Crowd Violence Analysis

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For one to analyze crowd violence it is important to analyze the phenomenon in its separate parts: crowd psychology and the psychology of violence. Violence can be further broken down into many categories but for purposes here it will be briefly analyzed as aggression and violent behavior. Crowd psychology is a relatively new area of psychology and has seen several theories come and go. Ultimately, the better our understanding of human psychology, violence and the effect of crowds on one's psyche and motivations the more effective we will be at predicting behavior.

Violence and Aggression

Violence and aggression have been a part of the human condition since the beginning of recorded history and most likely since time immemorial. In the roughly 5600 years of recorded history there have been more than 14,600 wars (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 110). Research varies widely on what causes aggression and violence. Many contend that it is a remnant of our evolutionary history, that is, it developed early on as a survival mechanism and later was used to obtain safety, material goods and status (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 111). A definitive definition of aggression is difficult to come by but most psychologists state that, for the most part, aggression is the intent or attempt to harm someone physically or socially or to destroy an object (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 112).

Theoretical Perspectives on Violence and Aggression

In general there are three factors contributing to violence and aggression: innate factors, socialization factors and situational factors (Law Library, n.d.). Innate factors are those that are

inherent in the makeup of a person. They can be psychodynamic, biological and ethological.

Psychodynamic theories maintain that humans, by nature, will always be prone to aggressive

impulses and are likely to commit violent acts if the impulses are not adequately managed

(Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 114). The earliest presentation of this theory was by psychologist

Sigmund Freud. Freud theorized that human beings are susceptible to aggressive build up from

birth. Without an effective outlet for this aggression a person will explode or lash out. Because of

its similarities to pressure buildup in a container this theory became known as the

psychodynamic or hydraulic model of aggression (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 114).

Another form of innate aggression theory comes from ethology. Ethology is the study of

animal behavior in a relation to an animal's natural habitat and compares that to human behavior

("Ethology," ND). One more notable ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, believed that aggression is an

inherited instinct in both animals and humans (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 115) and was in and of

itself an innate and driving force noted for its spontaneity and centrality to species preservation

(Law Library, n.d.). Lorenz also believed that ritualized aggression within the animal kingdom,

displays of force and superiority towards members of the same species, developed as a method of

preservation. Evolution of fangs, claws and vibrant displays of prowess served as a stand-in for

wantonly killing one another. Constant fighting among one's own group, he stated, would

eventually assure its destruction. He believed that humans outdistanced the evolutionary process

of ritualized aggression and replaced it with technological capabilities and superior learning

ability thus developing the capacity to maim and kill members of their own species Bartol &

Bartol, 2011, p. 115).

Ethology, or evolutionary psychology as it is more commonly known, is intriguing

however it fails to stand up to intense scrutiny when applied to humans. The main fault is that

researchers were comparing human beings to animals. What is notably lacking in the animal kingdom is "the capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation and action is a distinctively human characteristic" (Bandura, 1989).

Multiple theories suggest that aggression and violence is a matter of a person's biology. Biology can include one's neurophysiology, heredity, hormones and human instinct. One of the first studies on biological influences on violence was conducted by Cesare Lombroso in 1876 in which he asserted that traits of subordinate animals and primitive men reemerged intermittently in some individuals (Vogelman, ND). Other research has been conducted since including works by Jacobs, Brunton, Melville, Brittain, and McClemont and has mostly focused on chromosomal imbalance. The research is compelling in that there have been cases of violence and murder where individuals did display chromosomal abnormality however the frequency has not been sufficient to form a definitive correlation. Furthermore, the obvious flaw in this theory is that there are significant numbers of violent offenders who show no such abnormalities.

If innate factors are not sufficient in and of themselves to determine who may be prone to aggression and violence then perhaps socialization factors are more suitable. Socialization factors provide context for social learning (Law Library, n.d.) and suggest that to understand criminal behavior or aggression one must examine thoughts, expectancies, competencies and values (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 92). Every person's experience is unique and these experiences all contribute to one's personality, morality and perception.

Different mechanisms are apparent in the learning of violence. For example, if a young child wants another's toy but the playmate refuses to relinquish it the child may push or strike them and take the toy. In the child's mind, the use of aggression and violence accomplished his goal: attaining a desired outcome (Law Library, n.d.). Although simplistic, this illustration gives

a general idea of some types of socialization factors which might contribute to the learning of violent behavior.

