

Muukkonen Martti:

## Continuing validity of the collective behavior approach

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### {1553} **Abstract**

This study evaluates the collective behavior (CB) approach that dominated studies of social movements from the 1920s to the 1970s. Its roots lie in five scholarly traditions: Durkheim (collective consciousness), Mill (a sum of individual cost-benefit calculations), Weber (charisma and bureaucracy), Simmel (interaction of individuals), and European mass-psychology.

Collective behavior studies began in Chicago University in the 1920s by Robert E. Park. His pupil Herbert Blumer made the basic classifications in the field. In the interactionist school, Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian stressed the emerging norms that modify CB and Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang focused on collective processes. In the structure-functionalistic school, Talcott Parsons stressed the impact of cultural trends in movement emergence and Neil Smelser developed a value-added theory of how social movements form.

Collective behavior tradition was attacked in the 1960s when its theories did not fit into the student movement and there was a paradigm shift to resource mobilization (RM) and Marxist approaches. However, with the rise of constructivism, the ideas of CB have been reinvented in new social movement studies (NSM).

*Collective behavior* (CB) approach was the dominant theoretical paradigm of American social movement studies from the 1920s to the beginning of the 1970s. Its roots were in European sociology and social psychology but it grew to a special subfield of sociology in America. It had two main strings, interactionist and structural-functionalist. Since it was unclear for a long time whether CB studies belong to sociology or social psychology

(McCarthy & Zald 1977, 1213, n.2), sometimes mass society, relative deprivation and progressive deprivation (or J-curve) traditions have been included in collective behavior research (Muukkonen 1999, 130-139).

In the 1970s a paradigm shift from CB to resource mobilization (RM) and Marxist approaches emerged. After the paradigm shift, the CB tradition was buried in historical reviews in introductions, and in textbooks with the repeated criticism that it focused too much on individual action and on the emergence of movements.

With the rise of social constructivism the theories of CB were reinvented – many “new” ideas in the cultural school of new social movement (NSM) {1554} approach seem surprisingly familiar. In addition, some recent empirical works have utilised CB theories (for example, Aguirre & al 1998; Muukkonen 2002, Weeber & Rodeheaver 2003). Thus, it seems that it is time for a new review of this classical tradition. I hope that this encourages my readers to explore the original works of these early scholars of the field.

### ***Roots of collective behavior approach***

Collective behavior approach can be understood as descendant of five European theoretical traditions: Durkheimian (collective consciousness), Millian (cost-benefit calculations), Weberian (charisma and bureaucracy), Simmelian (interaction of individuals) and European mass-psychology (crowds). It must be noted that Marxism, which has been important for European social movement research, did not influence CB tradition to a great extent. (On the roots of CB, see Tilly 1978, 12-51; Levine & al 1976, 813f.; Turner & Killian 1959, 4f.; 1987, 4f.; Eyerman & Jamison 1991, 15f.; McPhail 1989, 402-408)

However, in his review article on social movement research in Germany, Dieter Rucht (1991, 176) points out that none of the German classics provided refined conceptual tools for the analysis of social movements. The major influence of the classics has been in creating master frames and root metaphors for the academic traditions they formed. Thus, Simmel's thinking was important for Chicago interactionism as well as Durkheim's and Weber's were for structure-functionalism.

A practical consequence of the lack of defined social movement theory in Europe was that before, the 1960s were seen "as organised and strategically acting collectives" as Neidhardt and Rucht (1991, 425) put it. The only exception was the studies of The Movement, namely the labour movement. However, it was studied more as an institutionalised part of the welfare state. The major development of the field took place in the US and in the collective behavior tradition.

### ***Interactionistic school of collective behavior tradition***

The CB tradition has been closely connected to the Chicago school and interactionism. Robert E. Park, a pupil of Georg Simmel (Baker 1973, 257; McPhail 1989, 405), launched the term *collective behavior* in his Heidelberg dissertation *Masse und Publikum* in 1903. For him:

[c]ollective behavior, then, is the behavior of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common and collective, an impulse, in other words, that is the result of social interaction (Park & Burgess, 1924, 865).

