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POLICE DEPARTMENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE OCCURRENCES OF CIVIL DISTURBANCES*

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This paper reports on a part of a larger study of four different civil disturbances¹ that occurred in the summer of 1969 in four large American cities with a substantial nonwhite population. Each riot centered around a confrontation between some black "ghetto" inhabitants and predominantly white-manned social control agencies such as the police and the National Guard. The disorders ranged from relatively minor to relatively major incidents as measured by number of participants, and by the degree of looting, fires and casualties involved, although none were close to the massive disturbances that occurred in Watts, Detroit, or Washington (as reported e.g., in Conot, 1968; Locke, 1969; and Gilbert, 1968).

Methods

Typically, when students of collective behavior deal with riots, they attempt to synthesize all accounts and perspectives into one overall picture of "what really happened," i.e., a "true" description of the event. The very possibility of doing this has recently been challenged by researchers associated with the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence. Kapsis and his associates (1970) argue that the traditional or unidimensional methodological approach conveys a false sense of authenticity by attempting to synthesize divergent strands of what happens during a civil disturbance. Furthermore, the strain towards descriptive consistency inherent in the unidimensional approach to reporting is seen as underemphasizing the very essence of a civil disturbance, which is a series of group conflict encounters. Using a riot in Richmond, California as an example, these researchers suggest that a more valid approach would be multi-dimensional, with a separate depiction of the phenomena as perceived by the different groups involved. We would also add that most efforts to describe and to analyze riots, to the extent that perceptual differences are taken into account, do so from an individual rather than group or organizational point of view.

Our larger study took the multi-dimensional approach, with the object of presenting the varying perceptions and divergent accounts of the disorders as seen from the perspective of the social control agencies, the multiplicity of black organizations and the different mass media groups involved. Other parts of this larger study are detailed elsewhere (Fitzpatrick, Ponting, and Quarantelli, 1973); in this paper we confine ourselves to a report of the perceptions of the civil disturbances by the social control agencies, primarily the police forces, in the communities in which the disorders occurred. With rare exceptions (e.g., Dynes, Ross and Quarantelli, 1972), accounts of disturbances are seldom presented from the viewpoint of the police as we attempt here. Almost as infrequent is the use of an organizational rather than a social psychological perspective of the parties involved in a riot.²

Three sets of data were used to build a composite organizational perspective of the social control agencies in the four disturbances.

1. In 1968 teams from the Disaster Research Center (DRC) studied a number of public agencies in these four cities as well as others in an attempt to gather baseline data on organizational and community expectations and planning for civil emergencies (see Dynes and Quarantelli, 1973, for initial reports on these studies). Data from this research was gathered through over 100 interviews some six to nine months prior to the outbreak of any of the disturbances we studied. This data provided material on previously held organizational perceptions of when and where racial hostilities would emerge, "troublesome" people and groups within given cities and projected techniques for suppressing civil hostilities.

2. About 50 tape recorded interviews were obtained by DRC teams a few days to several weeks after the disorders. The bulk of these interviews were with primarily high-ranking officials from the police and fire departments of the affected cities, county sheriff organizations, and National Guard units from their respective states. These interviews provided rich descriptive details of organizational perceptions at the times of the riots.

3. Concurrent with the interviewing, several dozen documents were obtained from the different social control agencies. These documents included intraorganizational memoranda, after-action reports, organizational logs, arrest records and plans and handbooks of operational procedures. Such material particularly helped to establish chronologies of the disturbances as well as rationales for particular courses of action undertaken.

Findings

Our examination of the data suggests that the findings can be subsumed under five general statements. In what follows, after each general statement we provide an analysis about the organizational perception involved, and conclude with a brief discussion about what might underlie the social control agency perspective.

1. Social control agencies view disturbances as emanating from one fairly specific event rather than from a series of sequential happenings.

The tendency is to see one fairly specific event as being "responsible" for the disturbance. Thus, the shooting and death of a black male, the attempted arrest of an "agitator" after police intervention in a fight and the shooting into the doorway of a church, were all seen as the direct precipitant of the emergence of crowd and riot behavior in the different disturbances studied. A fairly direct cause and effect relationship tends to be posited between a relatively clearly identifiable action and later illegal activities which necessitated the response of the social control agencies.

This organizational perception is of interest for two reasons. First, the ensuing collective behavior did not immediately follow from the specified event. In all cases, there was a considerable time span, in two instances extending over half a day, between the event and the appearance of clear cut riot behavior. Second, quite similar if not almost identical events were noted as having occurred numerous times in the past without any noticeable consequences. In the city in which the greatest disorder occurred, police department records and interviews indicated at least four different incidents happened in the days prior to the outbreak of the disturbance which overtly appeared to be equally potential "precipitating events" but which were not followed by any disorders. What seems to be overlooked in the organizational perception is what Turner and Killian have called keynoting behavior, that is, activities which present some type of positive suggestions in an ambivalent situation which encourage the development of subsequent actions (1972:89).

