

# Collective Behaviors *versus* Social Movements: An examination of the differences

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**Abstract** - Confusion has existed for some time in collective behavior (CB) and social movement (SM) studies. In light of this confusion, I have endeavored to demonstrate, through examination of past research, the inconsistencies and erroneous postulations of cornerstone studies and propose a more adequate base model that demonstrates the differences between CBs and SMs – classifications that have, in the past, been used interchangeably. In addition to clarifying CBs and SMs, the specific characteristics that would assist in categorizing collective phenomena into one of the two classifications will be delineated. It has been found that CBs can be identified by observed high levels of emotion, heterogeneity, novelty, and spontaneity, while SMs can be identified by observed high levels of homogeneity, longevity/ stability, organization and resources. Finally, it is demonstrated that leadership-participants (agent provocateurs [APs] and informants) are more likely to be evident in either CBs or SMs. APs are more likely to be leader-participants in CBs while informants are more likely to be leader-participants in SMs. It should be understood that collective behaviors and social movements are not the same phenomena and that both categories as well as the attributes should be considered with a continuum model developed in this piece.

**Index terms** – collective behavior, social movements, agent provocateur, informant, collective action.

## I. Introduction

The study of collective behaviors and social movements has become more and more relevant in the social sciences. Interestingly, there still exists a great deal of confusion concerning the concepts and characteristics of collective behaviors *and* social movements. I emphasize *and* primarily because past research, on several occasions, did not differentiate between the two. In fact, they used the terms interchangeably if not put all related matters under a newer term, “collective action”. This piece’s primary purpose is to propose a differentiated understanding of collective behaviors and social movements as well as to propose aspects and characteristics that describe both more clearly. By examining past research within the field, examples of inconsistencies will be identified and a general model will be proposed to counter those issues. In addition to dealing with the elements of both types of collective phenomena, particular leadership-participants that would more likely be present in one type than another will also demonstrate. Taken as a whole, this work will present a better base model for future collective behavior and social movement studies, instruction, and application.

## II. Inconsistencies of past research

It is clear in past research that misclassifications of

collective behaviors and social movements have led to erroneous research postulations. For instance, Snow, et al.’s “Victory Celebrations as Theater: A Dramaturgical Approach to Crowd Behavior” (1981), does a solid analysis of celebrations of the *University of Texas* football fans during the surprisingly successful 1977 season. But, in the authors’ fervor to make a case for their proposed dramaturgical approach, they attempt to discredit competing, well-established, theories that, in some cases, could have been successfully applied.

1) *Convergence theory* works for the very same reasons that the authors’ stated it did not work. Snow et al. argue that convergence theory does not work in this case because convergence infers “uniformity of action to hypothetically shared backgrounds or dispositions among the participants” (1981:24). They state that the majority number participating in the crowd behavior were U.T. students but that by no means constitutes homogeneity (1981). This is an arguable position. It can easily be conceived that since the same event sparked these celebrations and so many U.T. students were involved that general homogeneity could be supported. Equally, one must consider celebrant crowd behavior to be collective behavior and not a social movement. In this case, it would not be expected that homogeneity would be present on many levels or a specific feature of the analysis because collective behavior is largely a chaotic, heterogeneous development (Smelser, 1963; Turner & Killian, 1987). Also, since dominant emotion plays such an important role within collective behavior (Lofland, 1981), it could be assumed that the emotions may bring about homogeneity within a group of which most other aspects would still be heterogeneous. In essence, convergence theory supports similarity of background, similar affiliations, and the similar or same event experience to produce the general level of homogeneity. Snow et al. (1981) are simply not identifying properly and differentiating the characteristics of collective behavior in order to come to their conclusion that convergence theory would not be helpful in their analysis of celebrant crowds.

