Collective Behavior

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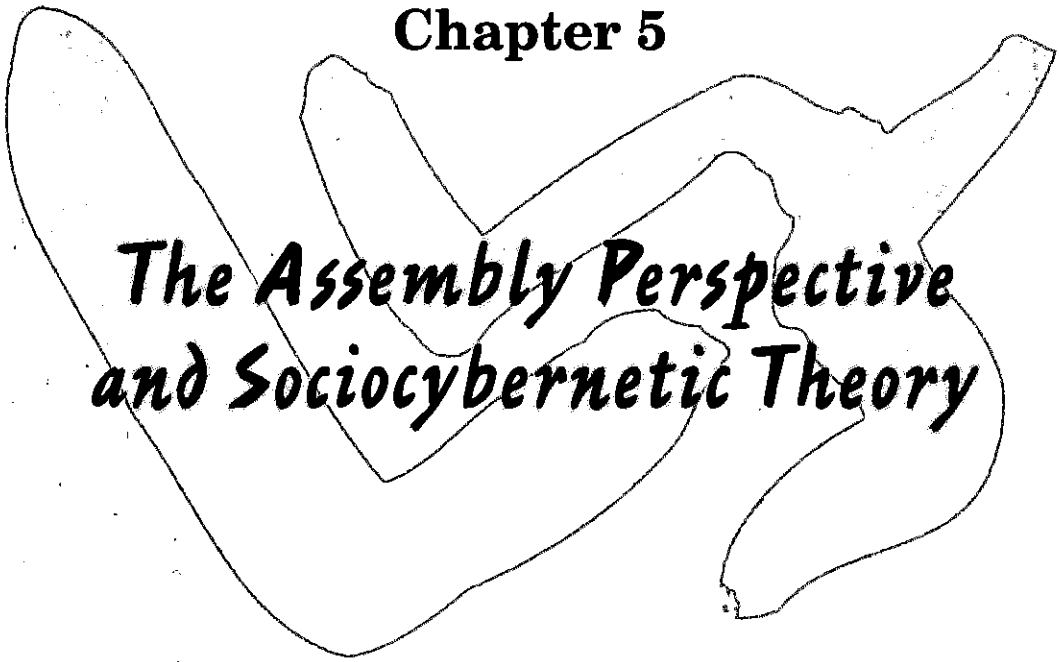
Chapter 5



The Assembly Perspective and Sociocybernetic Theory

Since the late 1960s, Clark McPhail has been actively engaged in the first-hand study and documentation of public gatherings. Working with colleagues and students, McPhail has carefully observed hundreds, perhaps thousands of events such as public rallies, protests, and sporting events (see, for example, McPhail 1994). Based on these observations, he has developed an approach to collective behavior that in some ways is fundamentally different from any other theorist. McPhail views collective behavior as any organization or coordination of individual activity. In daily life, people frequently come together and form temporary groups. Within these gatherings they somehow manage to coordinate their behavior to allow everyone to meet their goals. McPhail is interested in how the processes of assembling gatherings and coordination of behavior are accomplished. Unlike almost all other theorists of collective behavior, he is not trying to explain atypical behavior like fads, crazes, riots, or lynchings. Instead, he attempts to construct a theory that can explain *all* group behavior, including those rare instances when behavior does not follow expectations. He therefore focuses almost all of his attention on group behavior that is typical, routine, and/or ritualized.

There are several different labels for McPhail's perspective. It is often called the Social Interactionist/Behaviorist (SBI) perspective because the theory's roots are clearly tied to Symbolic Interactionism (like the Emergent Norm Perspective) and also to Psychological Behaviorism. Behaviorism looks

at human behavior from a mechanical perspective, breaking down our thoughts, feelings, and behavior into a series of small decisions and actions. Both of these outlooks are evident in McPhail's writings. Others simply refer to McPhail's approach as the Assembly Perspective because of the intense focus on the patterns by which humans *assemble* into gatherings. McPhail himself now refers to his theory as the Sociocybernetic Theory of Collective Action. This label will be explained in-depth later in this chapter.

McPhail argues that:

1. Individuals are not driven mad by crowds, and do not lose cognitive control during group events.
2. Individuals are not compelled to participate in collective behavior by some "madness-in-common." No psychological condition, cognitive style, or predisposition distinguishes participants from nonparticipants.
3. The majority of behaviors in crowds are neither universal within the group nor "mad." The vast majority of the time that people come together in large gatherings they engage in perfectly normal, expected behavior.

