

THE MADDING CROWD GOES TO SCHOOL: MYTHS ABOUT CROWDS IN INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY TEXTBOOKS*

The authors examined the crowd sections of 20 introduction to sociology textbooks, coding them for the presence of seven crowd myths—claims about crowds that have no empirical support and have been rejected by scholars in the field. The number of myths per book ranges from five to one. The authors conclude by making suggestions for rewriting these chapters and for improving the book reviewing process.

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TEACHING THE INTRODUCTION to sociology course poses a unique challenge because it requires a broad knowledge of a discipline characterized by specialization. The introductory textbook, then, assumes an importance in these courses that it does not in single-topic courses where the instructor has expertise and can easily evaluate, qualify, and contradict information in the texts for students.¹

We suspect that when most sociologists review introductory textbooks for possible adoption, they approach the task much as we do—they begin by reading the chapter or chapters of their special interests and make their first judgment on that basis. Therefore, the first chapter we read is on collective behavior, crowds, and social movements.

We have been particularly distressed over the years by the poor quality of chapters that deal with crowds and other types of so-called collective behavior. These chapters usually serve as the ultimate or penultimate

chapter and often also cover the topics of social movements and social change. They explain to students that the facts and principles described in the previous chapters are subject to change and posit crowds as one path to this change. Unfortunately, the information presented often suggests that social change occurs through irrationality, volatility, and extreme emotion. The images of crowds found in these books follow what Clark McPhail (1991) refers to as “the myth of the madding crowd.”

It may be too much to expect authors of introductory textbooks to be up-to-date on the latest work in all fields of sociology, including collective behavior, but it would seem reasonable to assume they would be familiar with material that has had currency for over 30 years. We refer here to Carl Couch’s (1968) assessment of what had become the predominant image of the acting crowd. His “Collective Behavior: An Examination of Some Stereotypes” (hereafter, “Stereotypes”) was originally published in the journal *Social Problems*, but its largest exposure came from its inclusion in Robert Evans’s (1969) *Readings in Collective Behavior*, the first such collection available. “Stereotypes” became a classic among seri-

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¹The textbook assumes an even larger role in this respect at community colleges, where instructors may have no training in sociology whatsoever and may rely completely on textbooks and ancillary materials.

ous students of the crowd because Couch applied the sociological perspective (Berger 1963) to a body of accumulated traditional beliefs about the acting crowd. Couch debunked what had become the common sense view of the crowd, which was held not only by sociologists but also by others. Couch critiqued nine crowd stereotypes: suggestibility, destructiveness, irrationality, emotionality, mental disturbances, lower-class participation, spontaneity, creativeness, and lack of self-control. "Couch's powerful critique of then current stereotypes of crowds and collective behavior was quickly and widely acclaimed by most scholars and requires but few qualifications today. He showed those stereotypes were empirically false or that they did not distinguish crowds from other collectivities" (McPhail 1991:110). "Today, Couch's ideas are taken for granted by serious students of these phenomena" (McPhail 1997), hence we label these stereotypes crowd *myths*.

In this paper we look at how introductory textbook writers have handled the presentation of seven crowd myths. We decided to limit the analysis to what we consider the more blatant myths (given the cumulative body of scholarly work during the last 30-plus years) through a content analysis of 20 introductory textbooks. Our goal is twofold. First, we hope to bring about change in these books and, consequently, in the information about crowds presented to introduction to sociology students. We make some suggestions along these lines. Second, we hope this critique as well as others that have emerged (Kendall 1999; Persell 1988; Ritzer 1988) will encourage authors and editors to reconsider how to approach the problem of evaluating the introductory textbook as it proceeds through the review process to publication.

Other researchers have critiqued the content (text and/or illustrations) of introduction to sociology textbooks. Most of their work has focused on books' coverage of part or all of the race-class-gender triad and related concerns about "diversity," "inclusion," and "difference." These in-

clude examinations of books' presentations of gender issues (Hall 1988); racial and ethnic groups (Dennick-Brecht 1993; Stone 1996); poverty as an intersection of class, race, and gender (Hall 2000); gender and race (Ferree and Hall 1990); the integration (or lack thereof) of race, class, and gender (Ferree and Hall 1996); class stratification (Lucal 1994); Hispanic women (Marquez 1994); affirmative action (Beeman, Chowdhry, and Todd 2000); disability (Taub and Fanflik 2000); and sexuality (Phillips 1991). These articles typically criticize how the textbooks present (or fail to present) these issues to undergraduates and advance alternative presentations.

More recently, several researchers have documented what Hamilton and Form (2003) describe as a "serious gap" between "the two sociologies" of research specialists and introduction to sociology textbooks since "the findings of the specialized literature are not reflected in the introductory texts" (p. 693). In particular, Hamilton and Form argue that introductory texts make "a range of standard claims" regarding race, ethnicity, and religion that are not supported by the evidence. Best and Schweingruber (2003; Schweingruber 2005) show that many terms in introductory textbooks' glossaries are not used regularly in leading sociology journals, and some are "interlopers" that were never in regular use there. Nolan (2003) suggests that introductory textbook authors may tell "benign lies" disproved by sociological research out of a desire to "shock and surprise their students with startling facts" (p. 108). Our findings also support the idea of "two sociologies" since we find that the introductory textbooks we examined present information that scholars specializing in the study of crowds have completely rejected (cf. Brush 1996).

