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## Chapter 21

# Collective Behavior and Social Movements

### Social Issues in the News

“N.J. Student Protests Showcase Facebook’s Role in Mobilizing Social Movements,” the headline said. On April 27, 2010, thousands of high school students across New Jersey walked out of their schools to protest budget cuts for secondary education. The mass protest began with a single Facebook page, “Protest NJ Education Cuts—State Wide School Walk Out,” set up by Michelle Ryan Lauto, a first-year student at Pace University, who had graduated a year earlier from a state high school. Her Facebook site quickly attracted 18,000 members as word spread about the walkout. Students used Facebook to discuss news media contacts and other strategies for their protests, and Lauto logged on to tell everyone to keep their walkouts and rallies peaceful. In Newark, New Jersey, students also tweeted and texted to make sure that their citywide walkouts all occurred at the same time.

Lauto recognized how much Facebook and other social media had helped the students’ cause: “You can use these social networking tools for very positive things—it’s not just about kids putting up photos from their weekend party.” She added, “All I did was make a Facebook page. Anyone who has an opinion could do that and have their opinion heard. I would love to see kids in high school step up and start their own protests and change things in their own way.” (Heyboer, 2010; Hu, 2010) Heyboer, K. (2010, April 28). N.J. student protests showcase Facebook’s role in mobilizing social movements. *Newark Star-Ledger*. Retrieved from [http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2010/2004/facebook\\_student\\_protest\\_mobilize.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2010/2004/facebook_student_protest_mobilize.html); Hu, W. (2010, April 27). In New Jersey, a civics lesson in the Internet age. *The New York Times*, p. A19.

Chapter 20 "Social Change and the Environment" noted that protest is an important source of social change. As the student walkouts across New Jersey illustrate, protest often involves mass numbers of individuals united in a cause; they sometimes know each other but often do not. Other kinds of mass behavior also exist, including crowds, riots, and rumors. These forms of mass behavior can also promote social change.

This chapter examines the social phenomena called *collective behavior* and *social movements*. These phenomena are a common feature of modern society and often

attract much public attention when they occur. They also often arouse controversy because they tend to “shake things up” by upsetting the status quo. Accordingly, we will discuss the many types of collective behavior and social movements to get a sense of their origins, dynamics, and impact.

## 21.1 Types of Collective Behavior

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List the major types of collective behavior.
2. Explain the difference between conventional crowds and acting crowds.
3. Describe the behavior that typically occurs during and after a disaster.

*Collective behavior* is a term sociologists use to refer to a miscellaneous set of behaviors in which large numbers of people engage. More specifically, **collective behavior**<sup>1</sup> refers to relatively spontaneous and relatively unstructured behavior by large numbers of individuals acting with or being influenced by other individuals. *Relatively spontaneous* means that the behavior is somewhat spontaneous but also somewhat planned, while *relatively unstructured* means that the behavior is somewhat organized and predictable but also somewhat unorganized and unpredictable. As we shall see, some forms of collective behavior are more spontaneous and unstructured than others, and some forms are more likely than others to involve individuals who act together as opposed to merely being influenced by each other. As a whole, though, collective behavior is regarded as less spontaneous and less structured than conventional behavior, such as what happens in a classroom, a workplace, or the other settings for everyday behavior with which we are very familiar.

As just noted, the term collective behavior refers to a miscellaneous set of behaviors. As such, these behaviors often have very little in common with each other, even if their basic features allow them to be classified as collective behavior. Common forms of collective behavior discussed in this section include crowds, mobs, panics, riots, disaster behavior, rumors, mass hysteria, moral panics, and fads and crazes. Of these forms, some (crowds, panics, riots, and disasters) involve people who are generally in each other's presence and who are more or less interacting with each other, while other forms (rumors, mass hysteria, moral panics, and fads and crazes) involve people who are not in each other's presence—in fact, they may be separated by hundreds or thousands of miles—but nonetheless share certain beliefs or concerns.

1. Relatively spontaneous and relatively unstructured behavior by large numbers of individuals acting with or being influenced by other individuals.

Another common form of collective behavior is the social movement. The study of social movements exploded in the 1960s and 1970s, and social movement scholarship now dwarfs scholarship on other forms of collective behavior. The second part of this chapter thus focuses solely on social movements.

## Crowds

A **crowd**<sup>2</sup> is a large number of people who gather together with a common short-term or long-term purpose. Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969)Blumer, H. (1969). Collective behavior. In A. M. Lee (Ed.), *Principles of sociology* (pp. 165–221). New York, NY: Barnes and Noble. developed a popular typology of crowds based on their purpose and dynamics. The four types he distinguished are casual crowds, conventional crowds, expressive crowds, and acting crowds. A fifth type, protest crowds, has also been distinguished by other scholars.

### Casual Crowd

A *casual crowd* is a collection of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time. The people in this type of crowd have no real common bond, long-term purpose, or identity. An example of a casual crowd is a gathering of people who are waiting to cross the street at a busy intersection in a large city. True, they are all waiting to cross the street and to this degree do have a common goal, but this goal is temporary and this particular collection of people quickly disappears once this goal is achieved. As Erich Goode (1992, p. 22)Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. emphasizes, “members of casual crowds have little else in common except their physical location.” In fact, Goode thinks that casual crowds do not really act out collective behavior, since their behavior is relatively structured in that it follows conventional norms for behaving in such settings.



A casual crowd is a collection of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time. It has no common identity or long-term purpose. This gathering of people waiting to cross the street is an example of a casual crowd.

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### Conventional Crowd

A *conventional crowd* is a collection of people who gather for a specific purpose. They might be attending a movie, a play, a concert, or a lecture. Goode (1992)Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. again thinks that conventional crowds do not really act out collective behavior; as their name implies, their behavior is very conventional and thus relatively structured.

### Expressive Crowd

An *expressive crowd* is a collection of people who gather primarily to be excited and to express one or more emotions. Examples include a religious revival, a political

2. A large number of people who gather together with a common short-term or long-term purpose.

rally for a candidate, and events like Mardi Gras. Goode (1992, p. 23)Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. points out that the main purpose of expressive crowds

is belonging to the crowd itself. Crowd activity for its members is an end in itself, not just a means. In conventional crowds, the audience wants to watch the movie or hear the lecture; being part of the audience is secondary or irrelevant. In expressive crowds, the audience also wants to be a member of the crowd, and participate in crowd behavior—to scream, shout, cheer, clap, and stomp their feet.

A conventional crowd may sometimes become an expressive crowd, as when the audience at a movie starts shouting if the film projector breaks. As this example indicates, the line between a conventional crowd and an expressive crowd is not always clear-cut. In any event, because excitement and emotional expression are defining features of expressive crowds, individuals in such crowds are engaging in collective behavior.