2) *Contagion theory* also applies to celebrant crowd behavior for many of the same reasons that Snow et al. (1981) state it doesn’t. Contagion theory, according to Blumer (1951), Freud (1922), and LeBon (1903), attributes crowd behavior to a breakdown of participants’ cognitive capabilities. Although Snow and colleagues (1981) state that there was no real

uniformity of action observed in the celebrant crowd behavior, it can be conceived that there was an aspect of uniformity involved that would cover Blumer's (1951) hypothesized assumption. Much of this uniformity of action is based on the dominant emotion being able to overcome cognition of the participants. This contention is tantamount to sheep, losing cognition, and collectively jumping off a cliff.

Consider the fact that the *University of Texas* football team had been out of the running for some time for a national championship. There was not much success projected for the 1977 season because it was considered a rebuilding season for Texas. Once the arch rival Oklahoma was surprisingly beaten for the first time in seven years, we could understand that there would be a *uniform* swelling of dominant emotion. Snow et al. (1981) describe very little uniformity of action but do not conceive of how uniformity of emotion can produce a number of different actions at or around the same time. Not only could uniformity of emotion be found in this case, but also some uniformity of action which the authors conveniently overlook. These uniform actions are: gathering in the same place and celebrating in general – both of which are in response to a surprise victory by the Longhorns' football team (Snow et al., 1981). Therefore, Contagion theory would be helpful and can be applied to celebrant crowd behavior.

This piece is not meant to be a criticism of primarily Snow et al.'s (1981) research having to do with celebrant crowd behavior or the dramaturgical approach to analysis of such behavior. It is possible to apply their model of dramaturgy and it would be helpful at looking at many aspects of the crowd behavior that was observed during the 1977 Texas football season. Still, these criticisms reside with a long line of cornerstone research that did not adequately differentiate between collective behaviors and social movements which lead to such erroneous research postulations and added to the confusion within the subfield. For instance, Lewis Killian's (1984) study concerning organization, rationality and spontaneity of the civil rights movement did not differentiate collective behaviors and social movements and therefore presented a confusing argument that all those elements existed within the movement. This is not an accurate portrayal of the information they provided. It is safe to say, that most social movements evolve from some collective behaviors (Hayes, 1975). This being the case, then the Civil Rights Movement has to be differentiated temporally from the beginning (which would include more elements of collective behaviors) from the later phases (which would include more elements of social movements). This means, that in some cases, collective behaviors maintain enough stability to become organized social movements. Still, transitions are necessary with certain elements to ensure CBs to SMs development. Therefore, the old adage statement that all collective behaviors are social movements is inaccurate and usually the result of researchers not temporally differentiating when some of these phenomenon show the CB elements early on and SM elements later. This was beginning to be understood with John

Lofland's (1981) article concerning the elementary forms of collective behavior.

### III. A model differentiating CBs and SMs

Most collective phenomena research before Lofland's piece actually used collective behavior and social movement terms interchangeably (see Smelser, 1963; Blumer, 1971; Zald & Berger, 1971; Weller & Quarantelli, 1973; Orum, 1974). The need to differentiate CBs and SMs on a basis of a number of characteristics can be accomplished with figures 1 and 2. First, in figure 1, size and transition issues can be described with examples in the research that seem to meet the classification denoted.

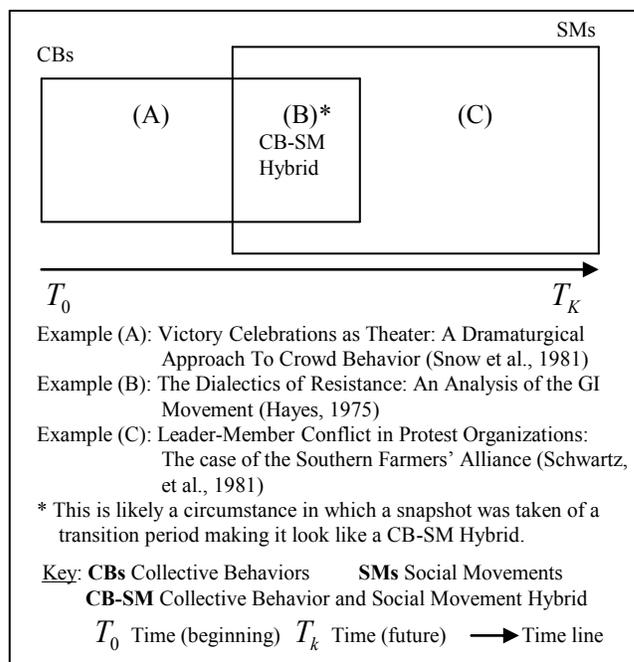


Figure 1: Conceptual representation of some important characteristics of CBs, CB-SM, and SMs (size and transition with examples).