These conclusions are based on years of carefully documented, firsthand research. As conclusion number #3 indicates, McPhail does not restrict himself to the study of unusual or unexpected group behavior. This focus on typical, routine group behavior is the heart of the Assembly Perspective. He argues that all gatherings, whether peaceful and organized or violent and chaotic, operate the same way. An organized event that goes exactly as planned is just as interesting to him as a spontaneous riot. McPhail studies planned, routine events because they occur much more often than atypical episodes. From his perspective atypical episodes are rare and unusual and not worthy of special study. He is interested in assembling processes, assembled gatherings, and dispersal processes.

Assembling Processes

The first stage of any gathering is the assembly process. In order to take part in any gathering, participants must receive assembling instructions, have access to the event location, and not be deflected or distracted from the goal of taking part (see Figure 5.1).

Assembling Instructions

Assembling instructions can be verbal ("Hey, let's go see the parade tomorrow at noon") or written ("Main Street will be closed from 11:00 A.M. until 2:00 P.M. Saturday for the Harvest Days parade"). They can be received in person, over the telephone, or through media sources such as the radio, television, and newspapers. McPhail states that we are most likely to receive as-

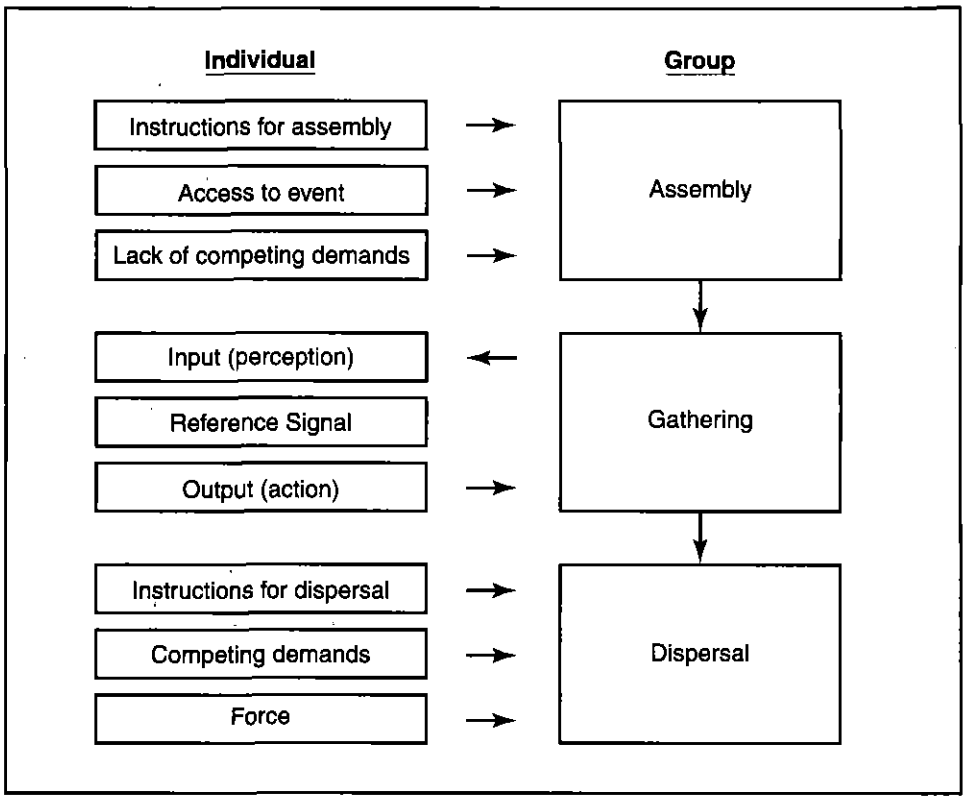


Figure 5.1 The stages of Collective Action according to the Assembly Perspective

sembling instructions informally through friends and acquaintances. In fact, most people go to gatherings with people they know. The more "nudges" from friends, media, and so on, an individual receives, the more likely he or she is to make an effort to attend the event.

Access

Access is a simple variable. People either have a way of getting to an event, or they do not. The more difficult it is for a particular individual to get to the location of an event, the less likely they are to attend. An individual cannot become part of a gathering if he or she has no way of getting to the event.

Distractions

Competing desires or demands for time and attention reduce the likelihood that an individual will attend a particular event. For example, if you have an important exam on Friday, you may be less likely to go to a party or concert

on Thursday. Also, many individuals who intend to go to a particular event end up doing something else instead. A group of friends on their way to a political rally may encounter someone they know who invites them to a party. A student on her way to the library may bump into friends on their way to a campus demonstration. In either of these scenarios, the person must choose between the event they originally wanted to attend and the newly offered social opportunity. Anything that distracts people from attending or demands their time and attention makes their attendance less likely.