### Acting Crowd

As its name implies, an *acting crowd* goes one important step beyond an expressive crowd by behaving in violent or other destructive behavior such as looting. A **mob**<sup>3</sup>—an intensely emotional crowd that commits or is ready to commit violence—is a primary example of an acting crowd. Many films and novels about the Wild West in U.S. history depict mobs lynching cattle and horse rustlers without giving them the benefit of a trial. Beginning after the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, lynch mobs in the South and elsewhere hanged or otherwise murdered several thousand people, most of them African Americans, in what would now be regarded as hate crimes. A **panic**<sup>4</sup>—a sudden reaction by a crowd that involves self-destructive behavior, as when people stomp over each other while fleeing a theater when a fire breaks out or while charging into a big-box store when it opens early with an amazing sale—is another example of an acting crowd. Acting crowds sometimes become so large and out of control that they develop into full-scale *riots*, which we discuss momentarily.

### Protest Crowd

As identified by Clark McPhail and Ronald T. Wohlstein (1983),McPhail, C., & Wohlstein, R. T. (1983). Individual and collective behaviors within gatherings, demonstrations, and riots. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 9, 579–600. a fifth type of crowd is the protest crowd. As its name again implies, a *protest crowd* is a collection of people who gather to protest a political, social, cultural, or economic issue. The

3. An intensely emotional crowd that commits or is ready to commit violence.
4. A sudden reaction by a crowd that involves self-destructive behavior.

gatherings of people who participate in a sit-in, demonstration, march, or rally are all examples of protest crowds.

## Riots

A **riot**<sup>5</sup> is a relatively spontaneous outburst of violence by a large group of people. The term *riot* sounds very negative, and some scholars have used terms like *urban revolt* or *urban uprising* to refer to the riots that many U.S. cities experienced during the 1960s. However, most collective behavior scholars continue to use the term riot without necessarily implying anything bad or good about this form of collective behavior, and we use riot here in that same spirit.

Terminology notwithstanding, riots have been part of American history since the colonial period, when colonists often rioted regarding “taxation without representation” and other issues (Rubenstein, 1970). Rubenstein, R. E. (1970). *Rebels in Eden: Mass political violence in the United States*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown. Between 75 and 100 such riots are estimated to have occurred between 1641 and 1759. Once war broke out with England, several dozen more riots occurred as part of the colonists’ use of violence in the American Revolution. Riots continued after the new nation began, as farmers facing debts often rioted against state militia. The famous Shays’s Rebellion, discussed in many U.S. history books, began with a riot of hundreds of people in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Rioting became even more common during the first several decades of the 19th century. In this period rioting was “as much a part of civilian life as voting or working” (Rosenfeld, 1997, p. 484), Rosenfeld, M. J. (1997). Celebration, politics, selective looting and riots: A micro level study of the Bulls riot of 1992 in Chicago. *Social Problems*, 44, 483–502. with almost three-fourths of U.S. cities experiencing at least one major riot. Most of this rioting was committed by native-born whites against African Americans, Catholics, and immigrants. Their actions led Abraham Lincoln to observe in 1837, “Accounts of outrages committed by mobs form the every-day news of the times...Whatever their causes be, it is common to the whole country” (quoted in Feldberg, 1980, p. 4). Feldberg, M. (1980). *The turbulent era: Riot and disorder in Jacksonian America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Rioting continued after the Civil War. Whites attacked Chinese immigrants because they feared the immigrants were taking jobs from whites and keeping wages lower than they otherwise would have been. Labor riots also became common, as workers rioted to protest inhumane working conditions and substandard pay.

5. A relatively spontaneous outburst of violence by a large group of people.

Race riots again occurred during the early 20th century, as whites continued to attack African Americans in major U.S. cities. A major riot in East St. Louis, Illinois,

in 1917 took the lives of 39 African Americans and 9 whites. Riots begun by whites occurred in at least seven more cities in 1919 and ended with the deaths of dozens of people (Waskow, 1967). Waskow, A. I. (1967). *From race riot to sit-in: 1919 and the 1960s*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books. During the 1960s, riots took place in many Northern cities as African Americans reacted violently to reports of police brutality or other unfair treatment. Estimates of the number of riots during the decade range from 240 to 500, and estimates of the number of participants in the riots range from 50,000 to 350,000 (Downes, 1968; Gurr, 1989). Downes, B. T. (1968). The social characteristics of riot cities: A comparative study. *Social Science Quarterly*, 49, 504–520; Gurr, T. R. (1989). Protest and rebellion in the 1960s: The United States in world perspective. In T. R. Gurr (Ed.), *Violence in America: Protest, rebellion, reform* (Vol. 2, pp. 101–130). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

### Types of Riots

Several types of riots may be identified according to the motivation and goals of the participants in the riots. One popular typology distinguishes between protest riots and celebration riots (McPhail, 1994). McPhail, C. (1994). The dark side of purpose: Individual and collective violence in riots. *Sociological Quarterly*, 35, 1–32. *Protest riots* express discontent regarding a political, social, cultural, or economic issue, while *celebration riots* express joy or delight over an event or outcome, such as the celebration of a football team's championship that gets out of hand. Protest riots are fundamentally political in nature, while celebration riots are decidedly apolitical.

Another popular typology distinguishes four types of riots: purposive, symbolic, revelous, and issueless (Goode, 1992). Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. *Purposive riots* arise from dissatisfaction regarding a particular issue and are intended to achieve a specific goal regarding that issue. The colonial riots mentioned earlier are examples of purposive riots, as are many of the riots that have occurred in U.S. prisons during the past few decades. *Symbolic riots* express general discontent but do not really aim to achieve a specific goal. The early 20th-century riots by whites, also mentioned earlier, are examples of symbolic riots. *Revelous riots* are the same as the celebration riots already discussed, while *issueless riots* have no apparent basis or purpose. An example of an issueless riot is the looting and general violence that sometimes occurs during a citywide electrical outage.

An important factor in understanding rioting is the type of people who take part in a riot. The “Sociology Making a Difference” box discusses this issue.

## Sociology Making a Difference

### The “Scum of the Earth” View of Rioters

When a riot occurs, it is almost natural to think that the rioters must be out-of-control, violent individuals who come from and represent the dregs of society. In the study of riots and rioting, this belief is called the “scum of the earth” view. Reflecting this view, about a century ago an Italian scholar called rioters “criminals, madmen, the offspring of madmen, alcoholics, the slime of society, deprived of all moral sense, given over to crime” (Rule, 1988, p. 95). Rule, J. B. (1988). *Theories of civil violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press. In scholarly circles this view, though often expressed in less extreme terms, was fairly popular from the end of the 19th century, when it was first formulated, through the 1960s.

If scholars and the public have this view of rioters, then it becomes easy to dismiss a riot as the irrational action of people not worthy of our attention and thus to not respond to any possible economic or political conditions that might have given rise to the riot. After the urban riots in U.S. cities began in the 1960s, politicians and the news media often depicted the urban rioters in negative terms that basically reflected a “scum of the earth” view. This depiction helped delegitimize the riots, which were thus seen not as protests against poverty and other conditions affecting U.S. cities but rather as wanton violence by the dregs of society.

