

Social contagion theory

[Sociology](#)



The social contagion, emergent norm, social breakdown and resource mobilization theories are the key theories that have been advanced to explain collective behavior. Highlight the key propositions of these theories in how they explain or account for collective behavior. Which one of these theories in your view is more capable of explaining the main incidences of riots that have occurred in Hong Kong, and why?

Our behaviour is normally guided and controlled by the institutional values and norms, e. g. a teacher will teach students, a police will maintain social order, viz. social control. However, sociologists considered that when people under a crowd occasion or collectivity, their behaviour will be affected, they termed this phenomenon as " collective behaviour". The following are four theories which explaining the collective behaviour in different ways.

Social Contagion Theory

When there is a formation of crowd, and individuals' emotions and ideas was influenced and spread by each other through interaction, like the spread of disease, such phenomenon is termed by sociologist as " social contagion" In his book " The crowd" (1960), Le Bon (cited in P. 69, OUHK, 2003) considered that when individuals gathered in a crowd, they will lose their identities, viz. the roles they played within the social institutions, e. g. a teacher of a school, a justice of a court; owing to such reason, the function of social control is weakened or no longer work, there will be no constraining or controlling force to equip their behaviour, they are free to do anything without consider the social expectation to them.

Besides, the theory assumes that the structure of human mind are similar, thus, they will behave similar action by their instincts. For instance, a teacher will say some rude language; a justice will act with violence. By spreading the emotion, some of mental unity will be created. In consider whether their behaviour is under peaceful or destructive manner, it is depends on the leader of the crowd's inclination.

Emergent Norm Theory

Other academics, say Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1957) (OUHK, 2003) opined that the behaviour of individuals in a crowd is not guided by their mental unity, they are still constrained by a sets of norms. However, these norms are not the same as they played their roles at the normal daily activities. Owing to the reason that the conventional role could not fully functioned/operated in such a crowd situation especially in an emergency occasion, a new role which combined with the existing one will be generated. Thus, a new norm is inevitably attached to the new role.

For instance, when there is a fire occurred in a school, under such emergency situation, teachers of the school may perform another roles, say rescuers or fire fighters, as they are played with the new roles, new norms attached to these roles will guided their behaviour. Whether individuals under the novel situation will perform a positive or negative behaviour, it is depends on their origin of identity. e. g., if the one whose occupation is more respectable, he would refrain from breaking the law, otherwise, he would act on destructive behaviour.

Social Breakdown Theory

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The word "breakdown" in the social breakdown theory implies that the existing rules, norms or values are collapsed totally. So, the social controlling forces for guiding their behaviour is not in order. Owing to the reasons that there are some problems in the society, and these problems are lasting for quite a long period, thus, lead to individuals' grievance. They are seeking for a new system instead of the existing one, through a change-oriented collective action (OUHK, 2003). That is why they are already have their objectives before they have taken collective behaviour.

For instance, in the early of 20th century, people were discontent with the autocracy of the former United Tsardom of Russia - Nicolas II, people marched to the streets and intended to remove the ruling Tsardom even though they were not success eventually.

Resource Mobilization Theory

This theory realized that there is a close relationship between collective behaviour and organization. An organization plays a very important role in collective actions, it not only organize the resources distribution, but also mobilize the objective and strategies. The theory states that a successful collective action is depends on whether the resources are mobilized/organized effectively. These resources including leadership, participant support, financial and material support (OUHK, 2003).

For instance, members of a Hongkong political party, Democratic Party, always organize protest march against government policy. Some political stars, like Martin Lee, Yeung Sum and Lee Wing Tat all are excellent leaders with influential power. Their party uses their network to organize and

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motivate people to take part in each protest, and also arrange logistics for both people and materials at each activity..

Theories explaining riots occurred in Hongkong

Riot in Front of Cultural Centre on 1 January 2002

There were over 300 thousands of people crowded in the area of Yaumatei, Tsimshatsui and Mongkok to celebrate the new year on 31 December 2001. Most of them were stayed at the open ground of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre. The emotion of the youths at that area were high after the countdown, they began to throw highlight-sticks, used ice-spray to attack (play) each others and destroyed plants as well. When the police requested the crowd to stop their behaviour and leave that area, there was a conflict between a teenager and a police, subsequently, they have made a body touch (Singtao Daily, 1. 1. 2002).

This case seems belong to the social contagion theory. It is because the formation of the crowd is neither organized by someone, and they are not discontent with the laws and order. As the high emotion was spread rapidly near the countdown, their social identity, say students should obey the law, was ineffectively control their thinking as well as their behaviour, they were performing with their instinct.

Another New Year's Eve Riot in 1982

The background of the incident is that, two expatriate youths were dancing in the Central District, such behaviour led the crowd shouted abuse them, then the police tried to implement disperse action. Since the youths did not

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content with the police's move, members of the crowd began to throw stones against the police and arson cars, the riot then happened (OUHK, 2003). In this case, the conventional norms and values were mis-interpreted by the youths, viz. they treated the police as the symbol of power and authority, and cars as the symbol of wealth and status. In order to shown their sentiment on these ideas, they took action by attacking the police and destroying cars.

Obviously, this case is fully complied with the emergent norm theory, because the conventional norms and values have been changed by the youths at that moment, therefore, their behaviour would be in the light of their new roles and new norms.

Incident of Star Ferry Increase Fares in 1966

After the green light has been given to the Star Ferry Company to increase the first-class fares from 20 cents to 25 cents on 19 March 1966 by the contemporary Transport Advisory Committee. On 4 April, a youth name So Sau Chung was protest a hunger strike outside the ferry terminal in Central against the increase. On 6 April, he was arrested by the police, such action triggered the Hongkongers' grievance from the increase of fares shift to the discontent of the colonial government, and commenced their destructive actions, such as looting and arson. After settled the riot down, police's investigation report revealed that the riot participants were under the age of 25, poorly educated, poorly paid, inadequately housed, overworked males (OUHK, 2003).

Based on these facts, we could clear that these people were not discontent with Star Ferry Company's move, indeed, they were unsatisfied with the colonial government, that means the system run by the government was not agreed by people. Simply speaking, it is the breakdown of social system, and since they are of clear objective, i. e. discontent with the ruling government, therefore, this incident can be regarded as a typical example of the social breakdown theory.

10th October riot in 1956

On 10th October 1956, when Nationalists (right-wing) were celebrating their National Day, an officer of Resettlement Department ordered by rules to remove their national flags at Li Cheng Uk Resettlement Estate (OUHK, 2003). Such move led to the Nationalists' grievance, and they blamed on the Communists (left-wing). Mobs looting shops, attacking property known to belong to Communist sympathizers and killing people in different area, such as Tsuen Wan and Central Kowloon on the following day.

From this incident, we can see that without strong backup, organization and sound network, that large scale of riot will not be occurred and spread quickly in various area. And it is obvious that the mobs (Nationalists) have an clear and consistent objective - battle the Communists and to show their strength in Hongkong and try to dominant the labour stratum. So, we can use the resource mobilization theory to elaborate this incident.

In view of the above mentioned four theories, the first two, i. e. the social contagion theory and emergent norm theory are mainly focused on what individuals behave under a crowd situation, whereas the last two, i. e. the <https://assignbuster.com/social-contagion-theory/>

social breakdown theory and resource mobilization theory are mainly concerned with how the collective behaviour be generated.