21.1A: Social Change

Collective behavior can result in social change through the formation of cohesive social movements.

Learning Objectives

- Analyze a real-life example, such as the Voting Rights Act, in terms of social change

Key Points

- Collective behavior can be distinguished from group behavior, and it is also distinct from deviant and conforming actions.
- Collective behavior can be observed in four types of groupings of people: the crowd, the mass, the public, and social movements, although other phenomena, such as fads and rumors, are also considered to be forms of collective behavior.
- Studying collective behavior improves our understanding of how to organize social movements to initiate social change.
- There are two main reasons for studying collective behavior. First, to reduce the damage caused by events such as natural disasters and riots by understanding how people behave in these situations; second, studying collective behavior improves our understanding of how to organize social movements in order to initiate social change.
- A crowd is an assembly of people who come together with a shared purpose or intent, and have an influence over one another. The four type of crowds, as identified by Herbert Blumer, are casual, conventional, expressive and acting. Diffuse crowds are crowds that are scattered across large distances.
- Posited by Gustave Lebon in 1896, contagion theory asserts that crowds have a hypnotic influence over their members, which, combined with the anonymity that individuals in a crowd can enjoy, leads to irrational and emotional behavior.
- Convergence Theory proposes that crowd behavior is the product of like-minded individuals coming together and is
not an inherent characteristic of the crowd itself.

- A combination of the theories of convergence and contagion, the emergent-norm theory states that crowd behavior is the product of the convergence of like-minded people, the sense of anonymity in a crowd and shared emotions. Underlying this theory is the symbolic-interactionist perspective.

- Understanding crowds as “gatherings,” which are temporary and are formed by an assembling process, allows us to create a distinction between what causes people to gather and what actions they take once they have gathered. Moreover, seeing crowds as gatherings also refutes the idea that crowds can impair judgment.

- A panic is a sudden terror which dominates thinking and can affect groups of people. A moral panic is a mass movement that arises when an individual or group, frequently a minority or subculture, is perceived to be a threat to society.

- A riot is a form of civil disorder that is characterized by disorganized groups lashing out and disturbing the peace in a sudden and intense rash of violence, vandalism or other crime. Riots typically reflect grievance or a sense of dissatisfaction with existing conditions. Unlike a mob, a riot is violent crowd behavior without a specific objective.

- “Mass hysteria” is a phrase used to describe a large group of people who share a mental state of fear or anxiety.

- A fad is a fashion that gains salience quickly in a culture or subculture, and remains popular for a brief period of time before losing its appeal dramatically.

- A rumor is an unverified account or explanation of events circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue in public concern.

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### Key Terms

- **riot**: Wanton or unrestrained behavior; uproar; tumult.

- **Collective behavior**: The expression 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 refers to social processes and events that do not reflect existing social structure (laws, conventions, and institutions), as they emerge in a “spontaneous” way. Collective behavior might also be defined as action that is neither conforming (in which actors follow prevailing norms) nor deviant (in which actors violate those norms). Rather, 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.

Examples of collective behavior include: religious revival meetings (like those depicted in the documentary *Marjoe*), a panic in a burning theater (e.g., the Kentucky Beverly Hills Supper Club fire), a sudden widespread interest in a website (e.g., MySpace) or clothing item (e.g., WristStrong bracelets), a collective social movement to improve the environment (e.g., Greenpeace), or the rapid spread of rumors (e.g., that Barack Obama is Muslim or not a US citizen). These diverse actions fall within the area sociologists call collective behavior.

Collective behavior differs from group behavior in three ways:

- Collective behavior involves limited and short-lived social interactions, while groups tend to remain together longer.

- Collective behavior has no clear social boundaries; anyone can be a member of the collective, while group membership is usually more discriminative.

- Collective behavior generates weak and unconventional norms, while groups tend to have stronger and more conventional norms.
Traditionally in sociology, collective behavior is displayed by four types of groupings of people: the crowd, the public, the mass, and the social movement. While there is debate over what should be included under the label of "collective behavior" among sociologists today, often included are additional behaviors like: rumors, riots, and fads.

**Types of Social Movements:** The four types of social movements, as described by cultural anthropologist David Aberle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who is changed?</th>
<th>How much change?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td>Radical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individuals</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Redemptive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reformative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Revolutionary</td>
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</tbody>
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Based on Aberle (1966)

**Collective Behavior and Social Change**

Collective behavior can actually change elements of society. This is the component of collective behavior known as “social movements.”

On March 7, 1965, African American leaders led a march of 600 people in an attempt to walk the 54 miles (87 km) from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. Only six blocks into the march, however, state troopers and local law enforcement attacked the peaceful demonstrators with billy clubs, tear gas, rubber tubes wrapped in barbed wire, and bull whips. They drove the marchers back to Selma. The national broadcast showing footage of lawmen attacking unresisting marchers seeking the right to vote provoked a national response. Eight days after the first march, Lyndon Johnson delivered a televised address to garner support for the voting rights bill he had sent to Congress. In it he stated:

> But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.

Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on August 6. The 1965 Act suspended poll taxes, literacy tests, and other subjective voter tests. It authorized Federal supervision of voter registration in states and individual voting districts where such tests were being used. The act had an immediate and positive impact for African Americans. Within months of its passage, 250,000 new black voters had been registered. Within four years, voter registration in the South had more than doubled.

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Boundless)/21%3A_Social_Change/21.01%3A_...
Understanding how to organize a social movement to pursue social change is one of the areas studied by sociologists. The insights gained from these studies can provide movement members the tools they need to succeed.

**Stages of social movements**

![Stages of Social Movements](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stages_of_social_movements.svg)

Adapted from Blumer (1969), Mauss (1975), and Tilly (1978)

**Stages of Social Movements**: The different stages of social movements, as adapted from Blumer (1969), Mauss (1975) and Tilly (1978)

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**Riots**

A riot is a form of civil disorder characterized by disorganized groups lashing out in a sudden and intense rash of violence, vandalism, or other crime. While individuals may attempt to lead or control a riot, riots are typically chaotic and exhibit herd-like behavior. Riots often occur in reaction to a perceived grievance or out of dissent. Historically, riots have occurred due to poor working or living conditions, government oppression, taxation or conscription, conflicts between races or religions, the outcome of a sporting event, or frustration with legal channels through which to air grievances. Riots typically involve vandalism and the destruction of private and public property. Riots, while destructive, have often played a role in social change.

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