THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LARGE GROUPS

Martin J. Bourgeois
Department of Psychology, University of Wyoming, USA

Helen C. Harton
Department of Psychology, University of Northern Iowa, USA

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Contents

Summary

This article reviews the psychological literature on large group processes. After defining large groups and discussing ways of studying them, we present a typology of large groups. Next, we review historical approaches to mass behavior and present five modern theoretical approaches to the study of large groups. We then discuss imitation and other types of social influence that occur within large groups, and conclude with an integration of the psychological study of small and large groups.

1. What Are Large Groups and How Can We Study Them?

Research on large group processes goes under various terms such as mass phenomena, collective dynamics, mass behavior, and collective behavior. A search of the literature on the psychology of large groups suggests that it is not currently a thriving area of

research within social psychology. This may be largely due to practical concerns; it can be quite an unwieldy task to bring a large group together in the same place at the same time, gain control over variables of interest, and collect data. Furthermore, many interesting large group phenomena, such as the recent panic at a Pearl Jam concert resulting in the death of nine fans, come to the attention of social psychologists only after they occur, and we can at best try to explain them *post hoc*. However, new advances in the science of dynamical systems and the technique of computer simulation provide promising avenues in generating and testing hypotheses about large group processes.

People interested in group processes are much more likely to test hypotheses in the context of smaller groups. Researchers investigating group dynamics typically bring together a relatively small number of strangers (usually between three and 12) for an hour or two and ask them to perform a task, solve a problem, or make a decision. Much of what we know about social influence within groups, group productivity and decision making, leadership, and other areas of interest are based on such short-term studies. However, such groups are not representative of many large real world groups, which raises the question: what is it that distinguishes large groups from small groups, and how might group processes differ between the two? Before answering such questions, it may be useful to describe a typology of large groups, address the early history of psychological approaches to large groups, and finally explain some recent theoretical and empirical approaches to the psychology of large groups.

2. A Typology of Large Groups

Descriptive models, which categorize phenomena according to their shared characteristics, advance knowledge in an area by organizing previous results and suggesting directions for further research. Several writers have offered typologies of large group behaviors. McDougall categorized large groups into the following types: 1) crowds; 2) natural groups, including kinship and geographical groups; and 3) artificial groups, which could be purposive, traditional, or mixed. In the first edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Roger Brown suggested that collectives could be classified based on size, the frequency with which they meet, the degree to which the group members have a common focus, and members' identification with the group. Yet another typology by Smelser uses the purposes of the group to categorize them into value-oriented movements, norm-oriented movements, hostile outbursts, and crazes and panics. Social psychologists have tended to move away from typologies of collective behavior more recently, as indicated by the 1998 edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* in which there are several chapters on group phenomena based primarily on theoretical orientation rather than size. Because this article is an attempt to provide a concise overview of large groups, we have revived the typology, presenting one similar to those suggested by Brown and Forsyth.

2.1. Crowds

Crowds are large groups that come together only once or a few times. People may identify with the crowd at the time they are congregating, but it is generally a temporary identification. Milgram, Bickman, and Berkowitz studied factors relevant to the

formation of a casual crowd by having varying numbers of confederates staring up at the sixth floor of a nearby building. As the size of the initial group of confederates increased, more and more passersby stopped to join the crowd. More purposeful crowds can be subdivided into audiences and mobs based on how active or passive they are.

2.2. Gatherings: Audiences, Queues

Gatherings such as audiences and queues are simply large groups of people who are present in the same place at the same time for a common purpose (e.g. to watch a play or a sporting event). Typically, these people join the group deliberately, in contrast to the casual crowd that may simply be co-present when an unusual event occurs, as discussed above. The behavior of people in audiences and queues is typically quite scripted, with individual members closely following the norms of the group regarding such behaviors as entering, exiting, applauding, and so on. These types of large groups are typically very passive.

2.3. Mobs: Aggressive Mobs, Panic Mobs

Mobs are active crowds. This activity can take many different forms and purposes, and it is not always antisocial or irrational. For example, a mob of citizens may take to the streets in celebration of the end of a war, nonviolently sharing their joy. Two defining features of mobs are their emotionality and the shared quality of this emotion through all group members. Aggressive mobs, including lynch mobs and riots, tend to receive the most media attention. In 1987 a frustrated and angry mob of striking railway workers in South Africa responded to police intimidation and murder and loss of their jobs by unanimously deciding to kill five kidnapped workers who had refused to join the strike. The crowd pushed the nonstrikers into a nearby truck and drove to a wooded area where several crowd members stabbed the victims, dropped large concrete blocks on their heads, poured gasoline on them, and set them on fire. When eight of the strikers went to trial for murder, social psychologists testifying about the psychological effects of mobs saved the men from the death penalty.

Mobs may also be charged with fear. When a large group of people simultaneously rush to escape a dangerous situation such as a fire, escape routes may be limited, leading the crowd to push against itself. One of the most serious cases of mob panic killed 600 people when a fire broke out in a Chicago theater in 1903. While some of the people died of smoke inhalation, burns, or injuries sustained while jumping from the fire escapes, the majority were trampled or suffocated by other patrons in their rush to leave the theater, as evidenced by heel marks on the faces of many of the dead. Panic mobs can arise over less serious situations as well. In 1999, 54 people in Belarus died as a crowd attending a local festival surged into a subway station to avoid a sudden hailstorm.