Assembled Gatherings

It is important to understand that McPhail claims that crowd behavior is not at all like many earlier social theorists believed it to be. He argues that crowd behavior is almost never coordinated or unanimous. The overwhelming majority of gatherings involve many small groups of people who know each other and who gather in the same place at the same time in order to take part in expected behavior as part of a large group. Rarely do all members of the gathering behave exactly alike, and their attention is usually on each other as much as it is on the focus of the event itself. This applies to such routine and uneventful activities as going to a sporting event, taking part in a social protest, or attending a large college class.

Dispersal Processes

As McPhail points out, most gatherings disperse (break up) routinely in response to instructions from others, because of competing demands, or by force. It is extremely rare for violence or panic to break out. For instance, when a concert or football game is over, fans usually leave in an orderly manner.

Instructions for Dispersal

A common way for gatherings to disperse is at the instruction of a crowd member or organizer. "Go home people, it's over," "We're closing in ten minutes," and "Come on, let's go home" are all examples of this type of instruction. These instructions can be general or specific ("Please exit through the south door in an orderly manner"). Some members of the gathering may go home, while others may choose to reassemble somewhere else. It is common for a small percentage of sports spectators to gather at a bar or restaurant near the stadium after the game. Groups of friends and relatives may have scheduled a party or cookout at one of their homes after a parade or other public event. Some concert venues schedule after-show parties at other locations. Each of these is an example of large gatherings receiving instructions

for dispersal and simultaneously receiving assembling instructions for smaller gatherings.

Competing Demands

Sometimes members of the gathering leave simply because something else is going to start somewhere else: Spectators at a house fire might want to get home to eat dinner. Students listening to a campus speaker may have to leave at a certain time to take a midterm exam. Although McPhail does not mention this in his writings, many riots end when rioters and looters go home to sleep or go to work. Competing demands make an individual more likely to leave any type of gathering. Those members who have nothing else to do and nowhere else to go are much more likely to stay until forced to leave.

Force

Although most police forces do not have much experience handling large gatherings, it is often left to them to disperse a crowd that is deemed unruly, too large, or in violation of some law or ordinance. Even in these conditions of enforced dispersal, most gatherings quietly and orderly move to a different location or break up. Alternative instructions ("We aren't hurting anyone. We're staying right here!") are most likely to be given by two categories of individuals. Those who have traveled the farthest to attend the gathering have the most effort invested and may therefore want to keep the gathering together. Those with the most free time on their hands have no competing demands. Both categories of participants may have nowhere else to go, and both may be motivated to keep the gathering together.

This Assembly Perspective has been modified over the years by McPhail himself. He has created a more specifically formulated theory, which he calls the Sociocybernetic Theory of Collective Action.

The Sociocybernetic Process

McPhail's approach is truly an attempt to alter the study of collective behavior. He argues that other theorists have tried to come too far, too fast. They have tried to explain something that has not been carefully described, defined, and catalogued. In what he sees as an attempt to make up for this failure on the part of other sociologists, McPhail has spent a great deal of time and attention actually observing public gatherings all over the United States, particularly campus crowds and demonstrations. His focus has been on the components that make collective action possible. Traditional collective behavior such as riots, panics, and crazes are far too rare and unusual to warrant special attention. McPhail argues that all public gatherings should be examined using the same criteria.

Much of what McPhail writes may seem confusing at first. This is because certain terms are used in ways that might seem odd to a student of collective behavior. The theory is built on terms and definitions that are potentially confusing to the reader because McPhail's approach to collective behavior is so different from all of the other theories that we have analyzed. Some of the terms are commonly used by other collective behavior researchers, but not with the same meaning that McPhail intends.

Gatherings

McPhail (1991, 1997) disregards the term "crowd," preferring the term *gatherings*. A gathering is any number of people in the same place at the same time. A gathering forms any time people are around each other. The use of this term in place of more precise labels is revealing: McPhail only seeks to explain behavior that occurs in a face-to-face setting. This means that fads, crazes, and various other forms of collective behavior that occur over a period of time throughout a wide area are of no interest to McPhail. He does not attempt to define, classify, or explain them. Most other theorists attempt to explain these activities. McPhail considers them beyond the scope of his theory.