Psychologist Albert Bandura conducted an experiment which showed the effect of observational learning and aggression. In the famous Bobo the doll experiment, a child was placed in a room and shown two different videos. One video showed an adult enter into a similar room containing a blow up "Bobo" doll and act violently toward it while uttering certain phrases. At the end of the video the adult model was rewarded with sweets and soft drinks. Following the video the child was taken to another room which contained a Bobo doll. Bandura's research showed that a significant number of children would recreate the acts they saw on the video, especially when provided with an incentive or positive feedback. For a full explanation and results of the study please refer to Bandura's *Influence of Models' Reinforcement Contingencies on the Acquisition of Imitative Responses* (Bandura, 1965).

In addition to biological and socialization factors, situational factors also contribute to violence and aggression. Situationism is a theoretical perspective that argues that environmental stimuli control behavior (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 528). Many contend that criminology researchers and studies on aggressive behavior focus too heavily on dispositional factors and ignore outside influences. According to psychologist John Dollard aggression results due to people feeling frustrated, thwarted, annoyed or threatened (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 116). Psychologist Leonard Berkowitz notes that the presence of aggressive stimuli in the external environment also increases the probability of aggression. The latter type of aggression is commonly referred to as the weapons effect since it is most pronounced by the presence of a weapon such as a firearm (Bartol & Bartol, 2011, p. 117). Berkowitz theorized that weapons can

serve as conditional stimuli and elicit thoughts and responses associated with their use (Credo Reference, n.d.).

Crowd Psychology

Theories of Crowd Psychology

Crowd psychology is a branch of social psychology in which psychologists seek to explain how the mentality of the crowd differs from that of the individual. It emerged in the late nineteenth century when the rise of trade unionism and socialism led to widespread fears about the masses by the elites (Credo Reference, n.d.). Early theories tended to portray crowds as mindless and barbaric.

Perhaps the most famous of the early crowd-theorists was Gustav LeBon. LeBon postulated that when people assembled into a crowd they underwent a type of hypnosis. He believed that once a group was formed it presented a very different psyche compared to the individual mentality of those who composed it and that "the sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes" (LeBon, 1896). LeBon referred to this type of crowd as the organized, or psychological, crowd. Once the organized crowd formed it became a single being and "is subjected to the law of the mental unity of crowds." (LeBon, 1896, p. 13).

LeBon's theory that members of a crowd became, essentially, mindless automatons and, as he put it, "a crowd is closely akin to quite primitive beings" (LeBon, 1896, p. 20) drew significant criticism. This type of bigotry could've been attributed to the mentality of the time and/or the lack of a deeper scientific understanding in regards to psychology. Despite this,

LeBon outlined several characteristics regarding the morality of crowds that have persisted to some degree to this day.

One of the more persistent theories is that people lose a sense of individuality in crowds. Because of this diminished identity, or perhaps more aptly a sense of anonymity, people become more prone to taking part in actions as part of a mob that they would normally not participate in on their own. This does not necessarily mean that these actions are always violent. As LeBon pointed out "The varying impulses to which crowds obey may be, according to their exciting causes, generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they will always be so imperious that the interest of the individual, even the interest of self-preservation, will not dominate them." (LeBon, 1896, p. 21).

If crowds are essentially mindless beings at the will of the overarching mentality of the crowd, then where does a given mentality begin? According to LeBon once a conglomeration of living things comes together, regardless if they are humans or animals, they will always seek out an authority figure. In human groups this authority figure is an agitator, or a ringleader, around which all behavior originates. He even goes so far as to state that "a crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master." (LeBon, 1896, p. 68). Although this mentality may seem offensive to most nowadays the basic idea of the ringleader and agitator has persisted.

Contrary to LeBon's theories, American psychologist Floyd Allport believed that individuality is not lost but maintained and accentuated, thus violent crowds occur as a result of a convergence of violent people. His theories maintained the idea that crowd behavior is pathological and meaningless but locates and accentuates the pathology of the individuals rather than a collective influence by simply being present in a group (Credo Reference: Crowd Behavior, n.d.).