2.4. Collective Movements

Collective movements represent incidences where large groups of people are similarly influenced even though the individuals are not physically located together. Fads and fashions are collective movements where individuals do not have a group identity.

Rumors and mass hysteria cause temporary group identities, and social movements typically lead to more enduring group identities.

2.4.1. Fads and Fashions

Fads are very swift yet short-lived changes in attitudes or behaviors of a large group of people. Recent examples include the popularity of the Hula Hoop and the Frisbee, and various forms of dance (e.g. line dancing, disco, break dancing). When fads pertain to styles of dress, they are termed fashions.

In the early part of the seventeenth century, a wave of "tulipomania" swept across the Netherlands. Tulip bulbs were first introduced into Europe about 1600, and by 1634 it was a sign of good breeding to have a tulip garden. Soon afterwards, the fad caught on in middle and lower classes, and prices for especially rare tulip bulbs began to skyrocket. Mackay relates a story about a Dutch sailor who mistook a rare tulip bulb for an onion and ate it, not knowing that its worth in sterling silver could have fed an entire ship full of sailors for a year. By 1636, tulip bulbs went up for sale on the stock exchange in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Leyden, Haarlem, and many other towns. After greatly increasing in value for a short time, the bulbs soon became worthless.

Looking back with four centuries of hindsight, we may find the tulip craze amusing. Yet at this writing, popular toys are being sold at 10 times retail value on Internet auctions. In the recent past in U.S. culture, sales of Cabbage Patch Kids, Beanie Babies, and robot dogs have shown a trajectory similar to that of the market for tulip bulbs 400 years ago. What factors may be responsible for such irrational fads?

One potential contributor to the popularity of a fad is perceived scarcity. Whether we are dealing with rare tulip bulbs or the latest toy, people want what they can't have. Robert Cialdini, a social psychologist who is an expert in social influence, went undercover for several years as a sales trainee in order to investigate compliance tactics used by salespeople and marketers. According to Cialdini, toy manufacturers deliberately decrease production of popular toys in order to increase demand.

2.4.2. Rumors and Mass Hysteria

Electronic mail and the Internet have provided a new way for rumors to spread swiftly. Users of electronic mail often receive frightening e-mails about computer viruses or the hazards of using a common product such as shampoo, tampons, or aspartame with an urge to pass the information on to those they care about. Several websites contain collections of such "urban legends." For example, one e-mail suggested that anti-perspirants are a major cause of breast cancer. Both this and many other "facts" in the message were false, but because they seemed reasonable on the surface, many people believed them.

Rumors contribute to mass hysteria, defined by Forsyth as "the spontaneous outbreak of atypical thoughts, feelings, or actions in a group or aggregate, including psychogenic illness, common hallucinations, and bizarre actions." Cases of mass psychogenic illness are neither rare nor limited to primitive societies. On November 12, 1998, 80 students,

19 staff, and a parent at a high school in a small town in Tennessee were admitted to the local emergency room for symptoms such as headache, nausea, dizziness, and shortness of breath. The problems began early in the school day when a teacher noticed a strange odor in her classroom and began reporting symptoms. Several students in her room developed similar symptoms, and soon students and teachers from other areas throughout the school also became ill. When the school reopened five days later, 71 more people went to the emergency room. Several government agencies, including the National Center for Environmental Health and The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, conducted an extensive investigation to determine the cause of the illnesses, but no physical causes could be found. They concluded that the outbreak was most likely a case of mass psychogenic illness. These "illnesses" are often preceded by an outside event (such as the odor) and symptoms in one person whose illness is quickly validated by emergency response teams. It then spreads, often encouraged by fear and media coverage, to other victims who believe they may have been exposed to that same event.

2.4.3. Social Movements

Social movements tend to be deliberate and relatively organized, and they are often formed to change social systems. Reform movements, revolutions, and utopian groups are all types of social movements. The norms that govern behavior of members within social movements are often designed to counter norms within the larger social system that are seen as inappropriate. The Rainbow Family of Living Light provides a prototypical example of a social movement. Formed in 1972 out of the remnants of the hippie movement of the late 1960s, the Rainbow Family organizes numerous regional and international "gatherings" each year to celebrate the causes of peace and harmony. Although the Rainbow Family prides itself on having no membership qualifications, no fees, no leaders, and virtually no rules other than that of "peaceful respect," a visit to any gathering, which typically takes place on national forest lands, shows widespread adherence to group norms. Upon arrival, each attendee is hugged by a welcoming committee and is greeted with a friendly "Welcome home." Alcohol is strictly prohibited inside a gathering, but the use of what may be considered more "organic" drugs is widespread. Each person attending a gathering is expected to bring a cup, bowl, and spoon, and some contribution of food. A "magic hat" is passed around to solicit donations for communal needs. Music, chanting, and dance are widespread. It is quite obvious that the Rainbow Movement, although it is a loose movement of like-minded people, has quite specific expectations of its members, many of which clearly run counter to the perceived norms of the capitalistic U.S. culture that spawned it.

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Biographical Sketches

Martin J. Bourgeois is an assistant professor of psychology at The University of Wyoming. His research interests include social influence, group dynamics, and the psychology of the legal system.

Helen C. Harton is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Northern Iowa. Her primary research areas include attitude change and social influence from a dynamical systems perspective.