Moreover, for Park, sociology was “a science of collective behavior.” He saw that there was a continuum from social unrest and crowds via gangs, political parties and social movements to the state. Thus, in studying crowds one can find the seeds of emerging social order. (Park & Burgess 1921, 42, 193).

{1555}Park’s influence (see McPhail 1989, 405f.) in the later studies can be summarised in three points: 1. He launched the concept of collective behavior. 2. Through him came the thesis of European mass-psychology that a crowd is, as Everet Dean Martin put it: “people going crazy together” (Turner & Killian 1959, 8; 1989, 5); and 3. He based the interactionist stream of CB on Simmelian sociology (Levine & al 1976). In general, he laid the foundations on which others built.

Herbert Blumer combined interactionist ideas of social construction with Park’s theories and systematised his teacher’s theses (Turner & Killian 1989, 6; Neidhardt and Rucht 1991, 423.). He also stated the relation of CB to the general sociology as follows: “sociology in general is interested in studying the social order and its constituents... as they are; collective behavior is concerned in studying the ways by which the social order comes into existence (Blumer 1953, 167ff.)” Thus, for Blumer, like Park, CB was a study of the emergence of social norms.

According to Blumer, the basis of elementary CB is *circular reaction*. It arises in a situation when people are together in a state of unrest and cannot relieve it with existing models of behaviour. This starts a process of milling, i.e., people recognize each others’ behaviour and seek indications of what to do. This, in turn, leads to collective excitement, which is an intensified stage of milling, and to social contagion, which “refers to the relatively

rapid, unwitting, and nonrational dissemination of a mood, impulse, or form of conduct.” The importance of this milling is that a grievance should be determined as a grievance before action can happen. As long as something is seen as natural, it is not a cause for a protest. (Blumer 1953, 170-177)

Blumer (1953, 170-177) kept the crowd metaphor but saw that all crowds were not alike. *Casual crowd* meant passers-by stopping to watch something that happens in the street. *Conventionalised crowd* was an audience or the spectators of a sports game. These types are not actually forms of collective but conventional behavior. The third type of crowd is an *acting crowd*, which is essentially a revolting mob in the streets. Finally, the last type, an *expressive crowd*, took its metaphor from revivalistic meetings where different expressions play central roles.

However, the crowd was no longer the only metaphor for CB. Blumer (1953, 185f., 189f., 193f.) saw the crowd as a group of people who acknowledge each other. A *mass*, in turn, is made of atomised individuals who do not act together although they can move to same direction, as in gold- and land rushes. Blumer borrows also the idea of *public* from Park and sees it as a platform of discussion. One-way communication differs from discussion and he labelled it as *propaganda*.

Finally, the fifth type of CB is *social movements*. They are “collective enterprises to establish a new order of life.” Thus, Blumer saw CB not only as irrational but also as creative and a mechanism for the renewal of society. Social movements can be seen as organised forms of CB. But {1556} there are different kinds of movements. *General social movements* are close to new cultural trends. These movements are like ‘voices in the wilderness’ and the

main characteristics are literature and mass communications. A *specific social movement* is one which has a well defined objective or goal which it seeks to reach. According to Blumer, it has several distinct stages that require different kind of leadership. It starts from restlessness and in this stage an agitator plays a crucial role. The next stage is popular excitement when there is more milling and the movement starts to have a direction. This stage belongs to a prophet or a reformer. In the formalisation stage, the rules, policies and tactics emerge and the needed figure is a statesman. Finally, in the institutional stage the movement has crystallised into an organisation which needs an administrator. *Expressive movements* do not seek to change the institutions of society but to relieve the tension and unrest with some type of expressive behaviour. Fashion movements and religious movements belong in this group. (Blumer 1953, 199-217)

As we can see, Blumer widened the spectrum of metaphors of CB and departed from the idea that it is irrational or deviant. The new root metaphors are different: gold or land rushes, public discussion in newspapers, revivals, and revolutions. Thus, his theory on CBs covers a larger set of phenomena than Park's metaphor of crowds.

Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian developed further the interactionist school of CB. They stress the actor's importance in sociological theory. They state that

[s]ocial change should not be regarded as autonomous, however, but as the products of interaction of individuals. Culture does not "change itself" in an impersonal, automatic fashion... Social adjustment is the product of the interaction of numerous individual responses. (Turner & Killian 1959, 40)

Authors saw CB as a breakdown of well-structured situation but not as irrational. For them, the key to action lies in the interaction processes that give rise to *emergent norms* that orient individuals in the movement's formation. Thus, when people face an unusual occasion, they first form a shared interpretation of their situation and then decide what should be done. Milling was, for Turner and Killian, a tool for creating a collective decision. (Turner & Killian 1959, 58-64)

While they deal with the whole spectrum of CB, they are the first ones to develop the theory of social movements in detail. For them “[a] social movement is a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or group of which it is a part (Turner and Killian 1959, 308).”

According to them, the main characteristics of social movements are collectivity, continuity and promoting or resisting a change. With this notion, they exclude quasi-movements like mass movements, migrations or gold rushes, fans of a public individual, and cults. Masses are atomised {1557} phenomena, fans attach to the hero instead of the cause, and cults do not want to change any social institutions. (Turner and Killian 1959, 308f.)

Although SMs have the continuity and organisation that CB lacks, Turner and Killian (1959, 308) note that inside SMs there are episodes that follow the dynamics of crowd behaviour. This is especially evident in the situations where the *esprit de corps* is aroused. In general, authors follow Blumer in understanding movement development.

Based on their notion of emergent norms, Turner and Killian divide movements into four broad groups. *Value-oriented movements* are those with a clear ideology and program. The

success or failure of these movements “is measured by the degree to which desired changes are prompted in the larger society.” *Control movements* have the ultimate goal of gaining power. These movements leave their “value objectives flexible or undefined.” This group includes political independent movements, nativistic movements and religious sects. Finally, there are *participation-oriented movements* whose activities “center around the satisfactions that members gain from the mere fact of participation.” This group includes passive reform movements, i.e. those that see the change as inevitable and prepare their members for the new order; personal status movements, which promise their members some benefits from being part of the society; and limited personal movements, which compensate the individuals for the frustrations of conventional life. (Turner & Killian 1959, 331-409)

Turner and Killian’s theory is largely based on Killian’s empirical work on different catastrophes. Their root metaphor is earthquakes and other disasters and this colours their work. Their basic concept of *emergent norm* arises from situations where a person is in the middle of ruins and desperately worried about his/her loved ones. In such situations an individual has to rethink personal values and is susceptible to suggestions from others. This basic finding is then applied to other forms of CB. An emergent norm arises when people observe each other and modify their own behaviour according to those observations. Thus the other root metaphor for Turner and Killian is the same as in Blumer’s public, namely discussion - the main metaphor of interactionism.

Like Blumer’s, Turner and Killian’s work is a theory of how social norms and structures emerge. As in almost all CB literature the interest stops when a movement has reached the point of an institutionalised stage. Since CB means unconventional behaviour, an institutionalised movement is no longer a movement according to this perspective.



Kurt and Gladys Engel Lang (1961, v-vii.) did not see unorganised behaviour as differentiated from organised behaviour as their forerunners. For them CB is a process in which one structure turns to another. These processes can occur both in organised behaviour as well as in elementary behaviour. It is question of *dynamics*, not of things, in CB.

Lang and Lang (1961, 43f; 51-206) divided the basic processes in collective dynamics into five categories: *rumour* or collective definition; { 1558 } *demoralisation*; *collective defence*; *mass conversion*; and *crystallisation*. Although these five processes are the basic forms of dynamics, the Langs emphasize that they do not always follow each other linearly. Mechanisms that produce and hasten these basic processes are integral to them. The first group of mechanisms is centred on the concept of *contagion* (imitation, learning by doing, circular reaction and suggestibility). The second group deals with the *leadership*. Authors divide the leadership into two categories: an informal leader (instigator) who gains the authority from other than official sources and a formal leader (initiator) who holds official authority. In addition to these, other leadership roles are those of innovator, influential and agitator (Lang & Lang 1961, 229-246).