Collective Behavior/Collective Action

In spite of his statements that "nothing is intrinsically collective behavior" and "definitions are arbitrary" (1991: 154), McPhail develops what he calls "a working definition of collective behavior":

- two or more persons
- engaged in one or more behaviors (e.g., locomotion, orientation, vocalization, verbalization, gesticulation, and/or manipulation)
- judged common or concerted
- on one or more dimensions (e.g., direction, velocity, tempo, or substantive content) (1991: 159)

Since that time, he has completely abandoned the term collective behavior in favor of the term "collective action" (McPhail 1997).

Any time two or more people are in the same place at the same time, they form a gathering. As soon as two or more of them engage in any behavior that is the same (common) or requires cooperation (concerted), it is collective behavior. All that is required is that the behavior appears to be in synch in direction, speed, or the nature of the behavior itself. For example, two people walking on a sidewalk may be heading in the same direction at the same velocity. Members of a concert audience may chant "Encore!" at the same rate. Other pedestrians or chanting fans match each of these behaviors (walking and chanting) in substantive content.

Although at first glance this may seem like a specific definition, careful analysis reveals several problems. There is the issue of judging behavior of others to be "common or concerted." Judged by whom? By what criteria? McPhail criticizes other theorists for relying on their own judgment when evaluating the actions of others, but in this definition he has made a similar mistake himself. Much more importantly, this definition effectively classifies as "collective behavior" or "collective action" *any* behavior engaged in by *any* two or more people at the same time. Using this definition, three people walking in the same direction on a sidewalk are engaged in collective behavior because their behavior is common in direction and velocity. A person buying a movie ticket from a ticket agent is an example of collective behavior, since the behavior of the buyer and seller is cooperative (concerted). Two drivers stopped for a red light constitute collective behavior. Two people fighting, making love, or sitting on a park bench are now engaged in collective behavior. All of these are examples of two or more people engaged in common or concerted behavior that is the same in nature, direction, or speed. Any time two or more people engage in the same behavior, even if they are unaware of each other and are therefore not influenced by each other, it's collective behavior. Any time two or more people cooperate in any way, they are engaged in collective behavior.

By creating such a broad definition of collective behavior and "collective action," McPhail has made it virtually impossible to distinguish between routine, ritualized, organized behavior, and what is more commonly referred to as collective behavior by most sociologists. McPhail justifies this by his repeated observation that most group behavior is peaceful and orderly. He does not seem to consider that peaceful and orderly group behavior is already intensely examined within a variety of general sociological theories. Social psychologists have intensely studied such normative group behavior for decades (see, for example, Allport 1969). McPhail attempts to classify and define *all* group behaviors as collective behavior. Only one small portion of such behavior is unusual, unexpected, or outside of social norms and he considers them to be a minor variance. He has gone so far as to argue that the concept of collective behavior itself should be abandoned (McPhail 1997). However, McPhail's current definition of "collective action" is the same as the definition of collective behavior discussed above.

Cybernetic Systems

"Cybernetic" means self-governing (see Figure 5.2). For example, a furnace thermostat is self-governing. When the temperature drops below a chosen level, the thermostat automatically turns on the furnace. When the temperature reaches a chosen level, it shuts the furnace off. The thermostat and furnace are part of a self-governing system. The thermostat compares the current room temperature (input) to the temperature setting (reference point) and decides whether or not the furnace needs to run. It can continue to

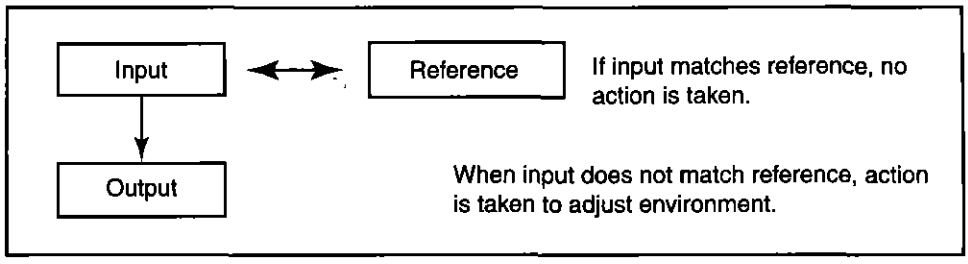


Figure 5.2 A Cybernetic (self-regulating) System

maintain the room temperature for a long period of time without any direct assistance from outsiders.

When applying this concept to human behavior, McPhail states that:

> The basic idea is that human beings are purposive actors and that, unless physically constrained (a phenomenon that sometimes occurs in very dense crowds), they control their own behavior by means of self-instructions regarding the achievement of their goals and objectives (1991: xxv).

