

## **A Sociological Primer on Crowd Behavior**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of “the crowd” suggests a homogeneity of actors, motives and actions that has been criticized as “an illusion of unanimity.” Nonetheless, traditional and contemporary theories of “the crowd” and collective behavior have sought to explain a unanimity that does not exist. Regrettably those theories have too often found their way into civilian and military police training manuals. The explanations these theories offer have been developed in the absence of a familiarity with what people actually do with or in relation to one another over the life course of temporary gatherings. I used extensive field observations to inductively develop a taxonomy of elementary forms of collective action. I then trained observers to take systematic records of gathering members participation in those actions over time. The most characteristic feature of temporary gatherings is variation and alternation rather than unanimity. Individual actors in these gatherings often act alone but intermittently engage in collective actions that are generated independently, interdependently, and by compliance with the solicitations of third parties. An explanation of this variation and alternation requires a different model of the purposive individual actor than has heretofore been exploited. Finally, I review evidence that the population of most temporary gatherings consists of some individuals but far more small primary groups of companions who assemble together, remain together and disperse together. Primary groups members are responsible for and responsive to one another. These groups figure prominently in the empirical record I review. Police who recognize this substratum of micro social organization may be able to communicate their messages to gatherings more effectively through these primary groups when attempting to manage or disperse them.

### **INTRODUCTION**

For more than a century the crowd has been a preoccupation of preachers, politicians and police who are concerned with mesmerizing, manipulating or managing crowd members to do what they are asked to do. Psychologists initially looked askance at crowds, usually from remote vantage points, and concluded that crowds were inherently despicable, either because they made everyone within them do despicable things they would not otherwise do (“the transformation perspective”) or because they were composed entirely of people already similarly inclined to do the same despicable things (“the predisposition perspective”). Some sociologists looked askance at both

psychological perspectives and argued that when a collection of people are faced with a common unique and problematic situation they are forced interact with one another to formulate a solution; that their respective contributions to that interaction are driven by their diverse predispositions; and, that the product of that interaction is a course of action that the majority follow, and that in turn becomes normative and thereby affirming those who act in accordance with the norm and sanctioning those who do not (“the emergent norm perspective”). Still other sociologists have borrowed the economists’ model of “the rational actor” (“the rational choice perspective”) and argue that people within problematic situations make decisions the same way they do elsewhere by formulating options and then choosing between them and acting upon the option that minimizes failure and maximizes success. By now considerable evidence has accumulated that dismisses the first two perspectives (cf. Postmes and Spears 1998; and McPhail 1971, respectively) , provides limited evidence supporting the third perspective (Tierney 1980; Aguirre et al 1998), and, mixed support for the fourth (McPhail 1991). Additional evidence is presented below.

The problem with all four perspectives is that they have been concerned almost exclusively with advancing an explanation for what they believe are the phenomena to be explained. Almost without exception, they have given no attention to specifying, observing, recording and describing the phenomena to be explained.<sup>1</sup> They offer empirical illustrations of the phenomena their explanation fits but none of the four can

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<sup>1</sup> Reicher (1984; 1996; Stott and Drury 2000; Reicher et al 2004) and his colleagues have invested considerable fieldwork time looking and listening to what occurs in both political protests and football supporter incidents. That said, their efforts fall more on the explanation side of the ledger than on the side of specifying and describing the range of individual and collective actions to be explained.

address the phenomena with which the other three are concerned. In my judgment this put the cart before the horse by advancing an explanation before becoming familiar with the range of phenomena to be explained.

Part of the problem is the concept of “the crowd” itself. In my judgment “the crowd” has proven to be a conceptual cataract rather than an instructive lens through which to focus upon the phenomena to be explained. “The crowd” implies a homogeneity of actors, of minds and/or motivations and, consequently, mutually inclusive or unanimous actions. One result of the conceptual cataract is a conflation of “the crowd” and “collective behavior.” More than forty years ago Turner and Killian (1972) wrote of “the illusion of unanimity” that both transformation and predisposition perspectives sought to explain. But neither those two sociologists nor most others took steps to differentiate or deconstruct the unanimity in question. A few sociologists (Tilly 1979; McPhail and Wohlstein 1983; Lofland 1985) embraced Erving Goffman’s (1972) alternative concept of “a gathering” which refers simply to two or more persons occupying a common location in space and time. Each person within the gathering might act alone, two persons might interact with each another, and/or two or more persons might act collectively.