The third mechanism in the processes of collective dynamics is the *susceptibility of followers*. Susceptibility depends, according to Lang and Lang, on how the situation is defined, awareness of alternatives, intellectual factors, motivational beliefs, self-confidence, need for high ego defending, authoritarianism, and ideology. The fourth group of mechanisms centres on the concept of a *social object*. This category refers to mechanisms that create victims, villains, martyrs, idols, heroes, and fools. Together, these mechanisms create sanctions and collective defences; serve as demonstrations of solidarity; give normative

standards of reference; condense and crystallise ideals; and can stabilise the situation (Lang & Lang 1961, 261-331).

Mass society has, according to Langs, some special processes like *public opinion*, *mass communication*, *fads* and *social movements*. SMs are “large-scale, widespread, and continuing, elementary collective action in pursuit of an objective that affects and shapes the social order in some fundamental aspect.” Thus social movements differ from previous forms of collective action in their aim to change society in some fundamental way. For them SMs are combinations of elementary and group behaviour (Lang & Lang 1961, 370f., 423f., 465, 490ff.).

While the other scholars developed theories on leadership in SMs, Lang and Lang identified four different types in adherency according to movement phase. There are

the *early converts* won over the movement when it is still small and sectarian. They are followed by the *active reinforcements*, ‘old fighters’ through whose support the movement begins to attain some significance even though the odds are still against it. The *joiners* constitute the mass of supporters who climb on as the bandwagon begins to roll and the movement becomes, so to speak, respectable. A last category, the *resisters*, consists of potential followers, persons who might be expected to display some affinity toward a movement which they strongly resist. (Lang & Lang 1961, 524f. Italics in original.)

Another distinction is between the active core and the periphery. The third way to distinguish among the followers is according to the degrees of involvement which differ greatly depending on movement type and size. {1559} Totalitarian and small movements tend to require higher commitment than reform and large movements. (Lang & Lang 1961, 526ff.)

Thus, the Langs see SMs a process of mass society. Although they stand in the tradition of Park and Blumer, they also utilise other theories. For good reason, their work could be classified as mass society theory but it has also elements of structure-functionalistic tradition. Although their theory remains one the CB level, it may be used to identify similar elements in organisational behaviour as well. For them, the distinction between collective and organised behaviour is thus only analytic.

### ***Structure-functionalistic school of collective behavior***

Structure-functionalism formed the other school in the American CB approach. To Talcott Parsons (1959), SMs were the implications of unusual events. Parsons developed the foundations of structure-functional theory of CB when he explained the turbulence in Europe in the 1940s to Americans. According to him, big social changes cause anomie and individuals react to these changes. The important point is that Parsons emphasised the implications of society's progress, not its break-down, like the interactionist scholars. For him, the major determinant for the emergence of Fascism was the rationalisation of the society and he saw Fascism as a countermovement to traditionalism. With this idea, he also explained the coalitions that Fascists were able to make.

Parsons combined the Durkheimian *collective representations* and Weberian ideas into one theory of collective action. In his article, there is already a glimpse of structure-functionalistic theory of action. However, it was Parsons' pupil, Neil Smelser, who developed a theory of CB in this tradition.

Neil Smelser was not contented with the previous studies of CB because “they imply that collective behavior flows from sources beyond empirical explanation.” His aim was “to reduce this residue of indeterminacy which lingers in explanations of collective outbursts.” This task called for an explanation of the following question: “Why do collective episodes occur *where* they do, *when* they do, and *in the ways* they do?” (Smelser 1962, 1)

Smelser (1962, 5) notes that there must be both *outside limits* and *internal divisions* for the field. Starting with outside limits, Smelser defines CB “as mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action.” With this he expands Blumer’s similar definition of SMs to the elementary forms of CB (panics, hostile outbursts, etc.). Smelser (1962, 8) also adds two other criteria for CB. First, there must be “a belief in the existence of extraordinary forces - threats, conspiracies, etc. - which are at work in the universe.” He calls these kinds of beliefs as *generalized beliefs* and notes that they resemble magical beliefs. Second, he adopts Blumer’s statement that “collective behavior... is not institutionalized behavior. According to degree to which it becomes institutionalized, it loses its distinctive character.”