Sociologists’ research on the social backgrounds of the 1960s urban rioters provided an important corrective to this common view of the rioters. These sociologists found that the rioters were fairly typical of the average resident—in terms of employment, economic status, and other factors—of the areas in which the riots occurred. For example, a study of almost 3,400 people arrested during the large 1965 riot in the Watts district of South Los Angeles found that more than half had no previous criminal convictions and that the remainder had been convicted only of minor offenses. In fact, these offenses were less serious than those leading to the arrests of Los Angeles residents in 1965 for nonriot reasons. Researchers also found that the median educational level of the arrested rioters was the same as that of other residents of South Los Angeles, and their political views were also similar to the views of residents who had not participated in the riot.

An important conclusion from these and other findings on the 1960s urban rioters was that instead of being the “scum of the earth,” the rioters were fairly typical and representative of the people in the communities where the riots occurred. These findings indicated that the riots could *not* easily be dismissed as the actions of the dregs of society but instead should be regarded, despite their violence, as protests against urban poverty that deserved to be heeded. By providing this perspective, the work by sociologists helped make a difference. (McPhail, 1971; Oberschall, 1967; Rule, 1988) McPhail, C. (1971). Civil disorder participation: A critical examination of recent research. *American Sociological Review*, 36, 1058–1073; Oberschall, A. (1967). The Los Angeles riot of August 1965. *Social Problems*, 15, 322–341; Rule, J. B. (1988). *Theories of civil violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## Social Movements

A **social movement**<sup>6</sup> is an organized effort by a large number of people to bring about or impede social, political, economic, or cultural change. We have much more to say about social movements later in this chapter, but for now simply identify them as an important form of collective behavior that plays a key role in social change.

## Disaster Behavior

A **disaster**<sup>7</sup> is an accident or natural catastrophe that causes many deaths and much property destruction. Hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, and floods are the most common natural disasters, while the sinking of the *Titanic* and the April 2010 BP oil well explosion are among the most well-known accidents that had disastrous consequences. Some disasters, such as plane crashes and the *Titanic* sinking, are very “localized” and affect a relatively small number of people, however tragic the consequences might be for those directly affected. Other disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, affect a much larger geographical area and number of people and thus have far-reaching consequences.

Some sociologists study why disasters occur, but sociologists interested in collective behavior study another aspect of disasters: how people behave during and after a disaster. We call this form of behavior **disaster behavior**<sup>8</sup>.

6. An organized effort by a large number of people to bring about or impede social, political, economic, or cultural change.

7. An accident or natural catastrophe that causes many deaths and much property destruction.

8. Behavior that occurs during and after a disaster.

When disasters occur, people's daily lives and normal routines are disrupted. As David L. Miller (2000, p. 250) Miller, D. L. (2000). *Introduction to collective behavior and collective action* (2nd ed.). Springfield, IL: Waveland Press. observes,

Disasters often strike without warning, and when they do, people face unexpected and unfamiliar problems that demand direct and prompt action. There is the obvious problem of sheer survival at the moment when disaster strikes. During impact, individuals must confront and cope with their fears while at the same time looking to their own and others' safety. After disaster impact, people encounter numerous problems demanding life-and-death decisions as they carry out rescues and aid the injured.

Over the next several days, weeks, and months, they must make many adjustments as their lives slowly return to normal, or at least as close to normal as can be expected. How do people generally behave while all this is going on?

A common belief is that people look out for themselves after a disaster occurs and that they panic and engage in "wild, selfish, individualistic, exploitative behavior" (Goode, 1992, p. 181). Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. However, sociologists who study disaster behavior generally find that the opposite is true: people stay remarkably calm after a disaster occurs and for the most part do not react with terror or panic. As Goode (1992, p. 181) Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. observes, "People tend to confer with others about the appropriate line of action. They weigh alternatives, consider consequences, and come up with socially and collectively reasoned solutions." In addition, relatively few people experience emotional shock. Friends, relatives, and even strangers tend to help one another and generally display a "high level of concern for and generosity toward disaster victims" (Miller, 2000, p. 274). Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Grief, depression, and other psychological consequences do occur, but these generally are no more serious than the reactions that follow the deaths of friends and family members caused by reasons other than disasters.

### **Rumors, Mass Hysteria, and Moral Panics**

The types of collective behavior discussed so far—crowds, riots, and disaster behavior—all involve people who are often physically interacting with one another. As mentioned earlier, however, some forms of collective behavior involve people who are much more widespread geographically and who typically do not interact. Nonetheless, these people share certain beliefs and perceptions that sociologists classify as collective behavior. Two broad categories of these beliefs and

perceptions have been distinguished: (a) rumors, mass hysteria, and moral panics; and (b) fads and crazes.

Rumors, mass hysteria, and moral panics all involve strongly held beliefs and perceptions that turn out to be not true at all or at least gross distortions of reality. A **rumor**<sup>9</sup> is a story based on unreliable sources that is nonetheless passed on from one person to another person. A rumor may turn out to be true, but it often turns out to be false or at least to be an exaggeration or distortion of the facts. The defining feature of a rumor, though, is that when it arises it is not based on reliable evidence and thus is unsubstantiated (Goode, 1992). Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. In today's electronic age, rumors can be spread very quickly over the Internet and via Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. In October 2010, a rumor quickly spread that Apple was planning to buy Sony. Although there was no truth to the rumor, Sony's stock shares rose in value after the rumor began (Albanesius, 2010). Albanesius, C. (2010, October 26). Apple buying Sony? Probably not. *PC Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2371467,2371400.asp>

**Mass hysteria**<sup>10</sup> refers to widespread, intense fear of and concern for a danger that turns out to be false or greatly exaggerated. Episodes of mass hysteria are relatively rare. One that is often-cited is the "War of the Worlds" episode (Miller, 2000). Miller, D. L. (2000). *Introduction to collective behavior and collective action* (2nd ed.). Springfield, IL: Waveland Press. On October 30, 1938, actor and director Orson Welles aired a radio adaptation of this famous story by H. G. Wells, which involved a Martian invasion of Earth. The show depicted the invasion occurring in New Jersey and New York, and thousands of listeners reportedly thought that an invasion was really occurring. This was decades before the Internet, so they called the police, National Guard, hospitals, and other sources for information and got in touch with friends and family members to share their fears. Although the next day newspapers carried many stories of stampedes in theaters, heart attacks, suicides, and other intense reactions to the radio show, these stories turned out to be false.