Social control agencies are usually mobilized or brought into a situation by some specific happening. Our analysis suggests that there is a tendency to let that happening dominate the initial actions that are undertaken and to overlook the possible dynamics of the situation. Thus, in one of our case studies, the police viewed the disorders as an outburst that was a product of a shooting and generally ignored such keynoting behaviors as persons calling for action on the part of the group that had gathered at and around the site of the incident. In another of our cases, the focus was on the shooting into the church and far less on the activities associated with the arrest of a black woman attempting to prevent her two sons from being taken into custody. Interestingly, the police riot plans of the two cities involved did emphasize the importance of locating, isolating, and arresting potential "leaders" of disturbances. But this prescription was not heeded. Limitation of the keynoting process to prevent the development of riotous behavior was recognized in organizational plans, but not in the field operations of social control agents.

Some of the reasons for such a limited focus seem clear enough. Situations which later develop into disturbances are often initially responded to by small numbers of social control agents. A few persons can only do so much. Also, in many cases the actual event which mobilizes the organization, such as a shooting, requires the attention of the responding officers to specific details such as the collection of evidence, the identification of witnesses and so on. Thus, there is a general diversion away from possible keynoters or keynoting behavior. Furthermore, many keynoting actions in themselves are not necessarily criminal acts, whereas behavior likely to catch police attention initially is more likely to be illegal activities. Thus, the restricted focus on the specific event which mobilizes them tends to lead police to overlook the dynamics of the situation in which they are operating. In the vast majority of instances in which the police normally act, it is probably true that the specific situation (e.g., a murder, a traffic violation, etc.) will not continue to develop, but this is not so in potential disturbance situations.

2. Social control agencies view disturbance-generating events as being the results of individual actions rather than as the consequences of social conditions.

Social control personnel were aware of both the poor living conditions and the grievances being expressed about them within the black communities, especially the ghetto areas. Respondent after respondent alluded to such conditions as widespread unemployment, inadequate housing, insufficient recreational facilities, poor educational opportunities and insufficient channels of communications with city agencies. That blacks voiced complaints about these and related matters was also readily admitted.

However, while social control personnel acknowledged the existence of the aforementioned conditions and associated voicing of grievances, there was a tendency to downplay their importance, especially as being significant factors in the outbreak of the disturbances. The dominant tendency was towards personalizing the circumstances leading to the disturbances. That is, riots were seen primarily as the product of malcontent, easily misled or troublemaking individuals. In this perception, neither current conditions within the black community nor their historical antecedents were viewed as important contributing factors in the rioting. In Gary Marx's phrase, the riots were seen as "issueless" (1970).

In essence, the organizational perception is not that social conditions occasion riots, but that people do, by choice. Such a conception is consistent with Rossi's findings with reference to police attitudes towards the causes of civil disorders (1968:110). This is a point of view, for example, different from that expressed in the Kerner report (1968). In that analysis, stress was given to the centuries of neglect and discrimination by whites against blacks and to the general and inadequate response, both public and private, to problems within the black community, whether housing, education, unemployment, or whatever. Research by social scientists has tended to support these notions, while in addition suggesting other variables as involved in the disturbance such as the close contact of people, rumor, milling, emergent norms and the convergence of large numbers of people at a location, to mention just a few (e.g., Hundley, 1969).

What academicians or investigative committees suggest as the "causes" of civil disturbances versus what social control agents and organizations perceive may be a moot point for some purposes. To use an overworked social psychological proposition, "situations defined as real are real insofar as their consequences are concerned." It is patently clear that to the extent that civil disturbances are seen as the result of the activities of individual participants, emanating from one rather than from a series of happenings or out of the background of the black community history and conditions, then social control tactics will, in part, mirror this view. The analysis of control tactics and strategy in each of the cases studied partially bears out this thesis of a relationship between the strategy used³ and the social control agency perception of the disturbances. For example, in the case of

the most intense disturbance, the control strategy used was definitely that of a show-of-force. This case also illustrates the harshest definition of the riot and rioters. Thus, there was personal blame rhetoric about "subversives" and "revolutionaries," conspiracy themes, rumors (checked out consistently by the police) of militants coming to town to keep things in turmoil, the definition of the disturbance as a meaningless one, and seeing it as triggered by the shooting event and not by preferential police treatment of the assailant as blacks charged. In another case, on the other hand, the containment strategy mirrored a more moderate perception of those participating in the disturbance. Here, themes of conspiracy were far less common, personalization of blame occurred, but in more moderate tones (e.g., "agitators, militants") and the initiation of the riot was seen as something in which police officers had a part.

