Redekop, Vern Neufeld, and Shirley Paré. "Introducing Targets, Bystanders, and Media."
Beyond Control: A Mutual Respect Approach to Protest Crowd–Police Relations. London:
Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 107–115. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849660907.ch-006>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023,
06:17 UTC.

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6. Introducing Targets, Bystanders, and Media

Protesters are out to change a situation by having an impact on decision makers directly and indirectly by mobilizing bystanders and the general public. Media coverage can have an impact on public opinion, which in turn can influence policy. In most cases protest crowds direct their dissenting voices and actions toward a target in the belief that this will change a situation to benefit the public good (or their interests, depending on the level of moral consciousness). In the first section we will examine the protest crowd–target relational system.

In the process of demonstrating, marching or engaging in other protest actions, the crowd has an impact on the bystanders. Bystanders can include those physically present but not part of the crowd itself, those living in the vicinity, businesses and commuters who are affected, and others who hear about or see what is happening by means of the media. They may be watching; their property may be jeopardized; they may have relationships with people in any of the other groups. The second section will elaborate on the protest crowd–bystander relationship.

When a crowd event makes it into the news, the general public gets drawn into the bystander group. Part of the bystander group, the media, facilitates the growth of the bystander group and deserves special consideration in the third section. Once our introductions are complete, we will focus on the significance of crowds as complex systems.

Targets

The protester–target relational system is central within a web of inter-related relational systems. After all, protesters wish to have an impact on the organization and people that they see as having the ability to effect those actions and decisions they have identified need to be taken. The target may be government, business, an international organization or an identity group that is doing something perceived by the protesters to be unjust, unwise, or ill-conceived. For example, the Global Justice Movement (GJM) has concerns about what is happening within the ‘global economy’ (Reiter and Fillieule, 2006, 145–173) They perceive a web of interconnecting issues including: environmental degradation, global warming, concentration of economic

power among wealthy nations and corporations, labour exploitation, and the use of health related products and processes for corporate profit. This makes for a very diffuse target that includes governments and corporations and those people associated with both. Summit gatherings, especially those involving the most powerful economic nations, are natural targets for anti-corporate globalization demonstrations as are institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary fund and organizational gatherings of the World Trade Association, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) or anything that symbolizes the web of interconnected issue areas that concern activists. Related may be more specific issues of concern: a company that pollutes, a logging industry that cuts down old growth forest, a pharmaceutical company that dumps drugs banned in North America in southern markets, or a company that has rendered local drinking water toxic because of industrial waste. Each can become a target. Especially in the last instance, local people may protest both against the company and against a government that did not sufficiently regulate the industry.

Targets may be separated into two broad categories: institutions and individuals. Institutions may be governmental, non-governmental or corporate. Individuals may be leaders who have committed atrocities—remember all the protests against Pinochet who led a repressive regime in Chile. Criminals who have committed the worst of crimes are the focus of protest if they become eligible for parole. Canadian criminals whose parole has been protested include serial child killer Clifford Olsen and Karla Homolka, who, together with her husband Paul Bernardo, was responsible for a number of rape-murders. At times, both institutions and individuals are combined; for example, during protests against the pending Iraq war in 2002, a placard talked of eliminating ‘Colin cancer’ referring to United States Secretary of State at the time, Colin Powell. Likewise, in the case of criminals eligible for parole, the protest may be directed toward the criminal justice system.

Often there is a strong symbolic dimension to the target of protests. Embassies both represent and are symbols of particular governments. Likewise, statues and memorials are symbolic sites for protest. During the Israeli–Hezbollah violent conflict, a Jewish and Muslim joint peace march went from the human rights monument in Ottawa to the War Memorial.

In most instances, the individuals against whom the protest is organized or the leaders to whom it is directed are not present at the protest. However, it

is possible that they send messages or that crowd organizers meet with their representatives. During the Quebec City Summit of the Americas, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien sent a message to the protesters that acknowledged the legitimacy of their concerns; the result was a calming effect on the crowd.

If there is a great psychological or physical distance between crowds and their targets, the communication between them is very indirect, often played out in press coverage that will provide quotes from people on each side of the relational system.

If the goal of the protest crowd is to communicate a truth that they feel passionately needs to be communicated and work for change, we can discern a more nuanced differentiation of targets:

- Primary Targets—those perceived as responsible for the injustice
- Authority Targets—those with the authority and capacity to make changes
- Public Opinion Secondary Targets—the point of the protest is often to impact public opinion so the strategy is to protest the Primary and Authority Targets in a manner that will capture the support of bystanders and the broader public through media coverage.

Targets of the protest crowd activities are vital to the success of the protesters' objective whether this objective is to make change, stop change or to influence public opinion. Although protesters usually want to communicate directly with targets most often they have to be content with passing their message through bystanders, the next relational system we will examine.