{1560}The key to Smelser’s (1962, 13f.) categorisation is his concept of *value-added*, which he borrowed from economics. His root metaphor is definitely that of Ford’s manufacturing line. It means that each step adds some value in a process from raw material to the final product. In this way Smelser combines the conditions of any CB with some specific types. There are six determinants that he regards as important: *Structural conduciveness*, *structural strain*, *growth and spread of a generalized belief*, *precipitating factors*, *mobilization of participants for action* and *the operation of social control* (Smelser 1962, 15ff. Italics in original.).

Smelser's car factory analogy sets his theory apart from 'natural history analogies' of Blumer as well as those of Turner and Killian. In the natural history analogy, the previous stage is a necessary precondition to the next one. For Smelser it was not a necessity. He describes the stage of painting in the factory line: "the paint itself has been manufactured prior to the shaping of the steel." Thus Smelser separates the concepts of *existence* and *activation* from each other as determinants of collective action. (Smelser 1962, 19ff.)

Smelser (1962, 32f.) borrows the basic components of social action from Parsons. They exist in a hierarchical order from general to specific as follows: values, norms, mobilisation into organised roles, and situational facilities. In a Parsonian way, Smelser (1962, 44) sees in these components seven different levels which also move from general to specific.

A third major concept in his theory is *structural strain*. It is defined "as an impairment of the relations among and consequently inadequate functioning of the components of action." A strain in some form is needed if the episode of CB is to occur. However, Smelser (1962, 47ff. Italics in original.) states that "*any kind of strain may be a determinant of any kind of collective behavior.*" Thus, whatever its source is, strain appears first at the operative level.

In the same way, according to Smelser (1962, 84-101), generalised beliefs range from simple to complicate. The simplest form is a *hysterical belief*, which is a negative explanation of the situation. Its opposite, a *wish-fulfilment belief*, is a positive explanation. *Hostile belief* has both hysterical and wishful elements. The additional element is that there must be some kind of symbol that represents the object under attack. A *norm-oriented belief* "involves mobilization for action in the name of a belief envisioning the reconstitution of the Normative

Series (Smelser 1962, 109ff. *Italics in original*).” Many social or reform movements are led by norm-oriented beliefs. Finally, there is *value-oriented belief* that “envisions a modification of those conceptions concerning ‘nature, man’s place in it, man’s relation to man, and the desirable and non-desirable as they may relate to man – environment and inter-human relations (Smelser 1962, 120f.)” The *value-oriented movement* is, according to Smelser (1962, 313-316), “a collective attempt to restore, protect, modify, or create values in the name of generalized belief.” He includes in this group different nativistic, messianic, millenarian, utopian, religious, political, nationalistic, and charismatic movements.

{1561} The nature of CB to Smelser (1962, 71) is “a search for solutions to conditions of strain by moving to a more generalised level of resources.” He framed the society as a perfect machine in which every single detail had its proper place. Clearly, structure-functionalism has borrowed its idea of structures and processes from natural sciences but under the surface there lies the old Jewish-Christian idea of God as a Creator of order.

Smelser’s theory is a combination of material and immaterial elements in the CB. He has combined the different determinants into one single hierarchy that draws a map for CB. In this map, there are some points that must be recognised. First, the centrality of values leads a scholar to focus on the values of the movements and their environments. Second, the strains point to the tensions that grow when these values and reality are in conflict. And, third, the idea of added value reminds us that all movements carry their history within them. All new decisions are based on the cumulative decisions made before, internally or externally.