Some gatherings are more or less continuous, for example, the populations of persons in prisons, refugee camps, and military encampments. Most gatherings are temporary; they have a life course that can be divided into three phases. Some kind of assembling process brings people into the common location and thereby forms the gathering. Eventually some kind of dispersing process vacates that location thereby terminating the gathering. The gathering itself is composed of all the actions –

individual, interactive or collective – engaged in by the persons who populate the gathering. As I hope to show, this allows us to break out of the illusion of unanimity and to appreciate the diversity of what people do alone, in relation to and with others within temporary gatherings. I will organize the remainder of this paper around the three phases in the life course of temporary gathering.

#### ASSEMBLING PROCESSES

I define the assembling process as the movement of two or more persons from disparate locations in space at time one to a common location in space at time two. They may travel short distances, e.g., from residences, work places, shops or bars to the scene of an accident, a fire, or a fight in the nearby streets; or they may travel longer distances, e.g., from the corners of a country or the perimeters of a city to a central location.

Those travels may be impromptu, ad hoc, or periodic, each with somewhat distinctive factors that influence when, where, how, why and with whom people assemble.

Impromptu assembling ordinarily begins for some individuals with the sounds of a traffic accident, argument or fight, or the sights or smell of a fire in progress, or the sounds of police, fire or emergency vehicles enroute that establish something extraordinary is happening nearby. Those with time and interest or curiosity may look out the window or step to the front door to learn more; they may even move closer to the scene see and hear what has happened and is happening. While they may travel alone, they are likely to see or encounter neighbors or colleagues or acquaintances with whom they may exchange queries or information. The extraordinary is not limited to calamities; league, national or international sport victories or even upset triumphs over presumed

superior opponents or traditional rivals often result in impromptu gatherings to celebrate the successful outcome.

Periodic assembling is perhaps the most familiar to any reader because it occurs every workday as people travel between their places of residence to their workplace alone or in carpools or on public transportation where it is more likely than not that they see many of the same faces of fellow travelers day in and day out. But there are also periodic assembling processes for school, for worship, for bowling and tennis leagues, for book clubs, for civic association luncheons, and for football matches and other sporting events for which there are season ticket holders. There are also periodic political protests and celebrations; indeed some draw both celebrants of the occasion as well as protesters taking advantage of sizeable audiences and media coverage of same to make their own statements; e.g., the annual “Remembrance Sunday” in London and the quadrennial presidential inauguration in Washington, DC

Ad hoc assembling processes are “one-off” phenomena, best illustrated by the majority of funerals, for which a second iteration is extremely rare. Family, friends and acquaintances and other mourners of the deceased travel one time, alone or with companions, from their respective disparate points of origin to the mortuary, cemetery, church, etc., where some type of commemoration takes place. The majority of protest events are ad hoc although some may subsequently become the first of a series or a campaign of protests in which there are daily, weekly, monthly or yearly iterations. The distinction between an ad hoc and an impromptu assembling process turns on the lead time between any potential participant’s initial awareness of the prospective or ongoing event or incident and the possibility of reaching its location before the event or incident

concludes. Impromptu assembling processes often commence and are completed within a matter of minutes or a few hours at most. Ad hoc protests and celebrations, and even funerals, are ordinarily scheduled at least 24 hours in advance allowing time for participants to cancel or reschedule competing obligations and arrange for means of transportation to the destination in question.

Who participates in these assembling processes and how does their participation come about? More frequently than not these phenomena prompt the question: “why do some people participate and others do not?” If you ask people why they participate you get a veritable cornucopia of answers (McPhail 1994). Research on participation in riots, protest events, and celebrations repeatedly indicates that there is no single motive, attitude, personality characteristic, or emotion (anger or joy) that differentiates participants from non-participants (McPhail 1971; Aron 1974). On the other hand, if you ask participants and non-participants when, where, how and what they learned about the event or incident in question you find some common denominators across these three types of assembling processes (McPhail and Miller 1973).

The majority of people learn about a protest rally, march or event through a chance or deliberate encounter with a family member, friend, colleague or acquaintance in one or more of the *social networks* in which almost all human beings are involved. Most people are involved in social networks with others with whom they share interests or who know of one another’s interests; they are more likely to call one another’s attention to ongoing or forthcoming events commensurate with those interests.<sup>2</sup> In those

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<sup>2</sup> The internet and cell phones have amplified with speed and breadth with which assembling instructions can go out to potential participants. Six months prior to the rally described in the following section, a web site listed locations around the USA where

encounters they learn something of the substance of what is taking place or is going to take place as well as where and when it is occurring or is going to occur. More often than not such conversations will include one or more suggestions, invitations or proposals to go to the location of the event or incident in question. The combination of solicitations with information about who, what, when and where constitutes what David Miller and I call *assembling instructions* (McPhail and Miller 1973). Solicitations turn out to be the critical necessary factor in whether an individual decides to assemble (Schussman and Soule 2005), although not the sole factor in predicting whether the individual will complete the assembling process. Two remaining and perhaps sufficient factors are *availability* - freedom from competing demands at the same time as the event in question, and finally, *access* - the ease with which the individual can walk, drive, ride or otherwise relocation from where he or she learned of the event to the location where the event takes place.

