GROUP EMERGENCE IN COMMUNITY CRISIS:
A STUDY OF CONDITIONS CONDUCIVE TO
THE DEVELOPMENT OF
COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

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A Paper Prepared for the Annual Meeting
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ABSTRACT

Using data from five community crises, this study analyzes the conditions that facilitate the development of emergent groups in stress situations. We compare the empirical evidence from three community emergencies in which there was group emergence with empirical evidence from two community emergencies in which there was no group emergence. It is postulated that the conditions conducive to the generation of new groups in community disasters can be classified in a three-fold typology: (1) social-psychological conduciveness; (2) cultural conduciveness; and (3) structural conduciveness. We anticipate that the findings of this research will expand and extend collective behavior theory through devoting attention to the origins of collective behavior, an area which has received little prior emphasis.
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Introduction

Collective behavior does not develop in isolation or a social vacuum. This behavior is embedded in a social, cultural, social psychological environment as is all other human behavior. However, the conditions conducive to the development of collective behavior have generally been ignored in both theory and research. Very little emphasis has been given to the origins of collective behavior. In fact, sociologists have seldom extensively considered the facilitating factors which result in the emergence of collective behavior.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the conditions that facilitate the development of collective behavior by examining the empirical evidence from situations in which collective behavior occurs. Community emergencies provide an opportunity to observe the development of a type of collective behavior, i.e., the development of emergent groups which crystalize after the disaster impact as totally new entities and as such have no actual pre-emergency existence. The following observations about group emergence are based on field studies conducted by the Disaster Research Center of The Ohio State University in over 50 different community crises. Each field study usually focused upon the situation immediately following impact where such activities prevail as search and rescue, care of refugees, and restoration of essential services.
Typology of Conducive Conditions

It has frequently been claimed that emergence in the disaster context is spontaneous. For example, according to Form and Loomis, "almost immediately after the impact of the destructive agent, a disaster system arises spontaneously to meet the human problems created and to restore a social equilibrium." Rather than being spontaneous, this group emergence we propose is directly related to the social psychological, cultural, and structural properties of the community social system in which it arises. In other words, continuity exists between the old and the emergent social systems. Form and Loomis allude to this when they state:

The functioning of pre-disaster and emergent disaster systems can be understood only within the organizational and cultural contexts of the stricken communities. Thus, although propositions may be advanced about the persistence and emergence of social systems in general during disasters, additional observation must take into account the type of community structure involved and the cultural values of the affected groups.

Turner, in his discussion of the emergence of collective behavior claims that "such behavior cannot be explored apart from the relationships with the existing order."

On the basis of the current research we postulate that the major conditions which generate emergent groups can be classified in a threefold typology: (1) social psychological conditions such as definitions of the situation and communication possibility; (2) cultural conditions including norms and values; and (3) structural
conditions such as authority patterns and organizational interrelationships. We are now going to deal with each type of conduciveness and in so doing we shall draw upon empirical evidence from three community crises in which there was group emergence: (1) 1963 coliseum explosion in Indianapolis, Indiana; (2) 1964 earthquake in Anchorage, Alaska; and (3) 1967 flood in Fairbanks, Alaska. For comparison purposes, we shall refer to two community crises in which there was no group emergence: (1) 1964 flood in Cincinnati, Ohio; and (2) 1965 plane crash in Wichita, Kansas.

**Social Psychological Conduciveness**

The development and existence of a situation which is inadequately defined is a condition conducive to group emergence. According to Lindesmith and Strauss, situations "have to be recognized, named, and catalogued by the individual so that appropriate action may be taken." It follows that there must be a collective definition of the situation as the basis for collective action. Loomis refers to defining the situation as cognitive mapping and validation of the situation. In most community emergencies there initially tends to be many variations of the reports of the situation and usually no individual or organization has the preassigned responsibility of assessing the situation to find out just what the situation is and what it means. In addition, the existing organizations often cease to give adequate direction.