## ***Discussion***

The student activism of 1960s came as a surprise to both sociologists and governments. Neither structure-functionalists nor interactionists could sufficiently fit this activism in their theories. According to Eyerman and Jamison (1991, 19-23; see also Mayer 1991, 62), students were not taken seriously and their behavior was explained by psychological reasons like ‘the alienation of youth’, ‘oedipal complexes’, and ‘conflict of generations.’ Marx and Wood (1975, 364) note that during the same period there was a shift in the composition of students from detached researchers to “more activist researchers, who view the study of collective behavior as a way to encourage social change.” CB approach lost its reliability and the same sociology students who were labelled by structure-functionalist tradition seem to have reacted by dropping Parsons from their paradigms when they started their own research. There emerged a Kuhnian paradigm shift to the RM and Marxist approaches in 1970s. The lesson to sociology can be that it is not wise to label people with concepts that they do not accept.

Theoretical critics of the CB tradition have pointed out that it focused mostly on the emergence and micro-dynamics of the movements (see, e.g., Weller & Quarantelli 1973, 670-674). As Margit Mayer (1991, 60) put it: “they all explained the origins of social movements by reference to the same dynamics that accounted for individual participation in movement activities.”

While this is true, it must be pointed that this is just what Simmelian sociology is all about. Lang and Lang (1961, 6) express Simmel’s idea of society as follows: “Social structure in its simplest manifestation is revealed by the patterned interactions between two people.” Similar

emphases on micro-dynamics can be found in micro-economics and anthropological reciprocity research as well. Thus, it is possible that the subject matter of {1562} the critics lies in the debate whether the society is a sum of individuals or the individuals are products of the society. CB tradition cannot be criticised for its faithfulness to its definition! The validity of CB must be sought from its very essence, not from what it does not claim to be.

When one frames SMs as pressure groups or lobbies (as it is done in RM theory), it is natural to emphasise the continuity and strategies of the movement. Similarly, Marxist traditions on the labour movement, women's movement, etc. have coloured the understanding of movements almost as military, with established troops, and consequently from this perspective, their emergence is not as interesting as their internal and external dynamics or as their goals and strategies. In these approaches, movements are actually organisations.

With the emergence of new social movement studies, the validity of Marxist explanations of movements was questioned. The emphasis shifted again from the structures and means of production to individuals and many of the old CB themes emerged from this new perspective. It was again focused on people's collective reaction to previously unknown situations or structural strain (Alberto Melucci's thesis of SMs as opposing state's and market's intrusion to social life). It was again a question of values and beliefs, temporary participation instead of permanent membership, protest events, or negotiated definitions etc. (Della Porta & Diani 1999, 11-20)

While Europeans focused on NSM paradigm and Americans on RM, both in a way spoke of different issues. As Melucci (1989) has said, NSM tells why and RM tells how. However, realising that all SM theories are actually partial theories, as McCarthy and Zald's subtitle of



their influential article declared, there is a place also for old CB theories as well (on synthesis, see Diani 1992, 7-13). They do not explain everything but are still powerful in explaining the emergence process of collective action. For example, Blumer's idea of *general social movement* fits rather well with the seeds of environmental movement in the 1960s when Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was "a voice in the wilderness" that preceded the later movement when it emerged. Turner and Killian's development of Blumer's *milling*, in turn, explains how movement goals are negotiated and defined. Although theorising has advanced from the days of CB, there is no reason to downplay valid theories just because they are old.

### ***Short biography of Martti Muukkonen***

Martti Muukkonen is a Finnish theologian, sociologist and pastor of the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran church. His studies focus on sociology of religion and anthropology of religion. His dissertation *Ecumenism of the Laity* (Joensuu 2002) focused on the change and continuity of the mission view of the World's Alliance of YMCAs, 1855-1955. Studying an international religious youth movement has led him in nonprofit and social movement studies as well as in youth research. Currently he is studying the religious roots of different western welfare models as well as ancient welfare solutions. He graduated as a MTh in 1981 from Helsinki University and was ordained same year. After 15 year service in the church and in the YMCA he returned to academic world. He got a MSS in sociology in 1999, LTh in sociology of religion in 2000 and ThD in sociology of religion in 2002 –all from the University of Joensuu in eastern Finland. Recently he has been supervising students in the master program of leisure and recreation.

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