More modern theories pertaining to violent crowds and riots include three that seem to emerge more often than not. These are contagion theory, convergence theory and emergent-norm theory. Contagion theory suggests that individuals are likely to influence the behaviors of others with whom they have frequent and redundant contact (Credo Reference, n.d.) and that crowds exert a hypnotic influence on members that results in irrational and emotionally charged behavior (Life Consultants Incorporated, n.d.). This theory closely resembles LeBon's contentions that once in a crowd people lose their individuality and are influenced by group thought and behavior.

Convergence theory argues that the behavior of a crowd is not a random grouping of personalities but rather a result of like-minded individuals coming together (Life Consultants Incorporated, Dr Wendy James, n.d.). Like minded individuals assembling into crowds would account for the mental homogeneity of mobs thus preceding the gathering of crowd members (Credo Reference: Mob Psychology, n.d.).

Emergent-norm theory is a combination of the above. It argues that norms may emerge as a result of social interaction amongst people who are in essence reading a crowd to gather cues as to what they might expect. Because some are uncomfortable in situations which lack clear norms some individuals may seize on whatever group norms emerge first (Credo Reference: Emergent Norm Theory, n.d.). Crowds are not always homogenous, however, and as a result there may be a variety of personalities and participation. For example, during a riot there may be those that participate directly in the event while others may dwell on the outskirts and give encouragement to those committing the actual violence.

Violence Triggers

Mentality in crowds is a topic which can be dissected ad nauseum. The formation of a crowd does not always equate to violence. Indeed there have been examples of large crowds which adhere to an agenda of nonviolence. An excellent example would be the marches conducted by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who pushed for civil rights reforms while simultaneously maintaining an ethos of nonviolence.

Another example of nonviolent protests are the women's rights advocates in Liberia. In this instance women from both Islamic and Christian backgrounds came together to protest inequality towards women in the Liberian culture. Their method comprised of conducting sit-ins at the local fish market and along the Liberian President's daily route. Though largely ignored by the powers that be this group showed that solidarity with the in-group mentality and morality is powerful enough to transcend religious and social barriers. For a brief overview the following is a short video summary of the movement: (PBS Learning Media, n.d.)

Now that it is established that crowds and protests do not necessarily equal violence and riots, how do violent events take shape? Generally speaking a riot occurs in response to a perceived wrong or a grievance ("Urban Riots," ND). There are a variety of reasons a particular group may feel they've been wronged. Arriving at an all encompassing answer as to *why* people riot, or specifically what triggers them, is virtually impossible. Each scenario is different and the perceived wrongs highly variable.

Brief analysis of current events shows a pattern of similarity involving violent protests turned rioting. In the United States the most commonly cited reason for rioting involved race. From 2012 to 2014 there have been three highly publicized incidents of violence stemming from perceived racial injustice. In 2012 violence broke out over the killing of Trayvon Martin

(Shapiro, 2014). Martin, who was 17 at the time, was killed by George Zimmerman in Florida after Zimmerman apparently followed Martin into a residential area because he appeared to be suspicious. Reports suggest that Martin ambushed Zimmerman and was striking him repeatedly. Zimmerman, using his concealed weapon, shot and killed Martin and articulated that he was in fear for his life thus avoiding immediate prosecution. The violence that ensued and continued stemmed from allegations that Zimmerman was treated leniently and acquitted due to his status as a white male. It should be noted, however, that Zimmerman is of mixed Hispanic and White heritage.

Again in 2012 riots broke out in Anaheim, California following the shooting of Manuel Diaz and Joel Acevedo. Violence erupted after Latino citizens were allegedly denied entrance into a public city meeting. Feeling that they were denied the right to express their grievances over the deaths of Diaz and Acevedo, attendees began to protest, which eventually led to violence (Lamb, 2014).

In 2013 violence erupted in New York after police shot and killed Kimani Gray. Protesters and rioters were apparently angry at the handling of the situation by authorities who maintained that Gray pointed a loaded weapon at police officers. However, an eyewitness report maintained that Gray was unarmed when he was shot by police. Many race riots accuse white police officers of racism after killing members of the black community but in this particular case the two police officers were both minorities; one an Egyptian who identified himself as black and the other Hispanic (Nelson, 2013).