First, we explain the seven crowd myths and cite evidence that they present false information about crowds. Second, we explain our research method. Third, we present our findings, describing how the textbooks examined present each myth. Finally, we make some suggestions for improving

treatments of crowds in introductory textbooks.

MYTHS ABOUT CROWDS

In this section we briefly describe each myth and explain why scholars of crowds have rejected it. Some of these myths, such as anonymity, unanimity, and destructiveness, have been rejected because of overwhelming empirical evidence. Other myths, such as suggestibility and spontaneity, have been rejected because either they are used tautologically or they lack logical foundation.

Myth of Irrationality

The myth of irrationality claims that people may lose their ability to engage in rational thought because of the influence of the crowd. Couch (1968) argued that some crowds may appear “irrational” in that they do not support the ideas “supported by the established institutions of the day” (p. 315), but if rationality is taken to mean choosing effective means of pursuing a goal, crowds may be very rational. A lone striker is clearly less effective than a picket line. In short, Couch’s analytic approach suggests that the concept of irrationality and its counterpart, rationality, may have “limited applicability for sociological analysis” (p. 315), because they are politically loaded terms.

A leading example of supposed irrational crowd behavior is “panic,” which is generally conceptualized as irrational flight in which fearful people may end up hurting or even killing themselves and others. Subsequent research has not demonstrated that people in crowds suffer any cognitive deficits. Indeed, research into emergency dispersal (e.g., Bryan 1982; Cantor 1980; Johnson 1987a, 1987b; Johnson and Johnson 1988; Keating 1982; Sime 1980, 1995) has consistently shown that when people are fleeing from dangerous situations they are guided by social relationships and roles and exhibit altruistic behavior. This was clearly evident in the emergency evacuation of the

World Trade Center after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. According to Kathleen Tierney, Director of the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware,

Beginning when the first plane struck, as the disaster literature would predict, the initial response was dominated by prosocial and adaptive behavior. The rapid, orderly, and effective evacuation of the immediate impact area—a response that was initiated and managed largely by evacuees themselves, with a virtual absence of panic—saved numerous lives. (Tierney 2002)

Myth of Emotionality

Related to the idea that people in crowds are not rational is the claim that they are governed by emotions—more so than is the case with people in non-crowd situations. Couch argued that emotions are present in many forms of social interaction and that crowds are not exceptional in this regard (cf. Turner and Killian 1987:13-5). Also clear is that emotionality does not necessarily lead to irrational conduct. The rejection of the notion that emotions and rationality are mutually exclusive phenomena (e.g., Aminzade and McAdam 2002a; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001b; Massey 2002) has led to valuable studies of the role of emotion in many aspects of social life, including social movements (e.g., Aminzade and McAdam 2002b; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001a). This approach to emotions is supported by neuroscience findings suggesting that rational or logical decision-making requires an emotional component (Damasio 1994). Such research confirms again Couch’s point that trying to distinguish crowds from other forms of social behavior on the basis of emotion is not fruitful.

Myth of Suggestibility

The myth of suggestibility claims that people in crowds are especially likely to obey or imitate others. Couch argued that if crowds were especially suggestible, they would simply disperse when ordered to by

authorities. McPhail appropriately labels the use of suggestibility in the transformation model as tautological since it is “one more instance of inferring an underlying causal mechanism from the phenomenon that mechanism is alleged to explain” (McPhail 1991:15). We know of no research that has shown that people in crowds are more likely to accept suggestions than people in other settings.

Myth of Destructiveness

The myth of destructiveness claims that people in crowds are especially likely to engage in violence against property or persons. Couch, however, argued that when crowds clash with authorities, the authorities commit more violence.² Throughout human history, he claimed, more lives have been taken by the agents of social control than by crowds. Subsequent research has shown that violence in crowds is rare (Eisinger 1973; Lewis 1982; MacCannell 1973; McPhail 1994a; Smith 1983; Snow and Paulsen 2000; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975). Recent research suggests that violence by crowd members is often carried out by small groups within the gathering (e.g., Stott and Reicher 1998) and that the actions of police are important in understanding crowd violence when it does occur (Gillham and Marx 2000).

Myth of Spontaneity

The myth of spontaneity is connected to the previously discussed myths. People in crowds are allegedly spontaneous because their rational thought processes are not functioning, they are under the sway of emotions, and they are especially suggestible. Combined with the myth of destructiveness, this myth views seemingly peaceful crowds as capable of erupting in violence.

²Although Couch’s characterization of clashes between authorities and crowds is correct regarding the riots of the 1960s, in two more recent riots—Miami in 1980 and South Central Los Angeles in 1992—most of the deadly violence was attributed to civilians (McPhail 1994a).