Many protests occur on or near college and university campuses. It may be the case that students are more likely to protest because they are learning to think analytically and critically about the world and therefore turn those tools to social, political and economic issues. A stronger case can be made for the social networks in which they are enmeshed and through which they are targeted with assembling instructions, the flexibility of their schedules, the lack of competing demands on their time, the ease with

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chartered transportation to the rally site in Washington DC had been arranged and for which seats could be reserved online. The same web site provided a message board where individuals could offer or request seats in private vehicles traveling from their home communities to and from the rally site. These means of communication are fed by and feed people with similar interests but the evidence suggests it is the combined effects of solicitations, availability and access that distinguish between who participate and who does not. Similar interests alone do not.

which they can assemble on or near campuses for protest rallies at the noon hour or following afternoon classes or labs, and, the economic resources that facilitate their travel to state and national capitals “to speak truth to power.”

The final and perhaps most important fact about the assembling process in the life course of most temporary gatherings is that most people do not assemble by themselves for sport events, political rallies, religious gatherings, or convivial occasions. Contrary to the stereotypical anonymity of the crowd, most people assemble with, remain together with, and ultimately disperse with one or more companions, either family members, friends, colleagues or acquaintances (Aveni 1977; McPhail and Wohlstein 1983; Neal 1993; McPhail 2003).<sup>3</sup> Many who assemble alone prearrange to connect with someone they know and with whom they will remain throughout the gathering. In short, the predominant composition of temporary gatherings is some singles and many small *primary groups* (Cooley 1909) whose members know one another, have at least a minimum sense of responsibility for each another, and can thereby exercise some influence over the actions they expect, demand, tolerate or discourage from one another. Police who understand this fundamental fact can often use it as a means of securing cooperation from gathering members.

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<sup>3</sup> My students and I (McPhail 2003) interviewed 10 persons assembling for and 10 dispersing from each of ten different sporting events. We asked those assembling if they were alone or with others and if the latter, the number of their companions. We asked those dispersing the same questions but also asked if they had remained together with those companions throughout the event they were now leaving. The correlation between the number of people with whom they were dispersing and the number with whom they reported they have been together during the ten gatherings was:  $r = + 0.964$ .

## ACTIONS WITHIN GATHERINGS

In the late 1960s, and with the assistance of graduate student colleagues, I began recording every action that two or more persons took with or in relation to one another in the numerous civil rights and anti-war demonstrations occurring on my campuses and in several cities throughout the eastern and central USA. We began recording with pen-and-paper, then moved to Super-8mm film, then 35mm slides, the videotape and continued this process for about five years. Another five years of analysis identified forty-nine elementary forms of collective action (EFCA) that form a crude taxonomy of what two or more people can do collectively with and in relation to one another (McPhail 1991). This includes eight forms of *facing* in common or convergent directions; twelve forms of *voicing* (vocalizations or verbalizations) in which they are engaged with their mouths; nineteen forms of *manipulating* (e.g., gesturing, carrying, throwing, striking, pushing or pulling) in which their hands are engaged; and five forms *posturing* and five forms of *locomotion* in which their legs are engaged. Details are reported elsewhere (Schweingruber and McPhail 1999).

With funding from the National Science Foundation we trained and deployed observers to take systematic records of their estimates of the proportion of three large gatherings (or multiple gathering segments) engaging in one or more of these EFCA. For the gathering we describe below – the October 4, 1997 Promise Keepers Stand-in-the-Gap Rally - observers observed for one minute every ten minutes and then entered their estimates on a seven point ordinal scale of proportions-of-participation that yielded the Rank Ordered Proportion of Participation (ROPP) score. Fifteen of the forty-nine EFCA

in the taxonomy were recorded with sufficient frequency to be included in our analysis. The ROPP scores ranged from: 0 = (No persons or only 1 person); 1 = (> 2 persons but < 20%); 2 = ( $\geq$  20% but < 40%); 3 = ( $\geq$  40% but < 60%); 4 = ( $\geq$  60% but < 80%); 5 = ( $\geq$  80% but < 100%); and 6 = (100%).<sup>4</sup> This ordinal score allowed us to average across multiple observers and to assign a ROPP score for each EFCA for each observation minute. In turn we could then calculate average ROPP scores for all fifteen EFCA for the entire duration of the gathering under observation and for different time periods within that duration, and could compute correlations between EFCA for the entire gathering and within each period.