9. A story based on unreliable sources that is nonetheless passed on from one person to another person.

10. Widespread, intense fear of and concern for a danger that turns out to be false or greatly exaggerated.

11. Widespread concern over a perceived threat to the moral order that turns out to be false or greatly exaggerated.

A **moral panic**<sup>11</sup> is closely related to mass hysteria and refers to widespread concern over a perceived threat to the moral order that turns out to be false or greatly exaggerated. Often people become very concerned about a moral problem involving such behaviors as drug use and sexual activity. Their concerns may have no basis in reality or may greatly exaggerate the potential and actual danger posed by the problem. In either case, their strongly held moral views about the situation heighten their concern, and they often seek legislation or take other actions to try to battle the moral problem.

Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (2009)Goode, E., & Ben-Yehuda, N. (2009). *Moral panics: The social construction of deviance*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. describe several moral panics in American history. One of the most important was the concern over alcohol that motivated the Prohibition movement of the early 20th century. This movement was led primarily by rural Protestants who abhorred drinking as a moral and social sin. They thought drinking was a particular problem among urban residents, many of whom were Catholic Irish and Italian immigrants. Their Catholic faith and immigrant status contributed to the outrage that Prohibition activists felt about their alcohol use.

Another moral panic over a drug occurred during the 1930s and led to antimarijuana legislation. Marijuana had been legal before then, but Anglo Americans became concerned about its use among Mexican Americans. Newspapers began to run articles about the effects of marijuana, which was said to turn its users into rapists and other types of violent criminals. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics provided “facts” about these effects to the news media, which published this misleading information.

As these two examples illustrate, moral panics often center on social groups that are already very unpopular, including the poor, people of color, and religious minorities. Prejudice against these groups fuels the rise and intensity of moral panics, and moral panics in turn reinforce and even increase this prejudice.

## Fads and Crazes

Fads and crazes make up the second category of beliefs and perceptions that are considered to be collective behavior. A **fad**<sup>12</sup> is a rather insignificant activity or product that is popular for a relatively short time, while a **craze**<sup>13</sup> is a temporary activity that attracts the obsessive enthusiasm of a relatively small group of people (Goode, 1992).Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. American history has witnessed many kinds of fads and crazes throughout the years, including goldfish swallowing, stuffing people into a telephone booth, and the notorious campus behavior known as streaking. Products that became fads include Rubik’s Cube, Pet Rocks, Cabbage Patch dolls, and Beanie Babies. Cell phones were a fad when they first appeared, but they have become so common and important that they have advanced far beyond the definition of a fad.

12. A rather insignificant activity or product that is popular for a relatively short time.

13. A temporary activity that attracts the obsessive enthusiasm of a relatively small group of people.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Collective behavior involves large numbers of people and is relatively spontaneous and relatively unstructured. Its major types include crowds, riots, rumors, and fads.
- Riots have been common in American history since the colonial era. Two major types of riots are protest riots, which are political in nature, and celebration riots, which are apolitical.
- Most disaster behavior is fairly calm and altruistic. Disaster victims generally do not react in a panicky or selfish manner.
- Moral panics often focus on unpopular groups in society, including the poor, people of color, and immigrants.

### FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Think of the last time you were in one of the types of crowds discussed in the text. What type of crowd was it? Explain your answer.
2. Think of the last rumor you heard. As far as you know, did it turn out to be true, not true, or partly true but an exaggeration or distortion of the truth?

## 21.2 Explaining Collective Behavior

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss the major assumptions of contagion theory and why this theory is no longer popular.
2. Describe the central views of convergence theory.
3. Explain how emergent norm theory takes a middle ground between contagion theory and convergence theory.

Over the years, sociologists and other scholars have proposed many explanations of collective behavior. Most of these explanations have focused on crowds, riots, and social movements, rather than on rumors, fads, and other collective behaviors that involve less social interaction. [Table 21.1 "Theory Snapshot"](#) summarizes these explanations.

Table 21.1 Theory Snapshot

Theory	Major assumptions
Contagion theory	Collective behavior is emotional and irrational and results from the hypnotic influence of the crowd.
Convergence theory	Crowd behavior reflects the beliefs and intentions that individuals already share before they join a crowd.
Emergent norm theory	People are not sure how to behave when they begin to interact in collective behavior. As they discuss their potential behavior, norms governing their behavior emerge, and social order and rationality then guide their behavior.
Value-added theory	Collective behavior results when several conditions exist, including structural strain, generalized beliefs, precipitating factors, and lack of social control.

### Contagion Theory

*Contagion theory* was developed by French scholar Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) in his influential 1895 book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Le Bon, 1895/1960). Bon, G. L. (1960). *The crowd: A study of the popular mind*. New York, NY: Viking Press. (Original work published 1895) Like many other intellectuals of his time, Le Bon was concerned about the breakdown of social order that was said to have begun with

the French Revolution a century earlier and to have continued throughout the 19th century. Mob violence by the poor was common in the century in cities in Europe and the United States. Intellectuals, who tended to live in relatively wealthy circumstances, were very disturbed by this violence. They viewed it as irrational behavior, and they thought that the people taking part in it were being unduly swayed by strong emotions and the influence of other people in the mobs.

Le Bon's book and its contagion theory reflected these intellectuals' beliefs. When individuals are by themselves, he wrote, they act rationally, but when they are in a crowd, they come under its almost hypnotic influence and act irrationally and emotionally. They no longer can control their unconscious instincts and become violent and even savage. In short, contagion theory argues that collective behavior is irrational and results from the contagious influence of the crowds in which individuals find themselves.

The views of contagion theory were popular well into the 20th century, but scholars came to believe that collective behavior is much more rational than Le Bon thought and also that individuals are not controlled by crowd influences as he thought.



### Convergence Theory

*Convergence theory* is one of the theories that presented this new understanding of collective behavior. According to this theory, crowds do not unduly influence individuals to act in emotional and even violent ways. Rather, crowd behavior reflects the behavior and attitudes of the individuals who decide to join a crowd. Once they converge in a crowd, the behavior of the crowd is a consequence of their behavior and attitude. Instead of the crowd affecting the individuals in it, the individuals in it affect the crowd.

Reflecting the adage that “birds of a feather flock together,” people who feel a certain way about a particular issue and who wish to act in a certain way tend to find and converge with similar people. The crowd they form then reflects their beliefs and desired activities. As Goode (1992, p. 58) Goode, E. (1992). *Collective behavior*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. writes, convergence theory

*Contagion theory assumes that people in a crowd act emotionally and irrationally because they come under the influence of the crowd's impulses.*

Source: Photo courtesy of Joanna, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/piazzadelpopolo/4580912111>.

says that the way people act in crowds or publics is an expression or outgrowth of *who they are ordinarily*. It argues that like-minded people come together in, or *converge* on, a certain location where collective behavior can and will take place,

where individuals can act out tendencies or traits they had in the first place.  
(emphasis in original)

Convergence theory does not deny that people may do something in a crowd that they would not do by themselves, but it does say that what a crowd does largely reflects the individuals who compose it. If we think of a mob or at least a small group of people who commit a hate crime—for example, gay bashing—we can see an application of convergence theory. The individuals who form this group are people who hate homosexuality and who hate gays and lesbians. The group violence they commit reflects these beliefs.