One version of this myth, which Couch called the stereotype of creativeness, argues that crowds act spontaneously because they develop new “emergent” norms (Turner and Killian 1987), which are adopted by the especially suggestible crowd members. Couch argued that new ideas for organizing crowd behavior are rarely developed through crowd interactions. Furthermore, he claimed, all social behavior is emergent, and crowds are not exceptional in this regard. McPhail (1991) correctly notes that the emergent-norm formulation is tautological and lacks the specificity needed for the theory to be tested.

No research has demonstrated that behavior in crowds is more spontaneous than elsewhere or that new norms are more likely to be developed there. To the contrary, many crowds require planning, and Tilly (1993) argues that protest crowds rely on repertoires of collective action, such as strikes or boycotts, that are understood by members of the culture. Rosenfeld’s (1997) research on the “celebration/protest” riot after the Chicago Bulls National Basketball Association championship in 1999 offers recent evidence in support of Tilly’s argument. As Couch (1968) noted, “there is probably more time spent in the planning of crowd action than in the planning for action by more established social units of comparable size” (p. 319).

Myth of Anonymity

The myth of anonymity is also connected to the other myths. Because people in crowds are allegedly anonymous, they are unaccountable and thus do things, like behaving destructively, that they would not normally do. This also contributes to the spontaneity of the crowd. Although Couch did not discuss this myth directly, it underlies nineteenth-century writer Gustav LeBon’s characterization of the crowd that Couch debunked, and, therefore, we include it as one of the enduring myths about the crowd. The claim that people in crowds are anonymous has been demolished by research, which has shown that people in crowds typically as-

semble with friends or family members (Aveni 1977; McPhail 1991, 1994b; Wimberly, Hood, Lipsey, Clelland, and Hay 1975). David Neal's (1994) investigation of a celebration crowd offers evidence that people who come in groups are more likely to act collectively than anonymous individuals.

Myth of Unanimity

The myth of unanimity claims that "everyone in the crowd was continually engaged in unanimous or mutually inclusive behavior" (McPhail 1991:71). Although not discussed by Couch, this phenomenon is labeled the "illusion of unanimity" by Turner and Killian (1987), who argue instead that crowds are characterized by "differential expression." Subsequent research has shown that crowds are characterized by alternating and varying individual and collective actions and that sequences of unanimous or near-unanimous behavior are rare and short-lived (McPhail 1991; McPhail and Schweingruber 1998).

RESEARCH METHOD

We read the crowd sections of each of 20 introductory to sociology textbooks and coded the books' stances on the seven myths. The textbooks were ones we currently had available. Although sales figures for the books are not publicized, we believe, based on conversations with book representatives, that our list includes the top-selling books that contain crowd sections.³ We identified 14 current introductory textbooks outside our sample. However, 10 of these books (e.g., Brym and Lie 2003; Newman 2002) have no sections focused on crowds. While a few other textbooks with crowd sections are available, we feel this sample is representative of how crowds are treated in introductory sociology textbooks.

³Hamilton and Form (2003) claim that five books—Henslin, Kendall, Kornblum, Macionis, and Schaefer—cover just over half the introductory textbook market.

We operationalized the myths as follows:

Myth of irrationality: Crowds may cause people to behave irrationally or to engage in panic, irrational flight.

Myth of emotionality: Crowds, more than other forms of social behavior, are marked by emotion.

Myth of suggestibility: People in crowds are more suggestible than in other settings, have less self-control, are more likely to behave in imitation and/or engage in "herd mentality."

Myth of destructiveness: Crowds tend to be violent, destructive, and/or antisocial.

Myth of spontaneity: Behavior in crowds, more than other social behavior, is spontaneous, unpredictable, volatile, and/or governed by norms that emerge from the situation.

Myth of anonymity: People in crowds are anonymous.

Myth of unanimity: In crowds, people are more likely than people in other situations to be doing the same thing at the same time.

Each of the myths was assigned one of four codes: endorses the myth (+), refutes the myth (-), both endorses and refutes the myth (+/-), and does not mention the myth or mentions without clearly endorsing or refuting (0). Both authors coded all the books and resolved discrepancies through consultation. We coded conservatively, looking for concrete statements (endorsed by the authors) that affirm the myths; we did not rely on examples that suggest the myths or on views the authors attribute to others.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the findings for the 20 books. In this section we discuss the results for each of the myths.

