest
Emergent Norm Theory

• MORE COMPLEX THAN EITHER CONTAGION OR CONVERGENCE THEORIES
Irrational Crowds?

- Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian developed the *emergent-norm* theory of crowd dynamics.

- These researchers concede that social behavior is never entirely predictable, but neither are *crowds irrational*.
• If similar interests may draw people together, distinctive patterns of behavior may emerge in the crowd itself.
Emergent Norm Theory

- Decision-making, then, plays a major role in crowd behavior, although casual observers of a crowd may not realize it.
- **Emergent-norm theory** points out that people in a crowd ‘take on different roles’.
- Some step forward as leaders; others become lieutenants, rank-and-file followers, inactive bystanders or even opponents.
Crowds as Emergent

• Crowds begin as collectivities, acting, and protest crowds – norms may be vague and changing as when, say, one person at a rock concert holds up a lit cigarette lighter to signal praise for the performers, followed by others. In short, people in crowds make their own rules as they go along.
Criticisms and Evidence

- Berk (1974) has used game theory to suggest that even during a panic in a burning theatre actors may conduct themselves rationally.
- This is a striking suggestion, given that panics have been described as the purest form of collective behaviour.
Berk

- Berk contends that 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.
Clark McPhail

- Clark McPhail, mentioned above, has examined many actual human gatherings. In , he concludes that such assemblies can be seen as lying along a number of dimensions, and that traditional stereotypes of emotionality and unanimity often do not describe what happens
Contemporary Theories CB’s

- **Takes into account:**
  - Localized Collectivities
  - Dispersed Collectivities
  - Types of Crowds
  - Social Change
Localized Collectivities

• Crowds are unorganized collections of people who gather temporarily for a particular cause.
Dispersed Collectivities

• Are those who gather in a variety of places at the same time

• Dispersed collectives may have different appearances
Types of Crowds include

1. Casual crowds,
2. conventional crowds,
3. expressive crowds,
4. Acting Crowd
5. Angry Mob
Collective Behaviour Studies

- A key component of all collective behaviour theories is Social Change.
Social Change

• Can be defined as changes in typical features of society (eg. Institutions, norms and values) over time.

• **Social change** is on-going and inevitable.

• I.e. Changes to notions of deviance, changes in clothing preference etc.
Social Change

- Often results from collective behaviours
- Collective behaviours are not regulated by normal rules and expectations.

- Therefore, something novel happens. I.e Tianaman Square..
Social Change

• Is sometimes predictable, for example, when a country goes to war.

• However, much of social change is unpredictable such as the **unintended consequences** of computers.
Social Change

• One thing is certain…the rate of social change is accelerating…

• Some **forces of social change** include: Technology, physical environments, demographic shifts, economic competition, war, ideas, government
Social Movements

• Are one type of Collective Behaviour.

• They comprise groups and individuals that provide continuous and organized efforts to bring about-or- resist social change.
• The emergence of grassroots social movements such as Greenpeace are proof that when people come together, they can effect change.
Features of Strong Social Movements

• 1. An effective organizational capacity
• 2. A clear position on their grievances and goals
• 3. Active engagement with existing power structures
Social Movements emerge from CBs

• CBS include:
• Riots, protest crowds, flash mobs, mass hysteria, disaster behaviours, fads, crazes,
Social Movements

• Are highly structured rational and enduring forms of collective behaviour.
• Most social movements are established to either stimulate or resist change.
Doherty (2002)

- **Four characteristics** of those who participate in social movements:
  - 1. They have a common identity
  - 2. They act at least partly outside traditional political institutions
  - 3. They rely on non-institutional networks of interaction
  - 4. They reject dominant forms of power
Two forms of Social Movements

• 1. Informal social movements generally emerge in oppositions to a specific social issue.

• They generally possess a charismatic leader

• They often lack in resources but make it up in terms of passion.
Two forms of Social Movements

2. Formal Social Movements

- Large organizations that have existed for a long time
- Often have large bureaucratic structures and operate outside the mainstream NGOs
- These movements such as Greenpeace or pro-choice are well integrated into society
Types of Movements

• Revolutionary—peaceful (Quebec) or violent (Cuba)

• Reformist—Civil Rights and MADD

• Reactionary—seek to reverse direction I.e Henry Morgantaller Order of Canada

• Religious—Moonies, Scientology
Life Cycle of Social Movements

1. Emergence
2. Coalescence
3. Bureacratic/Institutional
4. Decline
Sociological Theories of Social Movements

• Sociologist offer a number of theories to explain:

1. **when** social movements are likely to occur

2. **And why** people are attracted to join them
Relative Deprivation Theory

• Holds that the origin of social movements resides in discontent and those who are dissatisfied with present conditions.

• Subjective comparison, relative poverty or when racial, ethnic, sexual, physical differences feel treated unfairly
Crits of R.D theory

• 1. Why does SM rarely happen among the poorest people?
• 2. Relative deprivation is difficult to measure.
• 3. Theory is less popular now than in the 1960s
Mass Society Theory

- Can be traced back to Durkheim’s notion of organic solidarity.
- The forces of industrialization and urbanization leave people feeling disattached.
- Dimished ties…See Kornhauser (1959)
Crits of Mass Society Theory

• 1. It has been found (Thomson, 2005) that people do not loose ties in modern contexts-kinship and social solidarity may be found in mass society

• 2. Why is it that people who feel most connected are more likely to join with others…I.e Jack Layton..
Value Added Theory

• 1963 Neil Smelser a functionalist
• His value added theory holds that six conditions must be met before a social movement can begin.
Value Added: Six Conditions

1. **Structural Conduciveness** - roadblock Kansake Reserve - goal course on Native burial ground

2. **Structural Strain** - a disturbance to a smooth functioning society that can’t be tolerated.. Oka Crisis.
3. **Growth of a generalized belief** - understanding of how a movement will solve the problem - Civil Rights

4. **Precipitating incident** - ie Rosa Parks bus incident
5. **Mobilization to Action**-readiness for action, begin to act-bus boycott, lunch counter boycott.

6. **Social Control**-involvement of formal control agents such as police, politicians etc. The official response then invokes a collective response (how to work in the system?)
Resource Mobilization Theory

• A New theory - last 20 years - investigates how social movements gather resources to further their goals.

• Successful movements depend on how members can gather and use resources.
Resource Mobilization Theory

• Rudimentary resources such as computers, office space, photocopieters are easy to gather

• Greater difficulty in finding the right people-most movements require a charismatic leader
Crit’s of RMT

• It focuses too heavily on resources, not enough on movement goals

• Fails to account for the influence of average people and their role in the movement
Political Process Theory

- Overlaps with RMT, political process theory emphasizes the dynamic relationship between social movement organizations and the larger political economic order.
- Doug McAdam (1999) examines the connection between local, prov and federal gov’ts and how they react to SMs.
• Some systems are more favourable to SMs than others.

• **Two findings:**
  
  1. SMs are more likely to emerge in democratic societies
  
  2. Weak governments are more vulnerable to SMs
Crits

- **Political process theory** fails to look at the realities of information flow.
- Most gov’ts do not provide SMs with practical information to further efforts.
- The formal political actually obstructs the process in many cases. (Occupy)
Summary

• Theories of Collective Behaviours and Social Movements are connected.

• Each concern with how social change is possible

• CB’s theories more about crowds, social movement theories more about complex organization
Summary

- **Social Movements** are one form of collective behaviour-more formal and more organized than fad, riots, spontaneous outburst etc
- Social movement produce social change
- Various theories exists to illustrate how SMs do this.