### Emergent Norm Theory

Just after the mid-20th century, Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian (1957) Turner, R. H., & Killian, L. M. (1957). *Collective behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. presented their *emergent norm theory* of collective behavior, which downplayed the irrationality emphasized in earlier decades by Le Bon and other intellectuals. According to Turner and Killian, when people start interacting in collective behavior, initially they are not sure how they are supposed to behave. As they discuss their potential behavior and other related matters, norms governing their behavior emerge, and social order and rationality then guide behavior.

In at least two ways, emergent norm theory takes a middle ground between contagion theory and convergence theory. As should be clear, emergent norm theory views collective behavior as more rational than contagion theory does. But it also views collective behavior as less predictable than convergence theory does, as it assumes that people do not necessarily already share beliefs and intentions before they join a crowd.

### Value-Added Theory

One of the most popular and influential explanations of social movements and other forms of collective behavior is Neil Smelser's (1963) Smelser, N. J. (1963). *Theory of collective behavior*. New York, NY: Free Press. *value-added theory* (also called *structural-strain theory*). Smelser wrote that social movements and other collective behavior occur if and only if several conditions are present. One of these conditions is *structural strain*, which refers to problems in society that cause people to be angry and frustrated. Without such structural strain, people would not have any reason to



According to sociologist Neil Smelser, an important condition for protest is a precipitating

protest, and social movements do not arise. Another condition is *generalized beliefs*, which are people's reasons for why conditions are so bad and their solutions to improve them. If people decide that the conditions they dislike are their own fault, they will decide not to protest. Similarly, if they decide that protest will not improve these conditions, they again will not protest. A third condition is the existence of *precipitating factors*, or sudden events that ignite collective behavior. In the 1960s, for example, several urban riots started when police were rumored to have unjustly arrested or beaten someone. Although conditions in inner cities were widely perceived as unfair and even oppressive, it took this type of police behavior to ignite people to riot. A fourth condition is *lack of social control*; collective behavior is more likely if potential participants do not expect to be arrested or otherwise hurt or punished.

*factor: a sudden event that ignites people to take action. During the 1960s, several urban riots began when police were rumored to have unjustly arrested or beaten someone.*

Source: Photo courtesy of Anna Tesar, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/spanner/3029425939>.

Smelser's theory became very popular because it pointed to several factors that must hold true before social movements and other forms of collective behavior occur. However, collective behavior does not always occur when Smelser's factors do hold true. The theory has also been criticized for being a bit vague; for example, it does not say how much strain a society must have for collective behavior to take place (Rule, 1988). Rule, J. B. (1988). *Theories of civil violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Contagion theory assumes that individuals act irrationally as they come under the hypnotic influence of a crowd. Collective behavior scholars now believe that collective behavior is much more rational than contagion theory assumed.
- Convergence theory assumes that crowd behavior reflects the preexisting values and beliefs and behavioral disposition of the individuals who join a crowd.
- Emergent norm theory assumes that norms emerge after people gather for collective behavior, and that their behavior afterward is largely rational.
- Value-added theory argues that collective behavior results when several conditions exist, including structural strain, generalized beliefs, precipitating factors, and lack of social control. All these conditions must exist for collective behavior to occur.

**FOR YOUR REVIEW**

1. Which of the four theories of collective behavior presented in this section do you most favor? Explain your answer.
2. If riots are assumed to involve irrational behavior, how and why should that assumption affect perceptions of a particular riot and its possible consequences for public policy?

## 21.3 Social Movements

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List the major types of social movements.
2. Provide evidence against the assumption that discontent always leads to social movement activity.
3. Describe the stages of the life cycle of social movements.
4. Discuss examples of how social movements have made a positive difference.

Social movements in the United States and other nations have been great forces for social change. At the same time, governments and other opponents have often tried to thwart the movements' efforts. To understand how and why social change happens, we have to understand why movements begin, how they succeed and fail, and what impact they may have.

### Understanding Social Movements

To begin this understanding, we first need to understand what social movements are. To reiterate a definition already presented, a **social movement**<sup>14</sup> may be defined as an organized effort by a large number of people to bring about or impede social, political, economic, or cultural change. Defined in this way, social movements might sound similar to special-interest groups, and they do have some things in common. But a major difference between social movements and special-interest groups lies in the nature of their actions. Special-interest groups normally work *within the system* via conventional political activities such as lobbying and election campaigning. In contrast, social movements often work *outside the system* by engaging in various kinds of protest, including demonstrations, picket lines, sit-ins, and sometimes outright violence.

14. An organized effort by a large number of people to bring about or impede social change.

Conceived in this way, the efforts of social movements amount to “politics by other means,” with these “other means” made necessary because movements lack the resources and access to the political system that interest groups typically enjoy (Gamson, 1990). Gamson, W. A. (1990). *The strategy of social protest* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.



## Types of Social Movements

Sociologists identify several types of social movements according to the nature and extent of the change they seek. This typology helps us understand the differences among the many kinds of social movements that existed in the past and continue to exist today (Snow & Soule, 2009). Snow, D. A., & Soule, S. A. (2010). *A primer on social movements*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

*Social movements are organized efforts by large numbers of people to bring about or impede social change. Often they try to do so by engaging in various kinds of protest, such as the march depicted here.*

© Thinkstock

One of the most common and important types of social movements is the *reform* movement, which seeks limited, though still significant, changes in some aspect of a nation’s political, economic, or social systems. It does not try to overthrow the existing government but rather works to improve conditions within the existing regime. Some of the most important social movements in U.S. history have been reform movements. These include the abolitionist movement preceding the Civil War, the women’s suffrage movement that followed the Civil War, the labor movement, the Southern civil rights movement, the Vietnam era’s antiwar movement, the contemporary women’s movement, the gay rights movement, and the environmental movement.

A *revolutionary* movement goes one large step further than a reform movement in seeking to overthrow the existing government and to bring about a new one and even a new way of life. Revolutionary movements were common in the past and were responsible for the world’s great revolutions in Russia, China, and several other nations. Reform and revolutionary movements are often referred to as *political* movements because the changes they seek are political in nature.

Another type of political movement is the *reactionary* movement, so named because it tries to block social change or to reverse social changes that have already been achieved. The antiabortion movement is a contemporary example of a reactionary

movement, as it arose after the U.S. Supreme Court legalized most abortions in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and seeks to limit or eliminate the legality of abortion.

Two other types of movements are *self-help* movements and *religious* movements. As their name implies, self-help movements involve people trying to improve aspects of their personal lives; examples of self-help groups include Alcoholics Anonymous and Weight Watchers. Religious movements aim to reinforce religious beliefs among their members and to convert other people to these beliefs. Early Christianity was certainly a momentous religious movement, and other groups that are part of a more general religious movement today include the various religious cults discussed in [Chapter 17 "Religion"](#). Sometimes self-help and religious movements are difficult to distinguish from each other because some self-help groups emphasize religious faith as a vehicle for achieving personal transformation.