Nevertheless, in this and the other cases also, conditions within the black neighborhoods were generally overlooked as possible causative factors in the disturbances. This is understandable for the police as other groups in American society (including social scientists if one looks at their explanations of police behavior, as discussed in Galliher, 1971) tend to explain social behavior in terms of the makeup of individuals. Answers for social problems especially are sought not in the social structure but within the participants in the system. Who is to blame, not what is responsible is the general question asked. The police in looking at civil disturbances reflect this general American view of the world and reality.

3. Social control agencies see individual actions in disturbances as being relatively unorganized and unplanned.

Superficially, it might appear that social control organizations saw planning and organization in the disturbances. This theme was certainly voiced. Pre-planning for a riot was visualized in some instances with organized elements seen as being involved from the very onset of the process. This view particularly prevailed in one case where certain black groups were said to have met over a three-week period to agitate the black community over a black-white altercation incident. In two of the other case studies, some social control personnel saw organization emerging after the initiation of the disorder. That is, certain groups were seen as working at some "semblance of organization" and "there were people who after this thing (i.e., the disorder) was off the ground, managed to try and keep it going."

However, the idea of pre-planning or organization of the disturbance was not one that prevailed across-the-board. While this point of view was expressed, it was frequently denied or not supported in the remarks and observations of other officials in the same social control agencies. While some even saw nation-wide conspiracy and usually couched such statements in highly dramatic terms, most respondents simply did not see the actions of riot participants, which were interpreted as individual rather than collective actions, as something that was the result of organized criminal conspiracy.

The denial of any organization or planning in the disturbances was even more strongly expressed by higher officials in the social control agencies, and also particularly by specialized personnel, such as members of police intelligence units. Many such respondents openly scoffed at reports of organization and planning. They often noted that they had heard rumors about "outside agitators" coming into the local community and frequently checked on these kinds of stories, but seldom found they had any validity whatsoever. This point is neatly illustrated in the major disorder where the highest officials, members of the intelligence squad and the official report all explicitly denied any organization or planning in the riot whereas some individual line officers in interviews claimed just the opposite.

At the agency or organizational level, it is even clearer that little validity was given to notions of planning of the disorders. The social control agencies we studied on the whole were not receptive to such a perception of the situation. They had reached the same conclusion as had the Kerner report that "the Commission has found no evidence that all or any of the disorders or the incidents that led to them were planned or directed by any organization or group, international, national or local" (1968:202).

There were times during and after the disturbances when some of the social control agencies did issue statements through representatives that sounded as if conspiracy notions were being supported. However, such remarks about planning and organization of disorders seemed almost ritualistic statements of a public relations nature voiced for the consumption of the organization's assumed audience rather than because agency officials voicing them believed them to be true.

In fact, this observation may be an indicator of what is involved in this seeming discrepancy between individual and group perceptions of the situation, and what was sometimes expressed for public consumption. It has been suggested with regard to other social phenomena that there sometimes exists a general belief about a situation which, however, participants disavow as applying to themselves. For example, there is a widespread belief that college and university students find higher education impersonal, uninteresting, non-relevant, etc., but surveys indicate that while most students believe that this is true in general, they do not apply the observation to their own personal educational experiences which they find satisfying and rewarding (Lipset, 1972). At a different level, studies show that Americans believe life in recent years has become worse, more problematic and difficult, but they themselves do not have many individual complaints and that they and their families are doing relatively well. Similarly, many social control personnel project a widespread belief about conspiratorial planning in disturbances, although themselves not personally holding such a view. Thus, when faced with the need for a public explanation, some social control personnel rather than indicating what appears to be a very deviant position, make statements along expected lines, which it is thought might be applicable elsewhere. Police departments, as do most other groups, are not above engaging in organizational rhetoric: their public statements about

their views of social reality are not always to be taken literally or at face value.

4. Social control agencies perceive disturbances as stemming from the involvement of certain types of persons.

There is a strong tendency to label or typologize participants in civil disturbances. The types specified, their number and their degree of explication differed in each of our case studies. Nevertheless, about six basic riot-related "roles" tend to be identified. As might be expected from a common sense typology, the categories are neither mutually exclusive nor based on a single principle of differentiation. The labels applied are our own.