Formulating a conception of the situation on a community-wide basis is directly related to several aspects of communication. Inade-
quacy of communication is related to comprehending a critical, unfamiliar situation and to the development of collective behavior since functional and normative integration depend upon the free flow of communication within a society. Inadequacy of communication channels or inaccuracy of content account for much collective behavior according to Turner and Killian. Particularly in large, complex societies, individuals and subgroups are dependent upon other members whom they may never see and with whom they may never interact directly. Yet they interact through a chain of communication which is essential to the smooth operation of the social system. When the communication process is inadequate, emergence occurs as a collective solution to the problem.

Along the same lines, Dynes claims that "a large part of the disorganization which follows a disaster stems from the fact that normal methods of communication are often disrupted while the necessity for communication is increased. Individuals have to be contacted immediately for mobilization. Materials have to be requested. Information has to be sought in order to make decisions. . . . In addition, individuals experiencing a disaster often want information about what is happening and what has happened in their own community." Thus, an undefined situation and the absence of an established communication network during the emergency period are conditions facilitating group emergence.

In Anchorage, for example, the emergency situation remained undefined for several hours after the earthquake. The following comments by a city official reveal that the city department heads had
little pertinent knowledge about the scope of damage at least one hour after impact. "Now up to that time, I didn't have much information except what I saw over here on Fourth Avenue ... Most of them [city department heads] were congregated and had little idea at this point of what damage had been done and so forth."

Assessing the emergency situation is related to the functioning of the regular communication facilities. In Anchorage and Fairbanks the telephones were inoperative during much of the emergency period. The telephone and two-way radio facilities became overloaded in Indianapolis following the coliseum explosion. In these three emergencies, initial information about the crisis situation was scarce and individuals had difficulty developing an overall picture of the disaster.

When there is no arrangement to share or pool disaster information on a community-wide basis, a definition of the emergency situation may not develop until an emergent group arises. For example, in Anchorage the accumulation of knowledge of impact damage was the responsibility of no particular organization within the community so it developed haphazardly. Without such knowledge, the selection of tasks and the assignment of priorities was difficult. Almost every organization within the community was involved initially in an inventory of damage to its own facilities and services, but this information tended to remain within the organization that gathered it. No collective definition of the situation developed until a meeting of representatives from the responding organizations was held approximately ten hours after impact.
In contrast, during the Cincinnati flood where there was no group emergence, one particular community organization, the highway maintenance division of the department of public works, collects and disseminates the crucial information about the flood situation. This organization shares the emergency information with a number of other key organizations as is revealed by the following comments of a respondent.

"It's also part of the job of highway maintenance division once they're notified to put up a flood gate, to notify all the various agencies that are affected such as police, fire, and news. We take care of our own press releases. We have a man who's trained in that work. He knows just exactly who to contact in the various communications media within the city and he knows exactly what to do. . . . He is also expertly trained in giving out these press releases and knowing where to go to get the information in order to prepare a press release. Our dispatcher's office, they will notify the police and fire of any particular fire lanes or main routes that are closed so that safety can be maintained both in the matter of traffic and the matter of protection to buildings and property in case any fire or looting or anything breaks out."

**Cultural Conduciveness**

We now turn our attention to the impact of value systems upon group emergence. The norms and values which govern the community social system prior to the onset of disaster must be considered when analyzing group emergence. There is apt to be emergence of new forms of collective behavior, according to Blumer, when group life cannot be carried on satisfactorily in accordance with rules or cultural definitions.\(^\text{11}\)

A minimum degree of consensus on values within the community is necessary in order for an effective division of labor to develop
to achieve the tasks created by the impact according to Dynes.12
In other words, community consensus on the priority of values is necessary for group emergence. During the emergency period there arises what Barton calls an "emergency social system."13 That is, a consensus of opinion emerges on the priority of values within the community concerning disaster activities. "It appears," according to Loomis, "that in most disaster systems, short of those which embrace whole societies such as war in which both life and property are sacrificed, the value of human life is generally elevated and the primacy of private property lowered."14

Group emergence occurs so that certain high priority values can be realized during the emergency period. A set of values concerning search and rescue, relief activities, protection from continuing threat, restoration of essential services, and maintenance of community morale are activated after impact evoking certain kinds of behavior including emergent behavior. Thus, a change in the priority of values and norms may facilitate group emergence.