Figure 1 presents the ROPP scores for one EFCA in each of the four body areas of action: for *facing*, the EFCA was ONLOOKING in the direction of the rally platform or its representation on large video monitors distributed throughout a large gathering); for *voicing*, the EFCA was CONVERSING among two or more persons; for *manipulating*, the EFCA was CLAPPING by slapping one hand against the other); and for the *posturing/locomoting* of the legs the EFCA was STANDING erect.<sup>5</sup> The ROPP scores appear on the right vertical axis of Figure 1; their approximate corresponding proportions appear on the left vertical axis. The horizontal base line is divided into ten-minute intervals marking fifty-five observation points over the entire nine hours of data

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<sup>4</sup> Two shifts of thirty observers each were deployed for five hours of data collection; observers from the first and second shift stood side-by-side during one overlapping hour to check for inter-observer agreement regarding the proportion of participation the same designated gathering segment to which they were assigned. Agreement exceeded 70%.

<sup>5</sup> The other eleven EFCA for which comparable data were collected and have been analyzed but are not shown here are: *facing I*(*convergent facing clusters*; *disparate facing pedestrian clusters*); *voicing* (singing; cheering; praying); *manipulating* (gesturing; embracing); *posturing/locomoting* (sitting; lying; kneeling; walking). The voicing data are discussed at some length in McPhail (2006).

collection. Two vertical lines further differentiate that continuum, separating the pre-rally period (10:00am to 11:50am) and the post rally period (6:10pm to 7:00pm) from the rally period (12:00noon to 6:0pm).

We drew upon two other sources of information about this rally to make sense of the results described in Figure 1. The first was an on-site survey by the Washington Post (Morin & Wilson 1997) of a randomly selected sample of 882 rally participants in which 90% of the respondents self-identified with the central ideological principle of the rally.<sup>6</sup> The second was a C-SPAN videotape of the entire six-hour rally period, containing a digital timeline in its header that corresponded to the timeline our observers followed in making their observation records. We transcribed that videotape record and could thereby systematically compare the actions by (and solicitations from) rally platform speakers and musicians that immediately preceded the observation minutes in which our observers independently recorded participation in the four EFCA in Figure 1 (and in eleven other EFCA not shown here).

The pre-rally period in Figure 1, 10:00 to 11:50 can be construed as the end of the assembling process that has brought people from disparate points of origin around the city, state, region or nation, to the venue in which the gathering is located. It is a transition period between the completion of that longer journey and the start of the rally or event for which people have assembled. As such it is also the time in which people are walking around “getting the lay of the land,” engaging in conversations with persons who

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<sup>6</sup> The question and responses: “Are you a born-again Evangelical or charismatic Christian? Yes 90%; no 8%; Don’t know/decline 2%. “The survey was conducted by a team of 20 interviewers, who were dispatched around the Mall and selected participants to interview using methods similar to those used in election-day exit polls. The margin of sampling error for the overall results is plus or minus 5 percentage points.” (Morin and Wilson, 1997, p. A01)

have preceded them, conversing about the journeys that have brought them to this location, and about the event that has yet to begin.

This rally was mobilized by the national social movement organization known as “The Promise Keepers” under the authority of the United States Park Service that is charged with the responsibility of reviewing applications for permits to hold “first amendment” (“free-speech”) events on the National Mall.<sup>7</sup> Once the application has been reviewed and tentatively approved, a series of meetings between organizers and representatives of the USPS meet to establish the “time, place, and manner” in which the event will be both permitted and protected. The important point here is that while the rally platform and elaborate sound and video systems were installed over the course of several days preceding the day of the rally itself, as were the hundreds of portable toilets, first aid and information tents, print and electronic media accommodations, the permit specified that the rally could not begin until 12:00 noon nor continue beyond 6:00pm. These beginning and ending times are critical both for scheduling the arrival of chartered transportation bringing people to the National Capitol from points around the country as well as for scheduling their departure to return people to their points of origin. Park Service “first amendment/free speech permits” also forbid anyone from sleeping overnight on any protest site. Thus, people began occupying the mall on the morning of the rally shortly after daylight and the gathering continued to grow in size up to its

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<sup>7</sup> The Promise Keepers are a movement of evangelical Christian Men and the substance of the rally was religious, not political. The other two rallies we studied with the same methodology were both political; one was a feminist rights rally sponsored by the National Organization of Women, and the other was an anti-abortion rally sponsored by the March for Life Inc. Our primary concerns are with the forms not the substantive content collective action. The two political rallies were smaller, of shorter duration and absent C-SPAN videotape records.

estimated 600,000 persons at the 12:00noon start. The venue was 90% vacated within one hour of the 6:00pm termination of the rally.