This is an obtuse way of stating something simple: People have expectations and preferences. For McPhail, these expectations are a reference point against which we constantly measure our condition. Human behavior is viewed as a constant process of making adjustments in behavior (output) in order to match our perceptions (input) to our desired state (reference signals) (see Figure 5.3). Whenever possible, we engage in behavior that we believe will allow us to match our preferences. If a person is thirsty, his or her goal is to stop being thirsty. If at home, he or she is likely to get a drink from the refrigerator. If they are at a restaurant, they might ask a waiter or waitress to bring them something to drink. The individual will engage in whatever behavior seems necessary to produce the desired result, quenching of thirst.

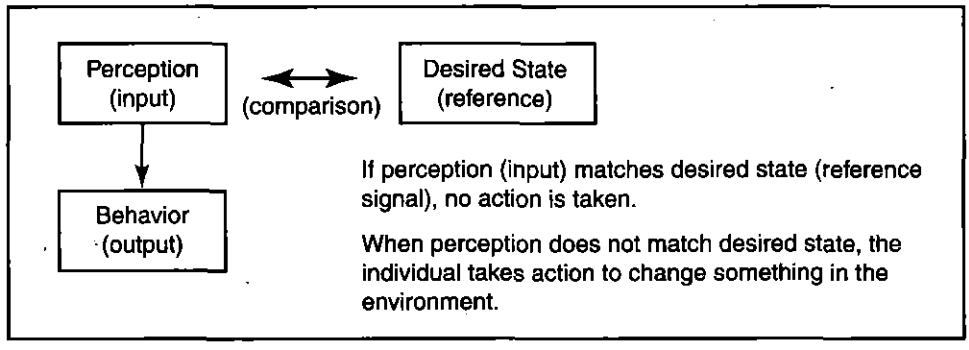


Figure 5.3 The Cybernetic model of human behavior

This can apply to major or minor goals. The process can be as simple as "I want to sit up, so I will engage in the muscle contractions necessary to move my body into an upright position."

Reference Signals

Whenever McPhail uses the terms "reference signals" he is alluding to the individual's standards for judgment. Going back to the thermostat analogy, if you set your home thermostat at 72 degrees Fahrenheit, 72° becomes the reference signal. It is the temperature that the thermostat refers to when deciding if the furnace should be switched on. McPhail argues that humans engage in the same process. When deciding to sit or stand, desired level of comfort is the reference signal. When deciding whether or not to get a drink of water, desired level of thirst is the reference signal. This is a complex way of saying that we make decisions about behavior based on what we expect or desire. If we desire a drink, we get it. McPhail assumes that we do so because we have evaluated our perception or *input* (thirst) against our desired state or *reference signal* (not thirsty), and decided that an action or *output* had to be made. This is a conscious effort to adjust our perception ("I'm thirsty") to our expectation ("I shouldn't be thirsty").

McPhail never uses the terms "goal," "expectations," or "definition of the situation," but all of these are implied within his conception of reference signals. When he uses the term *reference signals,* he means the standard by which people judge a situation. People act to achieve a goal, or meet an expectation, based on their definition of the situation. Keeping this in mind makes the theory easier to understand and simplifies the awkward "input/reference/output" terminology that McPhail uses.

Self-Instructions

McPhail bases much of his writing on the idea that human beings follow internal commands to engage in action. We mentally decide to do something, then tell ourselves to physically do it. McPhail bases his model of human behavior on mechanical and computer models. Such models are used to create machines or computer software that can engage in self-regulating behavior. As such, the decision-making process implied in self-instruction is an assumed step, not one that has been empirically demonstrated.

This mechanistic approach to human behavior is an important component of the Sociocybernetic Theory. McPhail consistently observes that groups of individuals often behave differently from each other. Self-instructions are McPhail's attempt to explain why individuals might behave so differently from each other at one moment when so clearly influenced by others at another moment. For example, an individual may instruct herself to obey the commands of a group leader one second, but if police appear she may instruct herself to retreat to safety. When self-instructions originate from

unique individual reference signals, behavior is individualistic. When self-instructions relate to common or shared reference signals, group behavior occurs. The idea of self-instructions largely ignores the emotional component of human behavior, as well as the non-rational ways in which we quickly react to anything that startles, alarms, or frightens us.