The concept of disaster subculture focuses upon the norms and values which exist in certain communities in relation to disaster behavior.15 A disaster subculture serves as a blueprint for individual and group behavior before, during, and after the impact of a disaster event. It includes norms, values, knowledge, and technology. A community with a disaster subculture develops standby mechanisms to meet the demands it has previously experienced in repetitive disasters. Consequently, in a community with a well developed disaster subculture, group emergence during the emergency period is not anticipated as the
community activates standby mechanisms to cope with the stress situation.

Disaster subcultures have not developed in the communities of Indianapolis, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. The existence of a disaster subculture is usually associated with having had repeated emergencies in the community and the development of disaster plans. None of these communities are disaster prone and none had developed extensive, community-wide disaster plans. Consequently, in Anchorage in particular, the primary value of saving human life was underscored right after the earthquake, and there was a great sense of urgency to act to mitigate the effects of the disaster. Emergent groups quickly arose and carried out search and rescue functions during the early part of the emergency period.

Cincinnati, which is subjected to annual flooding, has developed an extensive subculture. The existence of a flood disaster subculture is made explicit in the comments of a city official.

You know, a newcomer to Cincinnati concerned about such a thing as this flood would be concerned about the state of the people who are affected by it and be quite upset. Until you have lived here for some years and realize that practically every so many years the thing floods over and therefore it's a regular condition, not a new condition. And in a sense, although it's a disaster each time it happens, it's not a disaster that this town is unused to. Your sympathy disappears.

As a result of the repetitive flooding in Cincinnati, dams, levees, and flood gates have been built, and each year as the flooding commences, community organizations respond with procedures that have been used effectively in previous floods. Many organizational members have had extensive experience in dealing with prior floods.
In addition, adequate and appropriate disaster plans have been drawn up at the organizational and community levels.

Similarly, in Wichita where there was no group emergence after the plane crash, a disaster subculture has at least partially developed. The city is known as the "Air Capital of the World," and a community-wide disaster plan emphasizing plane crashes had been developed over a number of years. This plan was activated and followed during the plane crash emergency.

**Structural Conduciveness**

The development of new forms of human behavior and social organization must be studied in the context of the community social structure. In other words, the understanding of group emergence requires systematic reference to the underlying social structure; as the structural context of group emergence is of crucial importance. In fact, there is amorphous, unstructured behavior surrounding emergence, and different community emergencies vary in structural conduciveness for group emergence. Thus, there will be differential distribution of group emergence in community stress situations, and we have found that a lack of overall control and integration of emergency activities and insufficient organizational capability to perform emergency tasks are structural features facilitating emergence.

In Anchorage an authority vacuum persisted for a period of time after the earthquake. The situation about 40 minutes after the earthquake at the Public Safety Building which soon became the center for many emergency operations is described as follows: "There seemed to
be no commend, no authority, no one taking hold." The legitimate encumbrants of authority positions, such as the mayor, did not immediately commence to control and direct disaster activities. The overall coordination of emergency activities is closely related to the disaster authority structure. During the early part of the emergency period in Anchorage numerous community organizations carried on their disaster operations independently of other organizations. This was certainly the case with respect to the task of assessing and defining the emergency situation. Several organizations collected information about the extent of damage and retained this knowledge within the organization rather than sharing it with other involved organizations.

The community of Anchorage did not have sufficient organizational capability to cope with all the crucial disaster tasks. The immediate response of city civil defense was limited because it was largely a "paper" organization with a small staff. There was no civil defense director at the time of the earthquake. The director had resigned on March 15 and at the time of the disaster he resumed his position on an acting basis. Prior to his resignation, the organization consisted of one employee and a secretary whom the director had not been able to locate since the earthquake. The response capacity of this organization was further impaired as its office space was damaged to such a degree that it could not be used immediately. Civil defense had to operate out of one of the fire department offices.