Finally, in August 2014 Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson was accused of murdering Michael Brown. Witnesses maintained that Brown was unarmed and had his hands in the air at the time of the shooting while Ferguson Police have stated that the incident occurred

following a physical confrontation initiated by Brown. Despite apparent evidence to the contrary, protesters insist that Brown's death was a case of a racist police officer and are demanding indictment and punishment. This incident is still ongoing but there have been multiple cases of violence associated with this case in Missouri thus far. Police have come under the microscope for their handling of the situation as well. Residents and supporters from around the United States are accusing police of excessive response, one that involved the use of armored vehicles and 'military' tactics. Information on this situation is widely available and changes almost daily. ("Ferguson Riots," 2014). The last example illustrates another common theme in riots and violent protests. In many cases police response is blamed for the initiation of violence.

Following the aforementioned Ferguson disturbances, residents, analysts and media have accused the police of escalating tensions as a result of their response. Via a federal program police agencies nationwide are able to acquire some surplus military equipment for use with their departments. Some of this equipment includes armored vehicles. The presence of such equipment has led many to complain that police departments are becoming too militarized and too oppressive. The phenomena of police turning a peaceful protest into a violent riot are not limited to the United States, however.

Recently in Istanbul, Turkey, citizens staged a sit-in against government plans to demolish a city park which held many cultural artifacts. Excessive police response is being blamed for causing the peaceful sit-in to become a violent riot. Police forces reportedly utilized tear gas, rubber bullets and police officers outfitted in riot gear. Because of the police crackdown the riots have spread across the country and morphed into an anti-government demonstration as opposed to a peaceful protest against the demolition of cultural artifacts (Watson & Tuysuz, 2013).

Of course, police are not always to blame for the initiation of violent behavior. An undated example within a study on crowds in the Middle East heralded the police for exercising tremendous restraint. During a protest near an airport in Beirut, Lebanon crowds blocked a local street with vehicles and burning tires. When police were sent to the area to clear the protesters the crowd became more violent and began waving sticks and throwing stones in what was largely posturing.

During the standoff a member of Hezbollah threw a live grenade at police resulting in injuries to as many as fifteen officers. At this point the crowd could legally be treated as hostile under Lebanese rules of engagement; however the commanding officer observed that the crowd also realized this and became less certain of their commitment. The commander ordered his men not to fire and the crowd ultimately negotiated and ceased the violence (Sieck, Smith, Grome, Veinott, & Mueller, 2011). This display of restraint by the commander of the police was remarkable considering that he could've been faced with a far more deadly threat had the crowd contained more terrorist instigators.

The latter example serves as another excellent illustration of the possibility of crowd violence being manipulated for political or terrorist purposes. Knowing the basic psychology of a crowd and what may or may not cause a deterioration of behavior could be used by an individual or a group to instigate violence as part of an agenda. Depending on the demographics of a particular area a terrorist or other anti-government group could conceivably manipulate a crowd to a specific violent purpose.

The study of crowd psychology and violence is a field which has undergone many adaptations. Early theories of what contributes to violent behavior centered on the biological

makeup of individuals. Psychologists and scientist believed that they could determine what made a violent individual by analyzing their physical features or their individual biology. Later theorists maintain that violence is not predetermined but rather a factor of one's environment. Others still believe that it is a combination of both; that certain biological indicators contribute to who *might* become violent but that it's heavily influenced by socialization.

Early crowd theorists held seemingly bizarre beliefs that once an individual, who by themselves might be a rational and intelligent person, became a member of a crowd their individuality ceased to exist. They would take on the ultimate mentality of the crowd, whatever that may have been, and exhibit an almost zombielike state of irrationality, engaging in whatever behavior 'the crowd' might exhibit. Later study suggests that crowds offer a certain feeling of anonymity which allows someone the freedom to engage in behavior that they wouldn't normally be susceptible but could conceivably get away with in the midst of so many others.

Protests, demonstrations, mobs and violence can take on many forms and may occur for any number of reasons. In general these crowds are expressing some underlying frustration with their situation. This frustration can come from a variety of grievances from food shortages to racial injustice. Typically it takes a small spark to ignite a crowd into violence. This spark can be spontaneous, such as those that are ignited because of police response, or planned such as an individual who might emerge as a ringleader and encourage violent behavior. Understanding the psychology of violence and the psychology of crowds is crucial not only as a means of enlightenment but also as a means of countering potential threats. From the street level police officer to the policymaker in government, understanding the psychological background and motivations of a crowd will allow them to better prepare to avoid and prevent escalation.

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