Myth of Spontaneity

The myth of spontaneity is the most common myth, endorsed by all but two of the

Table 1. Stances Toward Crowd Myths by 20 Introductory Sociology Textbooks

	Irrationality	Emotionality	Suggestibility	Destructiveness	Spontaneity	Anonymity	Unanimity
Anderson and Taylor (2000)	-	+	0	0	+	0	-/+
Doob (2000)	+	0	+	0	+	+	0
Farley (1998)	-	+	-	0	+	-/+	-
Giddens and Duneier (2000)	-/+	0	+	0	0	+	+
Henslin (2001)	-/+	0	-	0	+	0	0
Kendall (2001)	-	+	-	0	+	0	0
Kornblum (2000)	0	+	0	0	+	0	0
Landis (2001)	+	0	+	0	+	+	0
Lindsey and Beach (2002)	-	+	+	0	+	+	0
Macionis (2002)	-/+	0	0	0	+	+	0
Popenoe (2000)	-	-	+	0	+	0	-
Renzetti and Curran (2000)	-/+	+	+	0	+	+	0
Schaefer (2001)	-	0	0	0	+	0	0
Scott and Schwarz (2000)	-/+	+	+	0	+	0	0
Shepard (2002)	-/+	+	+	0	+	0	0
Sullivan (2001)	-	+	+	0	+	+	-
Thio (2000)	+	0	+	0	+	-	-/+
Thompson and Hickey (2002)	+	-/+	+	0	0	0	-
Tischler (2002)	-/+	0	+	0	+	0	0
Vaughan (2001)	+	+	+	0	+	+	0

Key: + = endorses the myth; - = refutes the myth; +/- = both endorses and refutes the myth; 0 = doesn't mention the myth or mentions without clearly endorsing or refuting.

books, and the myth most integrated into the theoretical perspectives of the chapters. Each of the books discusses crowds as one form of “collective behavior.” Collective behavior is defined as behavior that is spontaneous because usual norms do not apply. Schaefer’s (2001) definition, which he attributes to Neil Smelser, is typical: “the relatively spontaneous and unstructured behavior of a group of people who are reacting to a common influence in an ambiguous situation” (p. 575). Other phrases used to define collective behavior include “the usual conventions are suspended”

(Anderson and Taylor 2000:559), “typically violates dominant group norms and values” (Kendall 2001:620), and “relatively spontaneous, unorganized, and unpredictable” (Thio 2000:438).

These definitions are clearly also influenced by the emergent norm perspective, which views collective behavior as extraordinary behavior emerging from extraordinary situations. This perspective receives far more favorable coverage from the books than other crowd theories. Examples of norms that emerge from crowds are scarce. Most examples deal with violence *but ig-*

nore any research about the conditions under which crowd violence typically takes place. McPhail's (1994a) evaluation of the literature suggests that most crowd violence arises out of interactions between two parties with opposing goals (Tilly 1978) or is committed by people whose intention is to commit violence. However, most violence in crowds is carried out by only a minority of members, casting doubt that a shared norm has emerged from crowd interaction. Other examples of allegedly emergent normative behavior—such as yelling obscenities during a demonstration (Henslin 2001), getting out of cars to look at an accident (Anderson and Taylor 2000), clapping at a graduation ceremony (Doob 2000), singing loudly (Farley 1998), and waving hands in the air (Farley 1998)—are, in fact, standard repertoires of behavior.

Myth of Suggestibility

The myth of suggestibility is the second most endorsed myth with 13 books (65%) claiming that people in crowds are especially suggestible. Crowd behavior is described as having a “magnetic quality” (Tischler 2002:513), an “imitative nature” (Scott and Schwartz 2000:69), and being “permissive” (Popenoe 2000:485). Like the myth of spontaneity, this myth is often connected to the basic framework and premise of the chapter. Since collective behavior (of which crowds are a type) takes place in ambiguous situations, people are particularly open to suggestions from others. As Sullivan (2001) claims, “Because of the lack of structure in crowds, people need to look for guidance for their behavior in places other than the preexisting normative structures. This need makes crowd members much more open and sensitive to the suggestion of others in the crowd than they might normally be” (p. 546). Lindsey and Beach's (2002) account exemplifies how spontaneity and suggestibility (as well as anonymity and emotionality) are connected:

Crowds are temporary gatherings of people who influence each other in some way and

share a focus of attention. Crowd behavior generally displays some of the qualities emphasized by contagion theorists. Because individuals blend into a crowd, they are relatively anonymous. This fact often increases their willingness to violate conventional norms: They know they will probably not be held accountable for their behavior. The permissive atmosphere of the crowd and the physical presence of large numbers of other people generate a sense of urgency. Faced with a relatively unscripted situation, crowd members tend to become suggestible and emotionally aroused. (p. 594, citations deleted)

Myth of Irrationality

The textbooks' treatments of irrationality are much more mixed than their treatment of spontaneity and suggestibility. Many of the authors are aware of critiques of irrationality, especially those by McPhail and by Turner and Killian, and explicitly deny that people in crowds behave irrationally. According to Kendall (2001), “Although some early social psychological theories were based on the assumption of ‘crowd psychology’ or ‘mob behavior,’ most sociologists believe that individuals act quite rationally when they are part of a crowd” (p. 622). However, several of these books subsequently claim that people do lose their rationality in emergency dispersals, so-called panics. Seven (35%) of the books were coded -/+ for these types of mixed messages.