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamic variation of participation in four EFCA over a nine hour period in a large rally on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Two caveats. First, everyone is always *facing* in some direction, and everyone's legs are always in some form of *posturing/locomoting*. Second, everyone is not always engaged in *voicing* or in *manipulating* actions. With that in mind, a relatively brief excursion through Figure 1 is informative about four EFCA, some of their correlates and the implications for traditional stereotypes about "the crowd" and "collective behavior." ONLOOK refers to the proportion of people in the more than thirty observers' different areas of responsibility who were, in each observation minute, facing in a common direction toward the rally platform (or its representation on eleven giant video monitors that were distributed throughout the rally venue). STAND refers to the proportion of persons who were, in each observation minute, *standing* erect. CONVERSE refers to the proportion of persons who were, in each observation minute, engage in *conversing* with one or more persons. CLAP refers to the proportion of persons who were, in each observation minute, *clapping* their hands together.

Figure 1 contains several important lessons about collective actions in temporary gatherings. The first lesson is that there was never mutually inclusive collective participation in any of the fifteen EFCA, including the four in Figure 1, in any observation minute of the entire nine-hour period. These findings speak to the illusion of unanimous collective behavior that both transformation and predisposition perspectives were developed to explain and to the inadequacy of the concept of "the crowd."

The second lesson derives from comparing our observation records of the proportion participating in the fifteen EFCA against the C-SPAN videotape record of the six-hour rally period. Our transcription of the C-SPAN record established that immediately preceding 20 of the 37 observation minutes in the rally, there were solicitations from the rally platform for one or more facing, voicing, manipulating, and/or posturing EFCA. While there was always a sizeable proportion of compliance, it was never unanimous. This is a further refutation of the transformation perspective claim that immersion in “the crowd” results in “suggestibility” that yields mindless and mutually inclusive compliance with the solicitations of charismatic speakers. To the contrary, we can infer some proportion of mindful or deliberate noncompliance and thus of independence on the part of gathering members.

The third lesson derives from Figure 1’s display of dynamic variation in the proportion participating in all four EFCA across consecutive observation minutes. Although *onlooking* toward the rally platform (or its representation on the giant video monitors) was the predominant EFCA during the rally period, the proportion of persons engaged in *onlooking* (shown in Figure 1) fluctuates over time, and is inversely correlated with *convergent facing clusters* (not show):  $r = -.647$  overall. Similarly, *standing* (shown in Figure 1) and *sitting* (not shown) were inversely correlated during the rally period ( $r = -.672^{**}$ ;  $r = -.499^{**}$  overall).<sup>8</sup> While 90% of the sample of participants self-identified with the central ideological principle of the rally organizers, there was never anything close to 90% participation across time in any of the actions rally speakers solicited. This is a direct challenge to the claim of the predisposition perspective that it is

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<sup>8</sup> Two asterisks - \*\* - indicate that the probability of a correlation coefficient of this magnitude occurring by chance is less than 1 in 100 ( $p < .01$ ).

a shared and constant predisposition-to-behave that is responsible both for the formation of a gathering - “birds of a feather flock together” – and for what those individuals do collectively within the gathering.” Variation in behavior cannot be explained by a constant predisposition to behave.

A fourth lesson of Figure 1 lends some support to the emphasis of the emergent norm perspective on the interaction of people within temporary gatherings. During the pre-rally and post-rally periods, when there were no directions or solicitations from the rally platform, gathering members were left to their own devices. Thus we see that *conversing* was the predominant EFCA in both those periods as people engaged one another in conversations. In addition, if one traces the ups and downs of the little black triangles in Figure 1, one can trace the fluctuating undercurrent of *conversing* during the rally period. It was noticeably higher during the last three hours compared to the first three hours, and then dramatically escalated during the post-rally period as people commenced dispersing from the gathering location. While some of these conversations were undoubtedly between strangers, arguably more conversing occurred among the small groups of companions with whom most persons in such rallies assemble, remain, and then disperse. With one exception (3:40), no conversations were solicited or suggested from the rally platform. Instead, the conversations were interdependently generated by two or more persons with or in relation to one another, illustrating the importance of small groups of companions upon the actions of their members.

A fifth lesson of Figure 1 derives from the pattern of *clapping*, and its correlate *cheering* (not shown), and addresses the issue of independence and indirectly the rational choice perspective. None of the noticeably high levels of *clapping* in the 11:50, 12:10,

12:20, 12:30, 3:10, and 5:20 or any other observation minutes were solicited; nor was the *cheering* (not shown) that accompanied *clapping* ( $r = .553^{**}$  during the rally,  $r = .504^{**}$  overall). These impromptu actions are neither solicited from the rally platform nor are they preceded by consultation with ones companions or neighbors.<sup>9</sup> They are truly independently generated forms of collective action.