An important feature of CBs and SMs is size. Size of organizational structure and the population involved. These characteristics will be defined and described in more detail when the continuum model is introduced and discussed. Yet, at this point, it is still prudent to generally discuss size. Collective behaviors will include less people and have virtually no organizational structure. The CB-SM classification is likely a snapshot of a CB making a transition to a SM. Most CBs cease to exist (for reasons that will be explained later) but a few actually morph into SMs. This circumstance has created some confusion in the literature that justifies lopping all classifications together and, as it is being argued here, wrongfully so. Still, such a transition from CB to SM would happen over time if the CB does not cease to exist. Therefore, a time line is included in Figure 1. Each classification that is represented above includes an example that was found to clearly fit that specific classification.

It should be understood that CBs and SMs must be identified and recognized on separate poles of a continuum. More importantly, the elements of CBs and SMs must be recognized as evident in varying levels on a continuum as well.

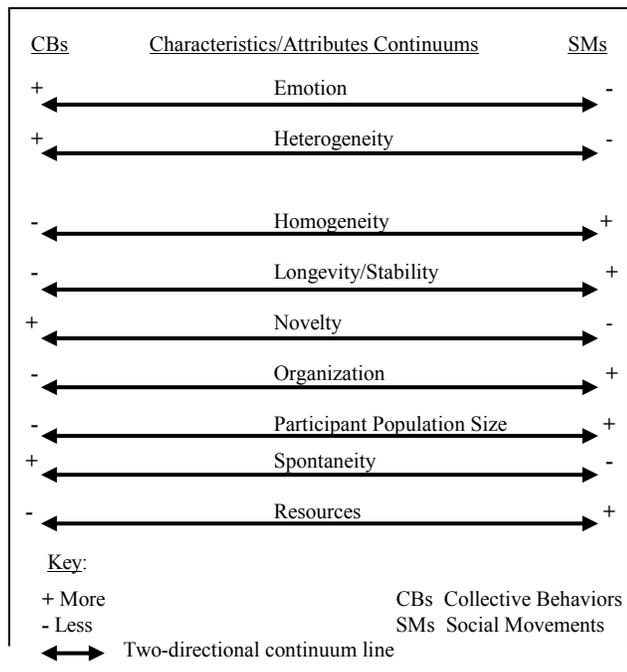


Figure 2: A CB and SM Characteristics/Attributes Continuum Model

Sections IV and V will define and describe the various attributes of collective behaviors (CBs) and social movements (SMs), respectively, represented within the above continuum model.

#### IV. Concerning collective behaviors

**Definition:** collective behaviors (CBs) are spontaneously gathered and acting crowds that are responding emotionally and seemingly chaotically to some cues or events within the social environment. CBs typically have a smaller number of participants, are short-lived, and generally rare compared to SMs. Referring to figure 2, we would assume the following elements to be strong within CBs: emotion, heterogeneity, novelty, and spontaneity.

**Emotion:** emotion is the feeling and irrational determination of participants. This is a key element in collective behaviors (Lofland, 1981). This element allows us to consider heterogeneity of participants because dominant emotion can overcome social background differences. As a matter of need, in order to overcome all the differences that a spontaneously developed crowd may have, some dominant emotion must be present which will supersede such differences and create a *homogenic-looking* collection of participants.

**Heterogeneity:** heterogeneity is also more likely to be found with CBs because of the spontaneity of the development of such phenomenon (Lofland, 1981). Heterogeneity is the

difference in characteristics of backgrounds and purposes of participants. These differences can be expressed in social class, race, ethnicity, age, etc. as well as a general understanding or reason for their feelings as well as for what is collectively happening. This also suggests that participants may have different ideas concerning what outcome may be produced by the collective action (if any idea of outcome is understood at all).