For McPhail, all group behavior is a form of collective action. It is important to remember that he consistently bases his theory on the fact that he defines all group or social behavior as collective behavior. As he puts it, "purposive action requires that two or more persons set similar reference signals with respect to which they adjust their individual actions to make their respective perceptions correspond to those similar reference signals" (1991: 207). In other words, people must want the same thing or agree on a goal in order to act together. According to the Sociocybernetic Theory of Collective Action, this can happen in one of three ways:

1. Two or more people can independently create similar reference signals and behave accordingly. This only applies to simple or elementary forms of collective action. For example, if two people separately decide they are thirsty and move toward a drinking fountain at the same time, they are engaged in collective action. They do not need to communicate directly with each other in order to do this.

2. Two or more people can interdependently create similar reference signals and behave accordingly. This can apply to more complex forms of collective action. It also requires that the individuals communicate directly with each other. They negotiate a common reference signal. For example, two friends standing in a long line might decide to give up waiting, leave the line, and go get something to eat or drink instead.

3. Two or more people can adopt a reference signal developed by a third party and behave accordingly. This can lead to the creation of complex collective action. Although participants do not have to communicate directly with each other, the third party must be able to communicate directly with each participant. People who find themselves in a confusing situation may follow the suggestions or commands of a self-appointed leader. For example, witnesses to an accident may suddenly engage in complicated and orchestrated activities in order to help rescue the victims if told to do so by a paramedic or police officer. Workers at a factory may suddenly shut down their machines and engage in a sit-down strike at the urging of a fellow worker. Students might leave a class in order to take part in a campus protest organized by a political activist. All of these are examples of actions engaged in by individuals who have collectively adopted a common reference signal from a third party.

McPhail argues that members of large gatherings almost never simultaneously engage in the same behavior at the same time. People actively choose from moment to moment whether or not to engage in the same behavior as

those around them. Most of them do not act the same most of the time. The theory essentially argues that what most other researchers call mass hysteria, crowd behavior, or collective behavior never really happens. Events at the "Woodstock '99" concert held in Rome, New York, in July of 1999 illustrate his point. At the end of the last performance audience members set the stage and adjoining trailers on fire, and pulled down and destroyed large sound and light equipment. To most theorists, this is a clear example of a riot. McPhail, however, would be quick to point out only a few hundred out of 225,000 audience members actually took part in the destruction. Because he would consider all 225,000 concertgoers members of the same gathering, he can argue that less than 1 percent of the gathering members engaged in violent or destructive behavior. The "riot" becomes characterized as nothing more than a minor problem within the gathering, possibly by a relatively small number of people who did not want to obey instructions for dispersal.

Of course, most other theorists would argue that the few hundred rioters make up a distinct crowd within the larger mass of people. Therein lies the greatest difference between the Sociocybernetic Theory and all of the other perspectives that this book examines: McPhail focuses on the large number of people in that place and time who did not take part in riotous behavior. The other theories of collective behavior would all focus on the people who did riot, and try to determine why they did. Where most theorists see a group of individuals who simultaneously engaged in unexpected, atypical behavior, McPhail sees a small anomaly within a much, much larger gathering of individuals who did what they were expected to do. The concert went almost entirely as planned and expected, and almost all audience members did what they were supposed to do the entire time. Even those individuals who instructed themselves to take part in destructive, atypical behavior only did so for an hour at the end of a seventy-two hour event. In short, McPhail would argue that there was no mass riot. Instead, he would define the destruction as a brief outburst of destruction by a few isolated individuals.

Similarities to the Emergent Norm Perspective

Although McPhail is consistently critical of the Turner and Killian, there are several similarities between the Emergent Norm perspective and Sociocybernetic Theory. These are due to the fact that both perspectives are based in part on Symbolic Interactionism. This common theoretical root leads to similar concepts and ideas in both perspectives. The reader may have noticed that McPhail's "developing similar reference signals" seems remarkably similar to Turner and Killian's conception of creating a collective definition of the situation. Likewise, "adopting reference signals developed by a third party" closely resembles Turner and Killian's concept of individuals conforming to an emergent group norm (see Chapter 3). McPhail borrows ideas that appear within the Emergent Norm perspective, but hides them behind terms and labels

quite different from Turner and Killian's. The Assembly Perspective's basic premise is the same as the Emergent Norm Perspective: when people behave the same it is because they all define a situation the same and/or because the situation seems to call for a particular course of action. McPhail simply places more emphasis on the individual's attempt to maintain some equilibrium between perceptions (input) and expectations (reference signals).

He argues that people within a gathering attempt to acquire information, and to develop a "collective or convergent orientation." This process, in which people come to focus on the same object or issue and develop similar attitudes and beliefs toward it, seems to be identical to Turner and Killian's "common focus of attention."