(1) The agitator role was most clearly distinguished in all of the four case studies with its content being most consistently and concisely defined. Essentially it was applied to young males using effectively charged exhortations to direct violent actions. Such persons were seen as operating primarily before the actual emergence of disturbances and were not perceived as taking direct actions themselves.

(2) The enactor role was also clearly distinguished in all four case studies. It was generally attributed to mostly pre-teen and teen-aged youngsters who were seen as "fertile ground for the agitators." Their activities were primarily seen as consisting of roaming the streets in small groups, hurling missiles and verbal assaults at social control personnel and engaging in fire-bombing, looting and destroying property.

(3) The sustainer role was not as clearly delineated as the two previous roles but seemed generally to refer to persons who, when a disturbance was underway, attempted to keep it going. A variety of motives were attributed for such behavior, ranging from personal to ideological reasons. No particular age or sex category was singled out as engaging in this role.

(4) The supportive role was seen as being played by persons who provided either explicit or implicit support for the developing disturbance. The behavior is viewed as essentially of a passive nature, almost that of a bystander at the scene but nevertheless encouraging agitators, enactors, and sustainers just by their very presence. Females were generally perceived as filling this role more than males, with all ages being possibly involved but with a predominance of middle-aged persons or older.

(5) The non-participant role has reference primarily to the local black population not taking part in the disorders. The vast bulk of local black ghetto residents are classified in this way, with constant reiteration of the theme that in black communities "95-98 percent are just as law abiding as anyone else." Their actions in the disturbances consist of avoiding any seeming support (even of a passive nature) of the more active participants.

(6) Finally there is the counterrioter role (for a discussion of the concept, see Anderson, Dynes, and Quarantelli, 1974). Counterrioters are perceived as individuals actively working to prevent a disturbance, or if one has started, attempting to bring it to a halt. Altruistic as well as opportunistic motives are attributed to counterrioters. They are most often seen as representatives of traditional Negro organizations, although in some cases young, local black males are perceived as playing the role.

Perhaps equally as important as the use of a typology is that the social control agencies implicitly seem to attribute the emergence of disturbances partly to the interplay of the varying roles. The differentiated mass of black persons in their communities is linked to a pattern of riot dynamics. This is not unexpected. It has long been noted that undifferentiated perceptions are characteristics of groups with little contact with one another whereas social control agencies and ghetto area interactions are extensive and intensive. Furthermore, of necessity there is a "popular sociology" of dramatic events. Faced with disturbances, it is hardly surprising that social control agencies attempt to account for them in some way and draw elements of the explanation from the social class, occupational and subcultural backgrounds of their organizational members.

The implicit riot dynamics model involved in social control agency perceptions of disturbances appears to be somewhat as follows. The world is seen in relatively concrete terms. Thus, a disturbance is directly associated with a specific event (e.g., a shooting) to which in retrospect it can be chronologically linked. The event itself is seen as primarily involving people. In Gestalt terms, the figure rather than the ground stands out. Thus, the people involved in the initial event are seen as crucial in what may develop. The confusion and uncertainty associated with the situation in the initial stages clearly argues against any collective planning of the event. More important, social control agency personnel do not perceive an undifferentiated mass of people responding to the event. Rather they see some persons (i.e., the agitators) trying to initiate disorderly actions, others (i.e., the enactors) willing to carry out advocated actions, still others (i.e., the sustainers) wanting to continue any ongoing disorders, with still more (i.e., the supporters) willing to encourage in a passive way any developing disturbance. On the other hand, most theoretically potential recruits (i.e., the non-participants) stay away as much as possible from the event and there are even a few (i.e., the counterrioters) who actively oppose illegal activities.

Disturbances occur when certain kinds of people (i.e., those playing the first four social roles mentioned) get more heavily involved in the situation than certain other kinds of people (i.e., those playing the last two roles listed). In essence, social control agencies see the source of disturbances in the participants themselves, as to an extent they also see the absence of disorders stemming from the personal characteristics of ghetto residents. Rather oversimplified and overstated but still capturing the basic perceptual idea involved, disturbances are seen as occurring when

the "bad guys" dominate the situation rather than the "good guys."

5. Social control agencies visualize themselves as blameless for disturbances.

Social control agencies do assign responsibility or blame for disorders or riots. But it is placed on other than their own organizations or personnel. Thus, even in the one case where the disturbance was seen as resulting from the police attempt to arrest someone defined as an "agitator," our respondents saw "trouble makers" and black militants as the major source of the initiation of the disturbance, even though "the militants didn't get the participation of the real black community." In general, there is a strong tendency to assign responsibility or blame for the disturbances on a relative handful of "agitators" along with somewhat larger numbers of "enactors," "sustainers," and "supporters." Rossi and his colleagues in their study of police in the ghetto suggest a similar theme. They note that "while individual policemen differed considerably in their ascription of responsibility for the problems they face (normal police work as well as civil disorders), most tended to see disorders as a result essentially of lawless, negligent, belligerent, and criminal uprising of some elements of the Negro community" (1968:110).