Renzetti and Curran (2000) illustrate this approach. In evaluating contagion theory, they claim that “while people may copy one another or look to others for indications of how to behave, this does not mean that they lose their rationality when in a crowd or similar type of collectivity” (p. 546). However, the authors also claim that during a panic “people who are confronted with a crisis or serious threat respond irrationally and actually worsen their situation” (p. 541).

Nineteen of the 20 books take a position on irrationality. In addition to the seven books coded -/+ (35%), five (25%) endorse the myth and seven (35%) reject it.

Particularly disturbing are those texts endorsing the myth. For example, when generalizing about panic, Thio (2000) states “The people in the Iroquois Theater and the Mecca tunnel behaved *as people often do* when faced with unexpected threats such as fires, earthquakes, floods, and other disasters: they exhibited panic behavior” (p. 441, emphasis added).

Myth of Anonymity

The eight books (40%) that endorse the myth of anonymity all posit that anonymity makes it more likely that people will do things that violate usual standards of behavior. Anonymity is said to let people “act more openly and freely than they normally would [and cause them] to lose a sense of responsibility for any misdeeds” (Doob 2000:578), to “lower inhibitions and spark intense emotions” (Renzetti and Curran 2000:546) and to sweep aside “normal constraints” (Vaughn 2001:393). Only Thio (2000) and Farley (1998) report that crowds are made up of groups of friends or relatives, but Farley later claims that people’s relative anonymity (“you do not know most of the people around you,” p. 478) explains why people do unusual things in crowds.

Myth of Emotionality

Ten (50%) of the books endorse the myth of emotionality as a distinguishing characteristic of crowd behavior, but they vary in their treatment of the topic. The books contain two sources of the claim that crowds are especially emotional. Most books that endorse this myth claim that people become more emotional because the crowd makes them. Four books were coded as + or -/+ based on their use of John Lofland’s (1981) typology of collective behavior, which attaches a dominant emotion to each type of crowd. However, as he notes, “for an emotion to be publicly most dominant—to have become the reigning definition of the emotional situation—is not to say that an especially large portion of the collectivity feels that emotion; the dominant emotion is almost always far from a matter of uniform,

unanimous, or even majority inner feeling” (Lofland 1981:x). In short, textbook authors do not clearly present how Lofland used the dominant emotional arousal to classify forms of collective behavior, and thus the myth that crowds are especially emotional is perpetuated.

Myth of Unanimity

The myth of unanimity is endorsed only by Giddens and Duneier (2000), who claim that during “crowd activities” “the situation suddenly becomes one of focused interaction; however temporarily, the crowd starts acting as a single unit” (p. 510). Most texts (65%) do not address this myth. The four books that refute the myth all refer to the work of McPhail and his colleagues. Two other books send mixed messages on this myth.

Myth of Destructiveness

It is encouraging that the myth of destructiveness is not explicitly endorsed in any of the chapters. However, many of the chapters suggest the violence of crowds by their examples, which are dominated by lynch mobs, sports riots, and fatal emergency dispersals. It is understandable that the authors want to focus on types of crowds that are problematic. However, the chapters could use some context, such as mentioning research on the rarity of violence in crowds before discussing why violence does occur. None of the chapters explicitly refutes the myth of destructiveness.

Evaluating Individual Books

While, regrettably, all of the books examined perpetuate at least one of the myths, they are not equally egregious. Some of the books endorse the discredited image of crowds with few or no qualifiers. For example, Vaughan (2001)—who endorses five myths, more than any other book, and refutes none—cites approvingly the work of LeBon, who “observed” the irrationality, emotionality, suggestibility, spontaneity, and anonymity of the crowd. Sullivan (2001) (four myths endorsed, two refuted)

and Doob (2000) (four endorsed, none refuted) each include a “characteristics of crowds” section that lists purported characteristics, such as “suggestibility,” “anonymity,” and “emotional arousal.” Landis (2001) (four endorsed, none refuted) and Lindsey and Beach (2002) (four endorsed, one refuted) compress similar material into a single paragraph that describes the cognitive impairment of crowd members. Renzetti and Curran (2000) also endorse four myths, but they do so in the context of critiquing older ideas. In their largely negative appraisal of LeBon, they concede that “If you’ve ever been part of a large crowd, you probably agree that the anonymity it offers can lower inhibitions and spark intense emotions” (p. 546).

Henslin (2001) and Schaefer (2001) endorse only the myth of spontaneity, and seven others endorse only spontaneity and one other myth, either emotionality (Anderson and Taylor 2000; Farley 1998; Kendall 2001; Kornblum 2000), suggestibility (Popenoe 2000; Tischler 2002), or anonymity (Macionis 2003). Although some of these eight books show awareness of recent findings and refute some of the myths, they remain wedded to a “collective behavior” explanation of crowds that claims that crowds are more spontaneous than other forms of behavior. So although these books are preferable to those that promote more myths, they will still require fundamental change in order eliminate their support for any of them.

Thompson and Hickey (2002) also endorse two myths (irrationality and suggestibility), while the remaining four books (Giddens and Duneier 2000; Scott and Schwartz 2000; Shepard 2002; Thio 2000) endorse three.