McPhail most resembles Emergent Norm theorists when he states that "the sights and sounds" of other crowd members expressing feelings ("evaluations" of the situation) similar to one's own "may affect the individual's adjustments in the intensity, volume, or duration of his or her applause, cheers, boos, throwing, and the like" (1991: 211). In other words, the sight of other people expressing feelings that match our own encourages more obvious expressions of those feelings, and seeing others express feelings opposite of our own discourages such bold displays. The behavior of individuals is directly influenced by others within the situation. If others display behavior that seems to coincide with our own feelings, then we feel those feelings reinforced and express them with even more intensity. This is precisely the point that Contagion theorists and Emergent Norm theorists make when they discuss "circular reaction" or "circular reinforcement." As Turner and Killian put it, in a group "certain attitudes are elicited and reinforced, so that individuals act in accordance with attitudes which would not necessarily have become *dominant* had they been acting purely as individuals" (1957: 15, emphasis in original). McPhail defines this effect as the interdependent development of a common reference signal. Turner and Killian would simply call it creating a collective definition of the situation.

Further, McPhail goes on to state in the accompanying endnote that those in an audience who do not know when to applaud will wait for others to applaud first. They will allow others to define the situation, letting them know when a specific behavior is appropriate. Once the behavior of others seems to indicate that a behavior is called for, they themselves engage in that behavior. For McPhail, these individuals are adopting the reference signals of others. Turner and Killian would view it as following the group's behavioral norms.

McPhail states that the interdependent creation of shared desires or goals can happen whenever individuals are faced with a mutual problem, defined as "unfamiliar phenomenon," "accident or emergency," or "disruption or blockage of activity." Surely the reader can see the parallels between this statement and those of Turner and Killian (Chapter 3).

These conceptual similarities between the Emergent Norm perspective and the Sociocybernetic Theory of Collective Action are important precisely

because McPhail heavily criticizes Turner and Killian throughout his writings. The focus is different, but the underlying assumptions about what drives individuals to behave the way that they do when part of a larger group are the same. It can even be argued that McPhail's theory is just a variation of or elaboration upon the Emergent Norm perspective.

Discussion

McPhail argues throughout his writings that collective behavior theorists are wasting their time by focusing their attention too narrowly. He specifically states that "Theories of the crowd and crowd behavior should not be theories of rare events" (1991:225). By this, he means that the vast majority of social behavior is cooperative, normative, and routine. Therefore, he considers those instances where order collapses and groups collectively engage in unexpected behavior to be too few to bother studying. However, McPhail fails to consider the fact that those "rare" events happen fairly often in every society. He also fails to consider that the two types of behavior are in fact fundamentally different.

For example, the study of deviant behavior has long been a specialty within the field of sociology. Deviant behavior is the study of those instances in which individuals engage in behavior that we as a society do not condone or accept. Most members of society obey the law most of the time. However, the relatively small number of people who engage in relatively few acts of deviance within society cause a tremendous loss of life, property, and security year after year. Millions of individuals and billions of dollars are dedicated each year to enforcing the law and punishing those lawbreakers who get caught. The fact that deviance is rare or unusual compared to social conformity does not mean that researchers should not attempt to isolate the causes for such behavior.

The same can be said for sociologists studying collective behavior. The fact that events like riots, crazes, panics, and hysterias are rare compared to typical social behavior does not mean that they are not worthy of special attention and study. It does not seem relevant to McPhail that collective behavior theorists and students might be interested in the "rare" episodes *because* they are unusual and atypical. General sociological theorists have been attempting to explain social behavior for quite some time. Most of their theories include the sort of typical public behavior that McPhail includes under the headings of "collective behavior" or "collective action." Almost all other theories of collective behavior, on the other hand, seek to explain the atypical, abnormal, unusual group behaviors that are not addressed anywhere else in sociological study. The Assembly Perspective is not intended to explain these peculiar episodes. Instead, McPhail aims to describe all public group behavior.

Core Assumptions

McPhail starts by assuming that collective behavior is essentially the same as all other group behavior. For example, he does not believe that it is worth trying to explain why a peaceful demonstration can suddenly turn into a violent riot, simply because most peaceful demonstrations do not. This goes directly against what all other collective behavior theorists mentioned in this book believe to be true. They all believe that those episodes of unusual group behavior, where individuals engage in patterns of behavior that are not expected under the circumstances, are distinctly different from normal public behavior and therefore deserve to be examined and explained in their own right. McPhail's disagreement with this basic premise of collective behavior allows him to make sweeping and damning statements about all other collective behavior theorists. He repeatedly states that they are all wasting their time; that focusing on unusual events cannot yield any important information. Some readers will agree with this assumption, and some will not. Those who agree with McPhail's conception of collective behavior will find the Assembly Perspective useful for categorizing and cataloging a wide variety of public gatherings. Those who do not agree will find it a useless typology.