In summarizing the lessons to be learned from this one empirical record, we have something of a paradox. The transformation perspective may have been onto something when they addressed the problem of gathering members complying with speakers' suggestions or solicitations, but there was not a mutually inclusive mindlessness - "the crowd mind" - at work. The empirical evidence negates that claim. There is no mutually inclusive and mindless compliance. The predisposition perspective likewise appears to have been onto something akin to individual preferences and evaluations yielding impromptu but unsolicited clapping and applause; however, those preferences were never unanimously expressed across the entire gathering nor did they even reach the 90% level suggested by the Washington Post on-site survey of gathering members' ideological self-identifications. The merits of the emergent norm perspective are illustrated by the preponderance of conversational interaction in the pre- and post-rally periods but do not address the dynamic variation in participation in other EFCA

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<sup>9</sup> Gatherings are often asked to stand for, and sometimes to sing along with, the performance of their national anthem. They are never asked to clap and cheer upon its completion, but they do so independently and with regularity. Similarly gathering members independently clap and cheer the successes of their favorite football team (Zillman et al 1989) or a rally speaker's iteration of their political party's platform plank (Heritage and Greatbatch 1986).

throughout the longer rally period.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically the advocates of these three perspectives are analogous to the three proverbial blind men who touched different parts of the same elephant. The different answers each perspective generated to the different questions evoked by the different part of the problem each touched do not suffice for the questions and answers posed by the other two.

The same persons in the same gathering engaged in three patterns of collective behavior that seem to be produced or to develop in three different ways: some develop independently (e.g., clapping); others develop interdependently (e.g., conversing); and still others appear to respond to solicitations from a third party. One solution to this problem is to assume that the individuals who are participating in all three forms are autonomous and self-directing actors. While that is consistent with decision making process assumed by rational choice theory, the model of the actor engaged in that decision making process is handicapped by the absence of a built-in negative-feedback process that allows for reflection, correction, and continuous adjustment of actions in relation to the opportunities and obstacles presented by the environment in which the individual finds him or herself.<sup>11</sup>

Last but not least, human beings are quite capable of engaging in multiple EFCA at the same time. By comparing the ROPP score for any EFCA in any single observation minute against the mean ROPP score for that EFCA in the six hour rally period, we are

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<sup>10</sup> Among the more serious and long-standing problems of the emergent norm perspective is the difficulty of identifying the emergent norm independently of inferring it from the collective behavior for which the norm is alleged to be responsible (cf. Tierney 1980; McPhail 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere I discuss in some detail (McPhail, Schweingruber and Ceobanu 2006) a model of the individual actor as an autonomous, self-organizing and self-directing hierarchy of closed-loop, negative-feedback control systems. In the same volume I present empirical evidence (McPhail and Schweingruber 2006) for this model.

able to identify those EFCA that are significantly elevated above their period mean in any observation minute in that period. We have identified all those observation minutes in which two or more significantly elevated EFCA occurred and have designated them as instances of complex collective action. During the 37 observation minutes of the rally period there were four minutes with no elevated EFCA and eight minutes with only one elevated EFCA. Complex collective actions occurred in twenty-five observation minutes and ranged from two significantly elevated EFCA in several observation minutes to one minute with seven significantly elevated minutes. There is not sufficient space in this paper to introduce those data nor to discuss variation in the dynamic complexity of collective action as a function of the aforementioned three patterns by which collective action develops. That discussion will appear in subsequent papers.

## **DISPERSING PROCESSES**<sup>12</sup>

**Routine Dispersal.** Most temporary gatherings disperse in orderly fashion. Between 1963 and 1999 I gave more than 7,000 lectures to classes ranging in size from 10 to 250 students. With one exception (McPhail 1969), everyone dispersed in a timely and orderly fashion; no one was ever injured leaving the classroom. Knowing what time the class routinely ends allows students to plan where they will go and what they can do afterward. Similarly, year after year, hundreds of thousands of football, baseball, basketball, and hockey fans routinely leave professional, collegiate, and high-school stadiums and arenas without incident or injury. Fans also have a reasonably good idea of approximately when the contest will be over and can plan what they will do after the game and where. Most modern stadiums and arenas have been well designed to empty

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<sup>12</sup> This section draws extensively on McPhail (2006).

the stands within minutes after the end of the game. Some students and some fans linger afterwards to engage in conversation but eventually disperse without incident. In most cases students and fans disperse with the same people with whom they assembled and remained throughout the gathering.