PROPOSALS

Our primary purpose in writing this paper is to bring about improvement in the treatment of crowds in introduction to sociology books. In particular, we believe these books should eliminate the crowd myths we have

identified here. However, these myths are not randomly placed in the books but follow from the frameworks the authors adopt. We close this paper with suggestions for improving these books’ treatment of crowds.

Eliminate the Three Perspectives on Crowds

The book chapters this paper has examined illustrate how empirical claims that have been demolished by research can have an enduring life in introduction to sociology textbooks. These chapters also show how theories that have outlived their usefulness—if indeed they ever had any—can likewise endure in these textbooks. Each of the crowd myths has its origins in one or more of three crowd perspectives—the contagion perspective, the convergence perspective, and the emergent norm perspective—each of which provides a social psychological explanation of why people behave the way they do in crowds. McPhail (1991) provides a devastating critique of these perspectives. Here we briefly describe each and explain how their inclusion in the textbooks contributes to the perpetuation of the crowd myths.

The contagion perspective, what McPhail calls the transformation hypothesis, posits that crowds transform people so that they think and act in ways they otherwise would not. This perspective originated with LeBon and was refined by Blumer, who contrasted the “circular reaction” in crowds to the “symbolic interaction” that characterized other social behavior (McPhail 1989). According to this perspective, the anonymity of the crowd, along with other conditions, results in the loss of individual rationality, leaving crowd members especially susceptible to suggestions from others in the crowd and to common emotional and destructive impulses. Because of this, crowd behavior is volatile and spontaneous.

The books by no means endorse the contagion perspective. With one exception, all of the books that discuss the perspective limit or reject at least some of its claims. However, some of them critique the contagion perspective while insisting it contains

some element of truth. For example:

LeBon's theory is still used by many people to explain crowd behavior. (Kendall 2001:626)

Some of LeBon's ideas, however, at least regarding street crowds, do seem valid. The massing of large numbers of people together, in some circumstances, can generate an irrational, collective emotionality and produce unusual types of activity. (Giddens and Duneier 2000:510)

LeBon's idea that crowds foster anonymity and sometimes generate strong emotions is surely true. (Macionis 2003:605)

The convergence perspective, which originated with Floyd Allport, rejects the contagion explanation that the crowd transforms its members and argues instead that people in a crowd act similarly because of similar predispositions that brought them together.⁴ This perspective receives less attention from the textbooks than the contagion perspective, it is usually critiqued, and it does not lend support to as many myths.

Unlike the contagion and convergence perspectives, the emergent-norm perspective is endorsed without reservation by most of the books. The perspective, which was developed by Turner and Killian (1987), defines collective behavior as "those forms of social behavior in which usual conventions cease to guide social action and people collectively transcend, bypass, or subvert established institutional patterns and structures" (p. 3). Thus, the perspective is compatible with the view of collective behavior adopted by the textbooks and is problematic for the same reasons. The myth of spontaneity, which is supported by 90 percent of the books, is central to the emergent norm

⁴Like the contagion perspective, the convergence perspective assumes and attempts to explain the phenomenon "that everyone in the crowd was continuously engaged in unanimous or mutually inclusive behavior" (McPhail 1991:71). However, the myth of unanimity receives little support from the textbooks.

perspective. We believe that behavior in crowds is emergent, but so is all other social behavior. The application of the perspective only to forms of so-called collective behavior is misleading because it suggests that emergent behavior is not found everywhere in social life and that behavior in crowds is especially emergent—a claim without empirical support.⁵

We recommend eliminating a discussion of these perspectives from the books entirely. Even if the perspectives are critiqued, it makes little sense to include discredited theories given the limited space available to discuss any topic in introductory books. Also, most of the books cannot discuss them without conceding some truth to them. In addition, the use of the perspectives makes the chapters more psychological and less sociological than chapters on other institutions. No other chapters in these books are organized around social psychological theories of why people act the way they do in, for instance, schools, workplaces, or families.

⁵The idea of an emergent norm as pioneered by Sherif's autokinetic experiments was not tautological. Sherif had independent measures of a norm that "emerges" in the social interaction among small groups at time one as group members made judgments of the apparent distance moved by a stationary pinpoint of light. When he brought the subjects back at time two, their judgments of movement distance corresponded to the earlier norm. What is tautological in Turner and Killian's formulation is that they infer the norm from the behavior to be explained. What is flawed is that they offer no defining criteria for how we might know collective behavior when we see or hear it. Thus, they infer an ephemeral norm from an ephemeral "collective behavior." If emergent norm theory specified the emergent norm as either descriptive (what most people do) or prescriptive (what people should do), there would be merit in such an approach. But emergent norm theory as presented does not separate the dependent variable from the independent variable, and this tautological problem prevents it from being tested. The presentations in introductory textbooks miss this point entirely.

What Should a Crowd Chapter Look Like?