**Novelty:** novelty is considered new behavior that exists from existing routines (Davis, 1949; Lang & Lang, 1961; Fairchild, 1965; Aguirre et al., 1988). This newness of response is made to counter some socio-environmental cue or event. CBs typically have short life expectancies and run during the newness of the actions, activities or in the gathering of the participants (Blumer, 1968). Once the novelty wears off, then we would expect that less emotion would be maintained and collective behaviors would either cease to exist or turn into social movements (Klapp, 1972; Lofland, 1981).

**Spontaneity:** spontaneity is the inclusion of what seems to be un-planned acts that spread rapidly among prospective participants (Lang & Lang, 1961; Blumer, 1969; Fairchild, 1965). We would expect dominant emotion to be wrapped up in the spontaneity of the phenomenon. If the dominant emotion is strong, there is a greater likelihood (as well as a push) of spontaneous actions from the participants.

CBs may have varying levels of strength for the four elements listed above but still would include a significant amount of each and far more than what would be expected in SMs. In summary, gatherings of participants that demonstrate dominant emotion, heterogeneity, novelty, and spontaneity should be classified strictly as collective behaviors.

#### V. Concerning social movements

**Definition:** social movements (SMs) are stable and organized approaches by a given population to facilitate some social change for a society or community (Lofland, 1981). As described in the definition, SMs can be maintained for longer periods of time (stable), involve better resources, communication, planning, and connectiveness between the participants (organization). Because of the higher element of organization, we would expect a larger number of participants which can be spread over great distances (not just in one locale). We would expect certain characteristics to be more common in SMs than in CBs. The following is a list of the characteristics that will be identifiers for SMs: homogeneity, longevity/stability, organization, participant population size and resources. Many of these characteristics, as you will see, will have influence on or influenced by the other characteristics.

**Homogeneity:** homogeneity is when there is similarity in characteristics of backgrounds and purposes of participants. This is found in SMs primarily because participation is voluntary whether for pay or not. The aims of participants of organizations are generally the same. Those that decide to work for AARP (American Association for Retired Persons)

are going to have similar aims of forwarding or working for pro-elderly policies and programs. Not only that, but many that decide to work for AARP whether for pay or as volunteers are typically older Americans and/or those with pro-elderly philosophies. Consider as well that because dominant emotions are not as evident in such organizations, then the only aspect that can keep solidarity and provide for stability would have to be a general homogeneity of purpose as well as background of participants.

**Longevity/stability:** Longevity/stability concerns how long SMs can maintain themselves over time. Organizations that sprouted from CBs like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), American Association for Retired Persons (AARP), National Rifle Association (NRA) as well as those that have been studied in the literature (women’s movements, farmers’ alliances, Alcoholics Anonymous, etc.) have been around for some time and have maintained themselves relatively well. SMs need to have longer lives because it takes significantly more time for their cause to be diffused to the public since the characteristics of dominant emotion and/or spontaneity are not present. Consider also CBs do not usually have an amount of resources that allow for organization and stability to be maintained while SMs typically do. All of this compounds the element of longevity/stability making it a characteristic of SMs.

**Organization:** organization includes a number of aspects such as development, inter-connectiveness of participants, communication, and resources (as well as the effective and efficient use of resources). Organization is the developed, effective and stable approach to achieving some goal or in doing some activity. It is the element of organization that allows for longevity/stability and even a focused sense of purpose for the participants. This element may be the biggest differentiator between CBs (which do not have it to great measure) and SMs (which do have it as a prominent characteristic).

**Participant Population Size:** population sizes vary with all crowd or organized behaviors, but what has been recognized in the research is that population size of participants differ on average when looking at CBs and SMs (see Orum, 1974; Griffin, Wallace, and Rubin, 1986). Although you may think that some CBs have a large number of participants (L.A. Rodney King Riots, Cincinnati race riots, etc.), relatively speaking, SMs incorporate far more people in both the short and long terms. Although tens of thousands may participate easily in large city block riots (CBs), hundreds of thousands easily participate in organized approaches to social change (SMs). Organization is necessary for the inclusion of so many participants (especially over state and international boundaries).