One type of social movement is the self-help movement. As its name implies, the goal of a self-help movement is to help people improve their personal lives. These tokens are used at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is an example of a group involved in a self-help movement.

Source: Photo courtesy of Chris Yarzab, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/chrisyarzab/4687962584>.

## The Origins of Social Movements

To understand the origins of social movements, we need answers to two related questions. First, what are the social, cultural, and other factors that give rise to social movements? They do not arise in a vacuum, and people must become sufficiently unhappy for a social movement to arise. Second, once social movements do begin, why are some individuals more likely than others to take part in them?

### Discontent With Existing Conditions and Relative Deprivation

For social movements to arise, certain political, economic, or other problems must first exist that prompt people to be dissatisfied enough to begin and join a social movement. These problems might include a faltering economy; a lack of political freedom; certain foreign policies carried out by a government; or discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity, or sexual orientation. In this regard, recall that one of the essential conditions for collective behavior in Smelser's value-added theory is *structural strain*, or social problems that cause people to be angry and frustrated. Without such structural strain, people would not have any reason to protest, and social movements would not arise.

Whatever the condition, the dissatisfaction it generates leads to *shared discontent* (also called *shared grievances*) among some or most of the population that then may give rise to a social movement. This discontent arises in part because people feel deprived relative to some other group or to some ideal state they have not reached. This feeling is called **relative deprivation**<sup>15</sup>. The importance of relative deprivation for social protest was popularized by James C. Davies (1962) Davies, J. C. (1962). Toward a theory of revolution. *American Sociological Review*, 27, 5–19. and Ted Robert Gurr (1970), Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why men rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. both of whom built on the earlier work of social psychologists who had studied frustration and aggression. When a deprived group perceives that social conditions are improving, wrote Davies, they become hopeful that their lives are getting better. But if these conditions stop improving, they become frustrated and more apt to turn to protest, collective violence, and other social movement activity. Both Davies and Gurr emphasized that people's *feelings* of being relatively deprived were more important for their involvement in collective behavior than their level of actual deprivation.

Relative deprivation theory was initially very popular, but scholars later pointed out that frustration often does not lead to protest, as people can instead blame themselves for the deprivation they feel and thus not protest (Gurney & Tierney, 1982). Gurney, J. N., & Tierney, K. J. (1982). Relative deprivation and social movements: A critical look at twenty years of theory and research. *Sociological Quarterly*, 23, 33–47. Scholars who favor the theory point out that people will ordinarily not take part in social movements unless they feel deprived, even if many who do feel deprived do not take part (Snow & Oliver, 1995). Snow, D. E., & Oliver, P. E. (1995). Social movements and collective behavior: Social psychological dimensions and considerations. In K. S. Cook, G. A. Fine, & J. S. House (Eds.), *Sociological perspectives on social psychology* (pp. 571–599). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Although discontent may be an essential condition for social movements (as well as for riots and other collective behavior that are political in nature), discontent does not always lead to a social movement or other form of collective behavior. For example, it might be tempting to think that a prison riot occurred because conditions in the prison were awful, but some prisons with awful conditions do not experience riots. Thus, although discontent may be an essential condition for social movements (and other collective behavior) to arise, discontent by itself does not guarantee that a social movement will begin and that discontented people will take part in the movement once it has begun.

15. The feeling by individuals that they are deprived relative to some other group or to some ideal state they have not reached.

An often-cited study that documented this fundamental point concerned the peace movement in the Netherlands during the 1980s (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). Klandermans, B., & Oegema, D. (1987). Potentials, networks, motivation, and barriers: Steps toward participation in social movements. *American Sociological*

*Review, 52, 519–531.* The movement was trying to prevent the deployment of cruise missiles, and a survey of a town near Amsterdam revealed that about 75% of the town’s residents were opposed to the deployment. However, only about 5% of these residents took part in a protest that the peace movement organized against the deployment. Thus, there is a huge drop-off from the number of potential social movement participants (*sympathizers*), in terms of their discontent with an existing problem or concern about an issue, to the number of actual social movement participants (*activists*).

### Social Networks and Recruitment

This huge drop-off from sympathizers to activists underscores another fundamental point of social movement scholarship: people are much more likely to participate in social movement activity when they are asked or urged to do so by friends, acquaintances, and family members. As David S. Meyer (2007, p. 47) Meyer, D. S. (2007). *The politics of protest: Social movements in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. observes, “[T]he best predictor of why anyone takes on any political action is whether that person has been asked to do so. Issues do not automatically drive people into the streets.” Social movement participants tend to have many friends and to belong to several organizations and other sorts of social networks, and these social network ties help “pull” or *recruit* them into social movements. Snow, D. A., & Soule, S. A. (2010). *A primer on social movements*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton. This process of *recruitment* is an essential fact of social movement life, as movements usually cannot succeed if sufficient numbers of people are not recruited into the movement.

An interesting development in the modern era is the rising use of electronic means to recruit people into social movement activities and to coordinate and publicize these activities. The “Learning From Other Societies” box discusses a now-famous protest in Iran in which electronic media played a key role.



*Participants in social movement activities are often recruited into the movement by people they know from the many social networks to which they belong.*

*Source: Photo courtesy of Olivier Laban-Mattei,*

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/arasmus/3629820798>

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## Learning From Other Societies

### Electronic Media and Protest in Iran

Less than a generation ago, the Internet did not exist; cell phones did not exist; and Facebook, Twitter, and other social media did not exist. When activists organized a rally or march, they would typically publicize it by posting flyers (which were mass produced at some expense by using a mimeograph machine or photocopier) on trees, telephone poles, and campus billboards, and they would stand on campuses and city streets handing out flyers. Sometimes phone trees were used: one person would call two people, each of these two people would call two other people, and so forth. Activists would also contact the news media and hope that a small story about the planned rally or march would appear in a newspaper or on radio or TV. Once the event occurred, activists would hope that the news media covered it fully. If the news media ignored it, then few people would learn of the march or rally.

This description of protest organizing now sounds quaint. As the news story about high school protests in New Jersey that began this chapter illustrates, a single Facebook page can ignite a protest involving hundreds and even thousands of people, and other social media and smartphone apps enable us to announce any event, protest or otherwise, to countless numbers of potential participants.

Although social movement scholars have begun to consider the impact of the electronic age on social movement activism and outcomes, the exact nature and extent of this impact will remain unclear until much more research is done. If one needed proof of the potential of this impact, however, events in Iran not long ago provided this proof.