Evaluation

Apparently, no researchers other than McPhail have used the Sociocybernetic Theory to analyze any episodes of collective behavior or collective action. Although the general conception of human behavior as sociocybernetic seems to be a source of discussion, particularly in Europe, there do not appear to be any collective behavior researchers actually using the approach to analyze public gatherings.

McPhail's conception of collective action and his Sociocybernetic Theory are only useful to those individuals who believe that a riot is fundamentally no different from a peaceful demonstration, or that people waiting for a bus together are engaged in exactly the same social and psychological processes as a group of people swallowing goldfish, looting a burning store, or taking part in a lynching. For those who wish to understand the abnormal, deviant behavior, this theory is weak at best. McPhail's insistence on treating a riot or a lynch mob as if it were identical to an orderly procession leaves us with no tools for prevention of those horrible events. The theory may be coherent, but is it useful?

As he writes, "Theories of the crowd and crowd behavior should not be theories of rare events" (1991: 225). Of course, this begs the question "Why not?" Most collective behavior researchers are interested in determining exactly what makes it possible for a group of people to engage in socially deviant behavior that they would not normally perform and that is not expected under the circumstances. McPhail considers this a useless pursuit. He argues

that routine, ritualized, and organized group behavior is no different than episodes of collective or crowd behavior (as defined by other sociologists).

In one sense, McPhail may be right: People might always follow similar decision-making processes whenever they engage in public behavior. However, Turner and Killian already made this point back in 1957. They argued that humans typically follow behavioral norms for any situation, and when the situation is unusual or confusing new norms can emerge to guide them. For example, "[in a crowd] . . . certain attitudes are elicited and reinforced, so that individuals act in accordance with attitudes which would not necessarily have become dominant had they been acting as individuals" (1957:15). People express feelings matching the behavior of those around them and suppress those that differ from the crowd behavior. McPhail makes a remarkably similar argument when he states that "the sights and sounds [of other crowd members] . . . may effect the individual's adjustments in the intensity, volume, or duration of his or her applause, cheers, boos, throwing, and the like" (1991: 211). The similarity is striking, especially considering McPhail's heavy criticism of the Emergent Norm perspective.

The Sociocybernetic Theory is probably most useful for two things. First, its language and terminology might attract more behaviorist-oriented researchers into the field. The theory seems designed to appeal to individuals with a precise, abstract approach to human behavior. The old "Social Interactionist/Behaviorist" label clearly revealed the behaviorist roots of the theory. This rigid mathematical model of human thought and behavior would surely appeal to those researchers who find the more general, philosophical style of Turner and Killian too vague and imprecise. In other words, it can be viewed as a sort of variation of Emergent Norm Theory intended for use by those researchers who prefer specific models of human behavior based on mechanical and mathematical reasoning.

The second useful component of the Sociocybernetic Theory of Collective Action may be the idea that collective behavior is not so different from normal group behavior as we sometimes think. Although this conception of collective behavior has been criticized above, it would not hurt researchers to remember that collective behavior is not as bizarre as it may sometimes seem. Early attempts to explain collective behavior were marred by incorrect assumptions about the "brutal" and "animalistic" behavior of participants. The Assembly Perspective is a deliberate attempt to correct and counter these errors. However, McPhail's efforts to define collective episodes as exactly the same as normative behavior certainly goes too far to be useful to many researchers.

The Emergent Norm Theory and Value-Added Theory both allow us to examine unusual group behavior while still assuming rational thought amongst participants. McPhail's insistence that participants retain rational thought is therefore not as revolutionary as he seems to think. It fits in quite well with other modern conceptions of collective behavior.

However, McPhail's argument that all group behavior is the same phenomenon, whether orderly and normative or violent and unexpected, runs

counter to all other current theories of collective behavior. If a researcher hopes to understand why a group of people engages in a particular episode of unusual behavior, then he or she needs a theory that seeks to explain the unusual. The Sociocybernetic Theory of Collective Action is not that theory. On the other hand, if a researcher seeks to understand the effects of groups on individual behavior within orderly gatherings, the Sociocybernetic Theory can be quite useful. A researcher who is interested in how public gatherings form, how they influence behavior, and how they disperse will find much of interest in the Assembly Perspective. Those interested in the dynamics that turn some public gatherings into unexpected, frightening, or silly events will have to look elsewhere.