Given the central place of crowd myths in the current textbook chapters, one might ask what will be left once they have been removed. Although a reader of many of the current chapters would not know it, there is a large sociological body of research on crowds. As we have argued in this paper, the theoretical “explanations” that underlie the myths about the crowd have been found wanting because they attempt to explain crowd behavior before they have adequately described it. “Before we can pose questions of explanation, we must be aware of the character of the phenomena we wish to explain” (Smelser 1963:5). Introductory students should be informed about empirical research on crowd behavior as well as efforts to explain such behavior.

The current textbooks typically group crowds as a type of collective behavior in a chapter that also includes a discussion of social movements. The collective behavior in these books consists of a hodgepodge of topics—including panics, mobs, riots, rumors, gossip, fads, fashion, hysteria, crazes, scapegoating, moral panics, urban legends, disaster behavior, public opinion, and propaganda—which are grouped together on the questionable grounds that they all take place in ambiguous situations without clear norms.⁶ Many of these topics are worthy of inclusion in introductory textbooks, but only if their sections are built around research and not collective behavior stereotypes. Crowds and social movements could remain in the same chapter because social movement demonstrations are a particularly significant type of crowd (cf. McAdam and Snow 1997:xxiv-xxv). However, eliminating the collective behavior framework weakens the current rationale for grouping them together and opens up

⁶The intellectual incoherence of “collective behavior” becomes especially apparent when examining how these books treat social movements. Twelve of the books state that social movements are a form of collective behavior. Eight of the books state that social movements are not a form of collective behavior.

the possibility for moving the crowd material into a chapter of its own or into chapters on groups or social interaction.

Chapters in introductory textbooks typically open with a catchy “real world” example of the topic under discussion, and a chapter on crowds has plenty of options for an opening vignette: anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle and elsewhere in the world in 1999; the emergency dispersals after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center; civil unrest after the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles in 1992; the recent development of “flash mobs” organized via the Internet, and so on. The opening vignettes can be followed by a brief history of the work on crowds over the past 100 years, emphasizing the shift from thinking of crowds as suggestible, emotional, and irrational to seeing them as shaped by the same forces that shape other social behavior. This introduction should also point to the ubiquity of crowds in many areas of life: recreation, religion, politics, social movements, and so on.

We would organize the next section around the life course of the crowd (McPhail 1991; McPhail and Wohlstein 1983): the assembling process, the dispersal process, and the crowd itself, which is composed of alternating and varied individual and collective actions. There is a good deal of research on the assembling process that produces crowds (e.g., Aveni 1977; Edger-ton 1979; McPhail 1994b; McPhail and Miller 1973; Shelly, Anderson, and Mattley 1992; Whyte 1980). Particular attention could be paid to the importance of temporal availability and spatial access and to the fact that people assemble with companions. The section on the dispersal process could include a discussion of emergency dispersals, including a critique of the concept of panic (Bryan 1981, 1982; Drabek 1968; Johnson 1987a, 1987b, 1988; Johnson and Johnson 1988; Keating 1982; Quarantelli 1954, 1981, 1957, 1960; Sime 1980; Tierney 2002). The section on the crowd itself could draw upon work that attempts to synthesize findings about various types of crowds

(McPhail 1991, 1997; Reicher and Potter 1985; Snow and Paulsen 2000) as well as research on particular types of crowds, ranging from prosaic crowds (Edgerton 1979; Goffman 1963, 1971; McPhail 1994b; Whyte 1980) to more organized forms, such as political demonstrations (Gillham and Marx 2000; Schweingruber and McPhail 1999).

Many other crowd-related topics might find a place in a reformulated introductory book chapter. These include riots (Carter 1990; McPhail 1994a; Myers 2000; Olzak, Shanahan, and McEneaney 1996; Rosenfeld 1997; Tierney 1994; Useem 1985, 1997) and the interaction between crowd participants and the police (della Porta and Reiter 1998; Gillham and Marx 2000; McPhail, Schweingruber, and McCarthy 1998; Schweingruber 2000; Stott and Reicher 1998). Other possible topics include queues (Leibowitz 1968; Mann 1969, 1973; Milgram, Liberty, Toledo, and Wackenhut 1986), religious revivals (Altheide and Johnson 1977; Clelland, Hood, Lipsey, and Wimberly 1974; Johnson, Choate, and Bunis 1984), and applause and boos (Atkinson 1984; Greer 1983; Heritage and Greatbatch 1986; Zillman, Bryant, and Sapolsky 1979). By listing these topics, we do not mean to suggest that they are essential components of a chapter on crowds, only that there are many interesting and well-researched topics from which authors can choose.

Most introduction to sociology textbook chapters are not driven by one theoretical perspective but consist of a variety of topics that reflect sociological research and theory and that may be of interest to students. A chapter on crowds should do the same; we are not proposing that new chapters should be organized around the perspective we find most useful.⁷ However, we do believe that new chapters should reflect a broad understanding that (1) people in crowds and else-

where are purposeful, (2) crowds do not create cognitive deficits, and (3) behavior in crowds is continuous with behavior in other settings and connected to other social institutions (cf. Snow and Paulsen 2000).