Even riots provide some evidence of routine dispersal. Most riots begin on workday evenings or on weekend afternoons. Burbeck and colleagues (1978) plotted the chronological frequencies of arrests, arson calls, life-threatening emergency (EMT) calls, thefts, and robberies during the 1963 Los Angeles, 1967 Detroit and 1968 Washington DC riots; Porter and Dunn (1984) did the same for the 1980 Miami riot. These records show that riot actions began in the late afternoon, rose to peak levels between 10:00pm and midnight, then plummeted dramatically thereafter. Riot actions commenced the following afternoon and the same 24 hour cycle repeated over the subsequent days of rioting. Rioting is not continuous; both riot participants, and the more numerous onlookers, disperse to sleep, many have to work, all must stop from time to time to use the toilet, to eat, and even to stash whatever loot they may have accumulated.

**Emergency Dispersal.** Plane crashes, explosions, fires, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, and bomb scares present sudden threats requiring quick decisions on when, where and how to move out of harm's way. One stereotype of "crowd behavior" in such situations is that individuals "panic" and engage in self-centered escape efforts to save their own lives. A cumulative and sizeable record of research consistently and convincingly rejects that stereotype. Investigations of emergency dispersals from nightclubs (Johnson 1988; Johnson, Feinberg, and Johnston 1994; Cornwell 2003), hotels (Bryan 1982; Sime 1983), museums (Smith 1976), and New York City's World Trade

Towers (Aguirre, Wenger, and Vigo 1998), as well as entry surges at rock concerts (Johnson 1987), establish two facts. First, the vast majority of people in those temporary gatherings are ensconced in primary groups. Second, faced with those emergencies, individuals do not abandon their companions, nor do they disregard the well being of total strangers, even when the chance of safe exit is decreasing.

Johnson, Feinberg and Johnston (1994) conducted an exemplary research project on primary group behavior in the face of life-threatening disaster. They drew upon interview data from more than 300 survivors of a 1977 supper club fire in a Cincinnati, Ohio, suburb (Johnson et al. 1994). More than 2,500 persons were in the dining rooms, bars, and a cabaret lounge when the fire broke out; the majority survived; 160 did not. Most survivors and fatalities were members of small primary groups (married or dating couples and friends) or larger secondary groups of business colleagues (including some nested primary groups). While some survivors reported overhearing comments urging others to “move it up; speed it up a little bit in the front,” they also reported that “people were not pushing others out of the way. It was orderly.” One survivor reported thinking, “Don’t panic!” Another told others to “stay calm; don’t panic. Don’t anybody push or hurt anybody else.” Many were afraid but the fear was rarely incapacitating. Some individuals screamed or cried but more frequently than not they were comforted by their companions who secured their cooperation in accomplishing a safe exit.

These results are not without precedent. Sociologists Enrico Quarantelli and Russell Dynes founded the Disaster Research Center in 1963 at Ohio State University (now at the University of Delaware). Over four decades, in collaboration with colleagues and graduate students, they investigated more than 700 disasters worldwide. Quarantelli

(2001) reports there were very few instances in those 700 studies where individuals lost control over their own behavior or abandoned their primary group companions; more frequently than not they worked to ensure their companions' and their own well-being and often that of nearby strangers as well.

The ultimate consequence of social bonds and altruism among primary group members in emergencies is demonstrated by Cornwell's (2003) examination of the 160 fatalities in the same Cincinnati supper club fire studied by Johnson and colleagues (1994). Cornwell reasoned that primary group members in any setting are likely to remain together in the first seconds and minutes after learning there is an imminent life-threatening situation. He developed information about the primary group composition of the 160 individuals who perished comparable to what Johnson and colleagues developed for the survivors. He concluded from his analysis of those data that:

The fatality risk of individuals was linked to the fatalities of people to whom they were tied. Furthermore, the probability of dying in the fire increased when bonds to other dying group members were stronger. . . . Primary groups tend to either avoid fatality altogether or experience several fatalities at once. . . . People engage in affiliative behavior during disasters, and social bonds tend to remain intact even in the face of extreme physical threat. . . . In the end, we are social beings and we sometimes forfeit our own safety in the name of the social bond. (P. 635)

**Coerced Dispersal.** For much of the twentieth century, civilian and military police believed they were justified in using force to control or disperse crowds because

they assumed individuals in crowds had impaired or diminished cognitive capacities to control themselves (Schweingruber 2000). Thus, instead of attempting to engage them in conversation and to negotiate a nonviolent resolution of a confrontation between the police and a gathering of civilians, they might first order civilians to disperse or face arrest. If the civilians resisted, the police could then threaten the use of force; if resistance persisted, the police could escalate the force to whatever level was necessary to effect dispersal. Unfortunately, more often than not, when police ordered dispersal, that order was not audible to the civilians; further, an opportune path for dispersal or sufficient time to disperse did not always accompany the order to disperse. If the dispersal was not immediate or timely, police often resorted to deadly force to compel dispersal. Histories of the labor, suffrage, civil rights and antiwar movements throughout the twentieth century are replete with accounts of injured and dead victims of coerced dispersal.