**Resources:** resources have to do with manpower and funding to ensure the organization can be maintained. Therefore, we would expect resources to be more widely available for SMs than for CBs (see McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

Still, if in the transitory period between CBs becoming SMs (CBs-SMs), we would expect resource mobilization to be a key factor in whether or not such transitions are completed and the organization within SMs become stable. Because of the short lifespan of CBs (and even though a lot of emotion is involved), we would expect that when controlling for the amount of time they exist, they do not have a lot of success at mobilizing resources (mainly due to the lack of social integration/ networking).

## VI. Concerning leadership types of collective phenomena

Gary Marx (1974) introduced two leader-participant types when it came to collective phenomena: *agent provocateurs (APs)* and *informants*. He described these leadership types as being neglected in the study of crowd behavior. In truth, aspects were neglected by Marx in not recognizing that these types are particular to whether one or the other is more likely to be present in either CBs or SMs. CBs would have a higher probability of having APs and SMs would have a higher probability of having informants. This section explains why this would be the case.

Participant-leadership dichotomies	
CBs Agent Provocateur	SMs Informant
<u>Characteristics</u>	
Proactive Planner (has agenda) Charismatic Resourcefulness	Reactive May not have an agenda Instrumental Not particularly innovative
<u>Advantages</u>	
Uses dominant emotion Manages time constraint Feeds spontaneity Provides lasting leadership (as long as the CB exists)	Provides needed information Provides some stability Feeds homogeneity
<u>Disadvantages</u>	
Can misrepresent info Can misdirect group action	Only limited usefulness Cannot greatly alter course

Figure 3: Leadership types matched to collective behaviors (CBs) and social movements (SMs)

To be more exact, Gary Marx saw these two types as participants within SMs. They are portrayed as leader-participant types because these participants do become important within collective phenomena. APs seek to influence and direct the actions of the group. Informants, on the other hand, usually only have information gathering and applying roles.

APs have several defining characteristics. APs would be observed as being proactive, a planning facilitator, charismatic/energetic, and resourceful. In understanding the various characteristics of CBs, you understand why the APs have these aspects to offer. Because CBs lack organization, sometimes the dominant emotions of participants need

guidance. Thus, we would expect APs to fill this function by providing directions to express such dominant emotion.

CBs also have an element of spontaneity. APs would be expected to “seize the moment” and quickly provide direction and ideas to emotional participants looking to express themselves. Therefore, we can conceive of at least a small amount of preparedness and planning on the part of APs.

In terms of APs ability to come to the forefront and be recognized by a spontaneous situation filled with emotional participants, we expect them to be highly charismatic and energetic. This would vault APs within the minds of the participants as well as make seemingly chaotic and emotional participants loyal to the whims of the APs. This, in turn, allows the APs to act outside generally regarded rules providing for innovativeness and possible deviance in their decisions for the participants’ actions.

According to Marx (1974), APs are more capable of molding and defining the action of a collective because they can fan the flames of emotion of the participants. APs may misrepresent information in order to get the collective to go along with their desired actions. Since this participant type can use dominant emotion of collectives for their own desires, this makes APs more powerful in defining the intentions of the participants. Being that SMs play down dominant emotions and are lacking in spontaneity, then APs would not wheel such influence with organized and stable groups. Lastly, we would expect that APs be capable of maintaining themselves as integral parts of CBs for as long as the CB lives (a relatively short life expectancy).

The disadvantages of APs are that they can get carried away and sweep the participants of CBs with them. APs are fine as long as they can keep the dominant emotion flowing and the collective participants fulfilled with purpose. This may not be the case as APs may be more focused on their more egocentric designs than on the emotional outpouring and desires of the collective participants.