In June 2009, thousands of protesters, most of them young people, took to the streets in Iran to protest a presidential election that was widely regarded as being rigged by and on behalf of the existing regime. When the government tried to stop the protests and prevented newspapers from covering them, the protesters did what came naturally: they tweeted and texted. As a writer for *Time* magazine later observed, because tweets go out over both the Internet and cell phone networks, “this makes Twitter practically ideal for a mass protest movement.” The protesters’ tweets and texts warned other protesters as well as the rest of the world what Iranian police were doing, and they helped the

protesters plan and coordinate their next steps. The protesters also used their cell phones to transmit photos and videos of the protests and the police violence being used to stop the protests; many of the videos ended up on YouTube. When the government tried to electronically block the tweeting and texting, the protesters and their allies outside Iran took electronic countermeasures to help thwart the blocking.

The *Time* writer eloquently summarized what Twitter meant to the Iranian protesters:

Twitter didn't start the protests in Iran, nor did it make them possible. But there's no question that it has emboldened the protesters, reinforced their conviction that they are not alone and engaged populations outside Iran in an emotional, immediate way that was never possible before. President Ahmadinejad—who happened to visit Russia on Tuesday—now finds himself in a court of world opinion where even Khrushchev never had to stand trial. Totalitarian governments rule by brute force, and because they control the consensus worldview of those they rule. Tyranny, in other words, is a monologue. But as long as Twitter is up and running, there's no such thing.

In short, the Iranian election protests in June 2009 revealed the power of Twitter and other electronic media to shape the dynamics and outcomes of protest. The day when activists had to stand in the rain on city streets to hand out flyers has long passed. Instead, they can tweet and use other electronic media. Social movement scholars, activists, and governments learned an important lesson from the Iranian protests. (Grossman, 2009)Grossman, L. (2009, June 17). Iran protests: Twitter, the medium of the movement. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,1905100.html>

16. The view that social movements are a rational response to perceived grievances and that they arise from efforts by social movement leaders to mobilize the resources, especially the time, money, and energy, of aggrieved peoples and to direct them into effective political action.

### Resource Mobilization and Political Opportunities

**Resource mobilization theory**<sup>16</sup> is a general name given to several related views of social movements that arose in the 1970s (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Oberschall, 1973; Tilly, 1978). McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, 1212–1241; Oberschall, A. (1973). *Social conflict and social movements*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall; Tilly, C. (1978). *From mobilization to revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. This theory assumes that social movement activity is a rational response to

unsatisfactory conditions in society. Because these conditions always exist, so does discontent with them. Despite such constant discontent, people protest only rarely. If this is so, these conditions and associated discontent cannot easily explain why people turn to social movements. What is crucial instead are efforts by social movement leaders to mobilize the resources—most notably, time, money, and energy—of the population and to direct them into effective political action.

Resource mobilization theory has been very influential since its inception in the 1970s. However, critics say it underestimates the importance of harsh social conditions and discontent for the rise of social movement activity. Conditions can and do worsen, and when they do so, they prompt people to engage in collective behavior. As just one example, cuts in higher education spending and steep increases in tuition prompted students to protest on campuses in California and several other states in late 2009 and early 2010 (Rosenhall, 2010). Rosenhall, L. (2010, February 28). Education protests on tap this week in California. *The Sacramento Bee*, p. 1A. Critics also say that resource mobilization theory neglects the importance of emotions in social movement activity by depicting social movement actors as cold, calculated, and unemotional (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2004). Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M., & Polletta, F. (2004). Emotional dimensions of social movements. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 413–432). Malden, MA: Blackwell. This picture is simply not true, critics say, and they further argue that social movement actors can be both emotional and rational at the same time, just as people are in many other kinds of pursuits.

Another influential perspective is **political opportunity theory**<sup>17</sup>. According to this view, social movements are more likely to arise and succeed when *political opportunities* for their emergence exist or develop, as when a government that previously was repressive becomes more democratic or when a government weakens because of an economic or foreign crisis (Snow & Soule, 2010). Snow, D. A., & Soule, S. A. (2010). *A primer on social movements*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton. When political opportunities of this kind exist, discontented people perceive a greater chance of success if they take political action, and so they decide to take such action. As Snow and Soule (2010, p. 66) Snow, D. A., & Soule, S. A. (2010). *A primer on social movements*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton. explain, “Whether individuals will act collectively to address their grievances depends in part on whether they have the political opportunity to do so.” Applying a political opportunity perspective, one important reason that social movements are so much more common in democracies than in authoritarian societies is that activists feel more free to be active without fearing arbitrary arrests, beatings, and other repressive responses by the government.

17. The view that a social movement is more likely to arise and persist when economic or political conditions weaken the government’s ability to oppose the movement.

## The Life Cycle of Social Movements

Although the many past and present social movements around the world differ from each other in many ways, they all generally go through a life cycle marked by several stages that have long been recognized (Blumer, 1969). Blumer, H. (1969). Collective behavior. In A. M. Lee (Ed.), *Principles of sociology* (pp. 165–221). New York, NY: Barnes and Noble.

Stage 1 is *emergence*. This is the stage when social movements begin for one or more of the reasons indicated in the previous section. Stage 2 is *coalescence*. At this stage a movement and its leaders must decide how they will recruit new members and they must determine the strategies they will use to achieve their goals. They also may use the news media to win favorable publicity and to convince the public of the justness of their cause. Stage 3 is *institutionalization* or *bureaucratization*. As a movement grows, it often tends to become bureaucratized, as paid leaders and a paid staff replace the volunteers that began the movement. It also means that clear lines of authority develop, as they do in any bureaucracy. More attention is also devoted to fund-raising. As movement organizations bureaucratize, they may well reduce their effectiveness by turning from the disruptive activities that succeeded in the movement's earlier stages to more conventional activity by working within the system instead of outside it (Piven & Cloward, 1979). Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1979). *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. New York, NY: Vintage Books. At the same time, if movements do not bureaucratize to at least some degree, they may lose their focus and not have enough money to keep on going.

Stage 4 is the *decline* of a social movement. Social movements eventually decline for one or more of many reasons. Sometimes they achieve their goals and naturally cease because there is no more reason to continue. More often, however, they decline because they fail. Both the lack of money and loss of enthusiasm among a movement's members may lead to a movement's decline, and so might *factionalism*, or strong divisions of opinion within a movement.

Government responses to a social movement may also cause the movement to decline. The government may “co-opt” a movement by granting it small, mostly symbolic concessions that reduce people's discontent but leave largely intact the conditions that originally motivated their activism. If their discontent declines, the movement will decline even though these conditions have not changed. Movements also may decline because of government repression. Authoritarian governments may effectively repress movements by arbitrarily arresting activists, beating



Political repression sometimes leads a social movement to decline or end altogether. The mass slaughter by Chinese troops of students in Tiananmen Square

them up, or even shooting them when they protest (Earl, 2006). Earl, J. (2006). Introduction: Repression and the social control of protest. *Mobilization*, 11, 129–143.