In part the insufficient organizational capability in Anchorage was the result of a number of new tasks created by the disaster
including search and rescue, sheltering and feeding refugees, inventorying available food supply, and control of convergence into the impact area. These tasks of undeniable immediacy had to be accomplished if the community was to continue to exist and function as a viable entity.

Interorganizational coordination was a major problem during the flooding in Fairbanks. The situation was characterized in the following manner by an Alaska Disaster Office official: "The police were rescuing, but they were not coordinating with ______city civil defense director____. The fire department was rescuing, but they were not coordinating with ______city civil defense director____. No one was coordinating. Everyone was running independently."

The emergency situation in Fairbanks was further complicated because there was a sharp decline in organizational capability in the community. A federal civil defense representative made the following comments about the impaired response capacity of community organizations. "Here in Fairbanks, as an example, the basic plan which I have, was not activated. No criticism to the local people ______ they were too -- it hit too quickly. Their emergency operating center was inundated with water. The city manager was in one end of town. The mayor was in the other end of town. The councilmen were spread out on rooftops all over town. Your local decision-makers, your local authority by law, were in no position to start making decisions."

After the coliseum explosion in Indianapolis no organizational member during the first half hour made any attempt to assume overall control of the initial search and rescue activities. As one respondent
pointed out: "... the police officers, the brass, the lieutenants that were out there -- they were all inside and they were lifting these things [pieces of concrete and other debris] around and they never thought of setting up a command post or anything like that, or trying to supervise overall direction. . . ." Concerning overall direction of activities at the explosion scene, the local civil defense director commented upon why civil defense did not fulfill this function: "Now there wasn't any state of emergency declared out there . . . so, consequently we didn't move. . . . Another thing, this was state property and the state police had a part to play in it. . . ." As well, in Indiana the county coroner is responsible by state law for the scene of death until the investigation has been completed. Consequently, the entire security at the coliseum immediately should have come under the coroner's jurisdiction. The coroner did not arrive until approximately 45 minutes after the explosion, and the area was not secured until some time after the disaster, being completely secured at approximately 2:00 a.m. when the city and state police cut off all incoming traffic except for individuals coming to identify the dead.

The community of Indianapolis did not have sufficient organizational capability to cope with the emergency because of the magnitude of certain disaster tasks. The task of identification of the dead clearly exceeded the capabilities of any of the organizations with available relevant resources and needed skills. The explosion left the county coroner's office with 55 bodies to be identified.
13.

Turning to the two community emergencies in which there was no group emergence, Cincinnati and Wichita, we find that command posts were immediately established in the disaster area, and disaster activities were controlled and directed by the incumbents of authority positions, primarily by the police and fire chiefs in Wichita.

Both of these communities have a rich array of organizations serving a variety of functions necessary in a disaster. The civil defense organization in Cincinnati had a paid staff of nine men and it could draw upon a pool of approximately 300 trained volunteers. Likewise, the local Red Cross chapter has a staff of over 1000 volunteers. A regional Red Cross official commented: "Cincinnati happens to be very fortunate that they've got a well trained disaster staff. They got plenty of volunteers. . . . They've got a good volunteer organization."

Conclusion

Any one of the conducive conditions may exist in a community stress situation and not lead to group emergence. The structural, cultural, and social psychological conditions are interdependent and interacting features of a community social system. Turner and Killian point out that "collective behavior arises out of a complex of societal roots and not from a single condition." In different instances one condition may be more important than others, and in most instances several conditions in conjunction will facilitate group emergence. We can, however, specify generally applicable although not necessary or sufficient conditions for group emergence.
Footnotes


3. This time has been called the emergency period. The concept emergency period is used by Dynes and the emergency functions are delineated by Barton. See Russell R. Dynes, Organized Behavior in Disaster: An Analysis and Conceptualization (Columbus, Ohio: College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, The Ohio State University, in press). See Allen H. Barton, Social Organization Under Stress: A Sociological Review of Disaster Studies, Disaster Research Group, Disaster Study No. 17, Publication 1052 (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council, 1963).


5. Ibid., 181.


10. Dynes, op. cit.


12. Dynes, op. cit.


15. For further discussion of the concept disaster subculture see Dynes, op. cit.