**Negotiated Management.** At some point in the 1980s, police in state, regional, and national capital cities in Western democracies more or less independently concluded that protesters were neither cognitively crippled nor deranged and that it might be more productive to work with protest organizers than against them (McPhail, Schweingruber and McCarthy 1998). The fundamental underlying assumption was that rank-and-file protesters were more likely to listen to their own organizers than to the police, and therefore organizers had better chances than the police of managing their rank-and-file members. By requiring that protest organizers in the United Kingdom notify the police of when and where they intended to protest (Waddington 1994), or in the United States, that U.S. protest organizers apply for a permit that involved providing the same information

(McPhail and McCarthy 2005), an opportunity was created for the police to meet with the organizers and to negotiate the time, place, and manner of protest.

These meetings honored and protected protesters' rights of free assembly, speech, and petition, not least because of the development of a body of free speech law that guaranteed protesters rights and required that the police protect those rights as well as the property and persons that had previously been their primary concern. The meetings also provided an opportunity to inform protest organizers of the responsibilities police have for maintaining law and order, and to discuss the spatial and behavioral boundaries that could not be violated without negative consequences. The outcome was ordinarily a document (a protest permit) that literally provided a common page that both protest organizers and police could read and thereby understand who could do what, when, and where and the consequences of doing otherwise.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the negotiated management strategy. This kind of "soft policing" worked well in most capital cities of the Western democratic nations in the 1980s and 1990s (della Porta and Reiter 1998), but less well in the policing of transnational protest events at and following the turn of the 21s century (della Porter, Peterson and Reiter 2006). Negotiated management has not disappeared nor has the pre-1980s traditional escalated force policy reappeared, but new policing tactics have appeared in response to new styles of protest; e.g., the "selective incapacitation of protesters," as well as the reactive use of "less-than-lethal" weapons (della Porta and Reiter 2006). That said, two advantages of negotiated management must be noted. First, it dramatically reduced injuries to police and protesters, and there were no protester deaths from police actions in the United States from 1971 through the end of the century.

Second, once a protest is under way, there is at least one protester (the organizer) known to the police and at least one police officer (the police negotiator) known to the protesters, who can meet in the street and negotiate to resolve most emergent contingencies.

There are several disadvantages. First, one or both sides may withhold information, or one or both sides may not negotiate in good faith. They may say one thing during negotiations and do another in the streets. Second, protest organizers cannot always manage all of their rank-and-file members, let alone interlopers who may attempt to hijack an otherwise orderly demonstration and create havoc or disorder that will evoke the threat or use of force by the police. Third, some protesters (e.g., anarchists) will not initiate talks with the police, let alone apply for and negotiate the terms of a permit. All of these disadvantages have contributed to the expansion of protest policing strategies and tactics.

Until recently, the Metropolitan Police of the District of Columbia (MPDC) had a well-deserved reputation for protecting the free speech rights of the many protesters who take to Washington streets every year. There have been recent and egregious exceptions to that reputation that, in fairness to the police, had something to do with changes in protest tactics (Noakes, Klocke and Gillham 2005), and on at least one occasion led the MPDC to deny prospective marchers the right to leave their point of assembly and to move through the streets. That “selective incapacitation” resulted in civil proceedings against the MDPC. In their defense, the MPDC presented evidence that in the calendar year of 2003 they had successfully policed 291 protest processions in the streets, only 49 (17 percent) of which had previously secured a permit. MPDC argued that this was evidence of their willingness and success in negotiating even those demonstrations that were

proceeding unlawfully in the absence of a permit.

On several occasions over the last four decades I have witnessed police offering protest organizers, in Washington DC and elsewhere, the option of polling their rank-and-file compatriots for a show of hands in favor of dispersing or remaining in place and accepting arrest or worse. Sometimes the vote goes one way and sometimes the other, but it demonstrates that overtures toward negotiation can often suffice without resorting to the use of force. And even if there is no known protest organizer with whom the police may seek to negotiate, I have attempted to present evidence throughout this paper of the presence of a substratum of small primary groups at every period in the life course of temporary gatherings. There may be useful parallels between those facts and the way that anti-drunk driving campaigns worked in both the USA and Great Britain. Most will recall the television and newspaper advertisements asserting that “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk!” When attempting to communicate with a gathering the police seek to manage or disperse, they might well appeal to primary group members sense of obligation to and responsibility for one another: “Be Smart! Stay Safe. Don’t let your friends put themselves or you at risk!”

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