Informants, on the other hand, can be integral parts of SMs but only as long as they have information to provide. Informants would be expected to be reactive and not proactive. They will tend to offer information typically in parts and pieces in response to the needs of an organized group. This makes the informant more instrumental and less agenda-based. The informant typically just has one small piece of the bigger picture. As soon as informants have given up their useful information, they seldom are of any further use to social movements. We see the informant’s tenure as short-lived. But, the information provided by informants will see to the solidarity and stability of SMs. The diffusion of the informant’s information will also unify purpose providing for more homogeneity.

One disadvantage already stated is that the informant’s tenure is short-lived. Informant are less likely to be able to change the course of SMs on the basis of the information they can provide. This makes informants’ impacts on a SMs considerably less than APs on CBs.

Concerning both types, there is a chance that CBs will not have any leadership-participants at all. This is not likely with SMs which will produce management for their organizations that will see to stability and effective use of resources. Therefore, it must be said that you can expect some level of management structure with SMs while this is not typically observed within CBs – in fact, many have no discernable management at all (hence they seem uncontrollable and chaotic masses).

## VII. Qualifications

Having focused on misclassifications and erroneous postulates of past research should not put questions in the minds of researchers and readers concerning the adequacy of the overall results of much of that work. Even though these researchers have had some classification problems, it is their research that has allowed this examination to come to fruition. This piece exists on the backs of many researchers that provided very necessary information which contributed greatly to the results. Please also understand that even though the same nomenclature was not used, several past research pieces in collective phenomena did recognize the difference between CBs and SMs (see Hayes, 1975; Blumberg, 1977; Lofland, 1981; Schwartz et al., 1981; Aguirre, 1984; and Aguirre et al., 1988). The aforementioned works either chose phenomena that squarely would be classified as CBs or SMs or described some aspects of differences between the two. This piece is merely an extension of their work.

Notice that the characteristics of CBs and SMs include the lion’s share of the citations in this piece. Similarly to the categorization differences that have been alluded to by past research (noted above), the same should be said for all the research that identified the characteristics of both CBs and SMs (see Blumer, 1971; Quarantelli & Hundley, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Lofland, 1981; and Aguirre et al., 1988). Their research outcomes justified the continuum model of collective behaviors and social movements depicted earlier. The leader-participant classifications, as stated earlier, were changed slightly from the original intent of Gary Marx’s research (1974). I believe I have stayed faithful overall to the described understandings of agent provocateurs (APs) and informants. Again, it is possible for CBs not to have any leader-participants while it is impossible for SMs to be without them. Still, I am careful to note my interpretation could either in part, or in whole, be in error.

Lastly, it may be noted by some readers that research used in this article is dated. Understand, it was necessary to review more dated articles because these pieces are the most chosen, cited, foundational pieces of both collective behaviors and social movements’ research. There really is no other conceivable way to make the origin of these arguable, misrepresentations clear. As time has elapsed, the identification problems have become even more confusing with the use of the term, “collective action”. The more recent research in the areas of collective behaviors and social

movements has yet to clarify and diminish the problems discussed in this piece.

## VIII. Conclusion

Due to the past confusion concerning classification and characteristics of CBs and SMs, I endeavored in this piece to present a clear, base model for future studies of such phenomena. It was demonstrated that CBs are likely to have high levels of emotion, heterogeneity, novelty and spontaneity while SMs are likely to have high levels of homogeneity, longevity/stability, organization, participant population size, and resources. It was also forwarded that Gary Marx's (1974) participants were more apt to be leader-participants in one or the other collective phenomena types. APs, because of the characteristics of heterogeneity, dominant emotion, and spontaneity, were more likely going to be a part of CBs while informants, because of characteristics such as organization, longevity/stability, and homogeneity, were more likely to be a part of SMs.

The continuum model of the differences between CBs and SMs should assist readers and researchers alike in understanding what constitutes these specific collective phenomena. With this model clearly delineating the differences in the characteristics of CBs and SMs, varying levels can be conceived that may be present and would allow for hybrid collective phenomena such as CBs-SMs. This approach to understanding collective behaviors and social movements should relieve much of the confusion evident in past research.

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