Change The Book Reviewing Process

The problems with the textbook review process have been well documented (e.g., Baker 1988; Kendall 1999; Ritzer 1988). Although the process may improve books in some ways, it is particularly ill-suited for correcting or eliminating erroneous or outdated material. As our findings illustrate, information may remain in books for decades after experts in the appropriate subfield have rejected it.

Kendall's (1999) study of the review process highlights its flaws. Based on her analysis of 50 reviews for three editions of one book, she identified five ways that the peer review process influences the contents of textbooks: "(1) degree of innovation, (2) length, (3) reading level, (4) cloning of ancillaries and accessories, and (5) how the book will be marketed to potential adopters" (p. 22). Noticeable by its absence is any mention of the review process correcting empirical claims or theoretical perspectives that are now considered erroneous or outdated or of it suggesting that new findings or perspectives be included. In fact, Kendall argues that the review process limits change in books because "some reviewers questioned content that differed from the best sellers" (Kendall 1999:24; cf. Ritzer 1988). The result is "unimaginative clones which undermine the important educational goals that teachers of sociology should be pursuing" (Baker 1988:381) and which "in another age might have been labeled as plagiaristic" (Graham 1988:358).

This is evident in chapters on collective behavior, which often closely follow others' previous efforts to organize the material with a sprinkling of recent research cited to suggest the chapter is updated. And while

⁷We believe William Powers's (1973) perception control theory is a useful perspective for understanding behavior in crowds (e.g., McPhail 1991, 1994a; McPhail, Powers, and Tucker

1992; McPhail and Tucker 1990; McPhail and Wohlstein 1986; Schweingruber 1995; Tucker, Schweingruber, and McPhail 1999).

the majority embrace Turner and Killian's emergent norm perspective, the presentation of this perspective indicates many authors have not read Turner and Killian's work carefully but are instead relying on others' summaries.

This standardization process is fostered by the review procedures. Publishers are moving away from the use of "content reviewers," experts in the field whose job is to ensure that information in the books is "reasonably complete, accurate, and undistorted" (Persell 1988:400), and relying instead on "user reviewers," professors who teach the course (Kendall 1999). These user reviewers often object to the elimination of topics about which they lecture in their courses or even to changes in the sequence of topics. Even if most reviewers approve of an innovation, publishers may pressure authors to satisfy a minority who may drop the book (or not adopt it) if it no longer corresponds to their list of lecture topics (Kendall 1999). The practice of offering a package of ancillary materials—test banks, videotapes, PowerPoint slides, CD-ROMs, Web sites, and so on—contributes to the reification of textbook contents, especially for those teaching to the textbook.

As a starting point for correcting the numerous errors about crowds in introductory texts, we urge textbook publishers to revise the review process. Working with the American Sociological Association and regional sociological associations, publishers should seek out reviewers with sufficient knowledge of an area to note the myths being perpetuated so texts can have their content revived, not just reworked with stylistic changes and efforts to make the chapters engaging and readable. While it is still important to include user reviewers, they should not be allowed to keep outdated material in the books. Publishers must be up front with user reviewers who want to continue lecturing about LeBonian psychology or the dangers of panic. They should be informed that the chapter is undergoing a substantial revision because, according to experts in the field, it is no longer the state-

of-the-art. Although some users may cling to outdated notions about crowds, improved versions of crowd chapters could become a selling point for those with knowledge of the field and those non-specialists who value accurate scholarship.⁸

SUMMARY

In this paper we have offered a critique of introductory sociology textbooks' treatment of crowds. As we first noted, we chose seven stereotypes or myths about the crowd that have been refuted for decades. Our findings show that a number of crowd myths persist, in varying degrees, despite the lack of empirical or logical foundation. While the texts we sampled vary in the quality of their material on the crowd, what is alarming is the extent to which these crowd myths persist in introductory textbooks.

We believe that it matters what students learn in introduction to sociology courses. As McPhail (1997) points out, some of these students "leave the introductory course and enter careers as journalists, photographers, police officers, and public officials where stereotypes about the crowd have both policy and action implications" (p. 37). Indeed, Schweingruber (2000) found that "mob sociology" is used in police manuals to justify repressive "crowd control" tactics. In addition, the claim that "collective behavior" occurs when society's constraints on people are weakened suggests that sociology, the "science of society," is not well suited to studying collective behavior and social change.

We followed our critique with proposals for addressing the problems we found with introductory textbooks' chapters on collective behavior, including reconsidering the way textbooks are reviewed. We suspect that many sociologists share similar concerns about their own areas of specializa-

⁸The first author will not use any of the texts that cover crowds in his mass introductory class because he does not savor explaining to students that the book is completely wrong.

tion. We recognize the enormity of the task faced by introductory textbook authors, and our intention in writing this is not malicious. Our purpose is to make the presentation of material on the crowd match more closely thinking in the discipline. The process of how we create introductory textbooks requires more serious attention than we sociologists have given it.

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