Democratic governments are less violent in their response to protest, but their arrest and prosecution of activists may still serve a repressive function by imposing huge legal expenses on a social movement and frightening activists and sympathizers who may not wish to risk arrest and imprisonment. During the Southern civil rights movement, police violence against protesters won national sympathy for the civil rights cause, but arrests and incarceration of civil rights activists in large protest marches looked “better” in comparison and helped stifle dissent without arousing national indignation (Barkan, 1985). Barkan, S. E. (1985). *Protesters on trial: Criminal prosecutions in the Southern civil rights and Vietnam antiwar movements*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

in June 1989 ended a wave of student protests in that nation.

Source:  
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:200401-beijing-tianan-square-overview.jpg>.

## How Social Movements Make a Difference

By definition, social movements often operate outside the political system by engaging in protest. Their rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins, and silent vigils are often difficult to ignore. With the aid of news media coverage, these events often throw much attention on the problem or grievance at the center of the protest and bring pressure to bear on the government agencies, corporations, or other targets of the protest.

As noted earlier, there are many examples of profound changes brought about by social movements throughout U.S. history (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Sue, 2010; Meyer, 2007; Piven, 2006). Amenta, E., Caren, N., Chiarello, E., & Sue, Y. (2010). The political consequences of social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 287–307; Meyer, D. S. (2007). *The politics of protest: Social movements in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; Piven, F. F. (2006). *Challenging authority: How ordinary people change America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. The abolitionist movement called attention to the evils of slavery and increased public abhorrence for that “peculiar institution.” The women’s suffrage movement after the Civil War eventually won women the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The labor movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries established the minimum wage, the 40-hour workweek, and the right to strike. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s ended legal segregation in the South, while the Vietnam antiwar movement of the 1960s and 1970s helped increase public opposition to that war and bring it to a close. The contemporary women’s movement has won many rights in social institutions throughout American society, while the gay rights movement has done the same for gays and lesbians. Another

contemporary movement is the environmental movement, which has helped win legislation and other policies that have reduced air, water, and ground pollution.

Although it seems obvious that social movements have made a considerable difference, social movement scholars until recently have paid much more attention to the origins of social movements than to their consequences (Giugni, 2008). Giugni, M. (2008). Political, biographical, and cultural consequences of social movements. *Sociology Compass*, 2, 1582–1600. Recent work has begun to fill in this gap and has focused on the consequences of social movements for the political system (*political consequences*), for various aspects of the society's culture (*cultural consequences*), and for the lives of the people who take part in movements (*biographical consequences*).

Regarding political consequences, scholars have considered such matters as whether movements are more successful when they use more protest or less protest, and when they focus on a single issue versus multiple issues. The use of a greater amount of protest seems to be more effective in this regard, as does a focus on a single issue. Research has also found that movements are more likely to succeed when the government against which they protest is weakened by economic or other problems. In another line of inquiry, movement scholars disagree over whether movements are more successful if their organizations are bureaucratic and centralized or if they remain decentralized and thus more likely to engage in protest (Piven & Cloward, 1979; Gamson, 1990). Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1979). *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. New York, NY: Vintage Books; Gamson, W. A. (1990). *The strategy of social protest* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Regarding cultural consequences, movements often influence certain aspects of a society's culture whether or not they intend to do so (Earl, 2004). Earl, J. (2004). The cultural consequences of social movements. In D. A. Snow, S. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 508–530). Malden, MA: Blackwell. and, as one scholar has said, “it is perhaps precisely in being able to alter their broader cultural environment that movements can have their deepest and lasting impact” (Giugni, 2008, p. 1591). Giugni, M. (2008). Political, biographical, and cultural consequences of social movements. *Sociology Compass*, 2, 1582–1600. Social movements can affect values and beliefs, and they can affect cultural practices such as music, literature, and even fashion.

Movements may also have biographical consequences. Several studies find that people who take part in social movements during their formative years (teens and early 20s) are often transformed by their participation. Their political views change or are at least reinforced, and they are more likely to continue to be involved in political activity and to enter social change occupations. In this manner, writes one scholar, “people who have been involved in social movement activities, even at a

lower level of commitment, carry the consequences of that involvement throughout their life” (Giugni, 2008, p. 1590). Giugni, M. (2008). Political, biographical, and cultural consequences of social movements. *Sociology Compass*, 2, 1582–1600.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The major types of social movements are reform movements, revolutionary movements, reactionary movements, self-help movements, and religious movements.
- For social movements to succeed, they generally must attract large numbers of participants. Recruitment by people in the social networks of social movement sympathizers plays a key role in transforming them into social movement activists.
- Four major stages in the life cycle of a social movement include emergence, coalescence, institutionalization or bureaucratization, and decline.
- Social movements may have political, cultural, and biographical consequences. Political consequences seem most likely to occur when a movement engages in disruptive protest rather than conventional politics and when it has a single-issue focus. Involvement in movements is thought to influence participants’ later beliefs and career choices.

### FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Have you ever taken part in a protest of some kind? If so, write a brief essay outlining what led you to take part in the protest and what effect, if any, it had on the target of the protest and on your own thinking. If you have not participated in a protest, write a brief essay discussing whether you can foresee yourself someday doing so.
2. Choose any U.S. social movement of the past half-century and write a brief essay that summarizes the various kinds of impacts this movement may have had on American society and culture.

## 21.4 End-of-Chapter Material

### Summary

1. Collective behavior refers to a miscellaneous set of behaviors that are relatively spontaneous and engaged in by large numbers of people.
2. Several types of collective behavior exist, including crowds, riots, disaster behavior, social movements, rumors, and fads and crazes.
3. The early contagion theory emphasized that crowds unduly influence individual behavior to be violent and irrational, but more recent theories emphasize that collective behavior is much more predictable and rational.
4. Social movements have been important agents for social change. Common types of social movements include reform movements, revolutionary movements, reactionary movements, and self-help and religious movements.
5. Explanations of social movements address both micro and macro factors. Important issues at the micro level include the question of irrationality, the importance of relative deprivation, and the impact of social isolation. Macro theories address the social, economic, and political conditions underlying collective behavior. Two of the most important such theories are Smelser's structural-strain theory and resource mobilization theory.
6. Most social movements go through a life cycle of four stages: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. Decline stems from several reasons, including internal divisions and repressive efforts by the state.
7. Social movements have political, cultural, and biographical consequences. Research finds that movements are more successful in the political arena when they use more rather than less protest and when they focus on a single issue rather than multiple issues.

### USING SOCIOLOGY

You are 35 years old and living with your spouse and 3-year-old child in a racially integrated neighborhood in a fairly large city. News reports indicate that two young Latino males from your neighborhood, both immigrants, were attacked and beaten the previous evening by a gang of young white (Anglo) males. Several people from the neighborhood organize a meeting to respond to the beatings. At the meeting, the organizers announce that a protest march will take place the following weekend to protest the hate crime that has just occurred. Do you participate in the march?