This point of view is essentially consistent with what has been called the "riff raff theory of riot participation." Fogelson and Hill aptly summarize it in the following terms:

At the core of this theory are three distinct, though closely related themes. First, that only an infinitesimal fraction of the black population actively participated in the riots. Second, that the rioters, far from being representative of the Negro community, were principally the riff-raff -- the unattached, juvenile, unskilled, unemployed, uprooted, criminal -- and outside agitators. Indeed many public figures have insisted that outside agitators, especially left-wing radicals and black nationalists, incited the riff-raff and thereby provoked the rioting. And third, that the overwhelming majority of the Negro population -- the law abiding and respectable 98 or 99 percent who did not join in the rioting -- unequivocally opposed and deplored the riots (1968:222).

Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) in a study of three disasters in American society indicate that there is a tendency to seek the cause of a non-natural disastrous event in a who rather than a what. This process is no less true in civil disturbances, as mass media accounts, official police reports and the records of post-disturbance investigative commissions and groups will readily testify. The major difference in their treatment of the issue is the matter of who is to blame, that is, social control agents or their opposition, be it blacks, students, or whatever.

Social science research into civil disturbances often utilizes a synthesis approach; that is, draws on material from all sides and attempts to construct a dispassionate one "true" account. The result is to move even further away from the scapegoating process found in the accounts of participants or organizations close to the disturbance. There are many advantages to the synthesis approach, but it does tend to discount the possible significance of the fact that contending groups in disturbances do blame one another, and perhaps more important, obscures the fact that organizations act on the basis of such perceptions, although other factors are also operative in determining group actions.

In our four studies, the dominant perception among our social control agencies was that some part of the black community was at fault with regard to the disturbances. To use an analogy which was implied in many remarks and observations, the disturbances were often viewed as if they were a mass "mugging." On the one hand, there are the "forces of evil," the "subversives," the "hate-brained people" and those relatively small segments of the black community which initiate and support the rioting for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, there are hapless and innocent bystanders, the passing motorists, blameless businessmen and merchants, and so on who are violated and attacked by "riff raff" elements, unless or until social control agencies step in to curtail them.

Viewed this way, it is understandable why social control agencies disavow any responsibility for disturbances. From their point of view, far from being a possible source of disorders, they are the group who is trying to prevent them. In many ways social control personnel transfer their view of fighting individual everyday crimes on to the unusual collective actions of racial disturbances. As we have already pointed out, perceptions of reality are often mirrored in related actions. The nominalistic view of the disturbances presented by our respondents finds its action corollary in the tactics and strategies of social control agencies. Be it a show-of-force or containment strategy, the basic orientation is the same: the removal of "deviant" individuals from the disturbance scene thereby preventing or quashing the development of disturbances. This tends to be the view taken with respect to ordinary crime. Even massive civil disturbances are perceived in a parallel fashion.

Conclusion

In some respects the results of this study are not unexpected. The major finding that social control agencies perceive certain numerically small "bad elements" in the black community as responsible for the disturbance is in line with the frequently expressed "riff raff" riot theory attributed to law enforcement organizations in American cities. Others of our findings, such as that social control organizations see disorders as being unorganized and unplanned, are not consistent with other also widely expressed views on how the police, for example, tend to view mass racial disturbances. But perhaps more important than specific findings was that we obtained some data

on a group seldom directly studied and that we did it from their perspective; a seldom used research stance. If, as we indicated earlier, a synthesis approach to disturbances, crowds and other kinds of collective behavior is on questionable methodological grounds, a whole series of studies using the multiple perspectives of all parties involved is badly needed. This paper is an attempt to move in that direction.

FOOTNOTES

1. The term "civil disturbance" is used interchangeably in this paper with such terms as "riot" and "civil disorder" so as to avoid the political implications that any one of these labels might otherwise imply as discussed by Grimshaw (1968).
2. Organizations as such, of course, can not perceive. However, we use the aggregate of perceptions as provided by high organizational officials as well as the perspective set forth in official organizational documents to delineate an overall organizational perception of the situation. The problem here is the usual one of attributing processes and activities to a supraindividual entity when most concepts available have originally been derived from the behavior of individuals.
3. For a discussion of different kinds of police strategies in civil disturbances see Brooks, Dynes and Quarantelli (1972).

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