Bystanders

There are three ways of having an impact on the target: through direct impact, public opinion and media coverage. The latter two involve media and bystanders in relational systems with the protesters and with the police. The bystanders can be separated into immediate bystanders—those physically present who can either watch the protest or who might be affected by it because they live, have businesses or work in the vicinity—and public bystanders—those who become aware of the protest through the media, internet or word of mouth. One can imagine concentric circles of bystanders going from those directly

affected because of their close proximity—such as shop owners who may be the victims of the breaking windows and looting—to those inconvenienced—commuters whose road is blocked temporarily—to those who are indirectly affected.

Political psychologist Ervin Staub has done extensive research on the role of bystanders in influencing social dynamics (Staub, 1992). Initially he did clinical experiments that demonstrated how the actions of individuals were subject to the influence of those around them. Later he applied his theoretical conclusions to group actions, showing how the encouragement or silence of bystanders can strengthen the impulse to be violent. As people not directly involved in a crowd action, especially if it is long standing, bystanders can influence the course of events. By either disapproving or encouraging they can diminish or exacerbate crowd violence. Staub extends the bystander circle to include the global community, suggesting, for example that if the global community had expressed unequivocal disapproval of the initial repressive actions of the Nazis in the 1930s, things might have turned out very differently.

There are four groups of bystanders who are particularly significant for protest crowds and police: property owners, moral and opinion leaders, civil society observers, and the media. The media play a distinct role and will be treated separately in the next section.

Property owners and citizens living near the protest area may be drawn into the action in a number of ways. They may need permits and have to

Figure 6.1 Bystander Groups

pass through security checks to get to their homes or businesses. They may be asked to provide help to those injured. Their property may be damaged or looted. They may choke on tear gas that the wind blows in their direction. Their free movement through the streets may be blocked during a demonstration and the resulting anger can create more conflict as they are called to join in the escalating violence of the crowd. They may inadvertently encounter angry interactions between police and protesters. Whatever their experience, they communicate it to friends in the wider community. How the information is interpreted has an impact on the overall sense of security, justice and hope or despair for the future.

Some civil society institutions have a concern not only for the issues raised by activists, but also for the dynamics of actions taking place at a demonstration. They may have concerns about violence, human rights and the impact of the protest itself on the viability of civil society. Moral and religious leaders who communicate with significant numbers of people may observe and reflect on what is happening and communicate their thoughts to people in the wider community. Through the intermediate efforts of these groups, people within a country and internationally are made aware of what is happening as a result of a protesting crowd.

Given all of these diverse players within the total picture of a crowd action and the response of the various parties, there are many choices that people can make. A basic choice is to a) work from a paradigm of trying to control the situation from one's own frame of reference or b) accept a paradigm that emphasizes communication and creative options that enhance the well-being of everyone.

Through the media the circle of bystanders is widened; it is the next focus of attention.

The Media

Media have the power to satisfy certain identity needs of protagonists in a demonstration. What journalists choose to cover can either satisfy or threaten needs for recognition and action, since some demonstrators have the goal of attracting media coverage. How a story is covered has an impact on the meaning systems of those involved. If coverage is perceived to be unfair, it provokes anger. If the frightening dimensions of either side

are exaggerated it diminishes a sense of security and increases fear. If a story enhances mutual understanding, it makes people feel connected. Given the power of the media to impact identity need satisfiers, it is easy to see how the media prompt a strong emotional reaction—people love and want the media for the exposure and information offered and hate the media for perceptions of bias, incompleteness, or sensationalism to ‘sell papers’ and increase ratings. An indication of the power of the media is that Seattle, Quebec City and Genoa have become code words for violent protest, largely because through the media they have become part of global consciousness.

As people not directly implicated in the crowd action, media play a number of roles. They are key members of the bystander group. Through media coverage, all of society can get drawn into the bystander role. As commentators, they help the public interpret what goes on and this interpretation may be either critical or encouraging of one group over the other. Their coverage helps to shape the overall impression people have of each group. Consequently, police now engage media consultants and arrange for cameras to be set up behind police lines. Each stakeholder group tries to put their own spin on the story. Stories are told of protesters who launch a violent action when the television cameras are rolling and stop as soon as the media leave. Protest becomes performance. In the end, media coverage does not always reflect the true nature of the demonstration. However, given the power of the media to influence public opinion, media access and attention become objects of mimetic desire for activists and politicians as well as the police.

Media have a tendency to focus on the conflictual dynamics of life—conflict makes a better story; they can get diverted from the substance of the meeting by a violent side show. Television media looks for gripping visual footage that is easiest to get in a violent situation. As such, there is a built-in media bias toward the more violent confrontations between crowds and security or crowds and targets. Furthermore, covering violent confrontations requires less research and feeds the demand of pressing deadlines. Taking stereotypical positions such as ‘police are aggressive,’ or ‘free-trade is bad’ means they don’t have to think about the issue in a deeper way.

Journalists are not objects to be manipulated; they are people and they are actors within the whole situation. They have their own values

that find expression in the work they do. During the Quebec Summit, one reporter attempted to experience what it was like to be on the security side of the fence and he became the target of projectiles from the activists' side. He felt this happened because he was the only one without protective gear.

Various media imitate one another in covering the same stories and highlighting the same details. Images of the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) Conference and the pepper spray incident¹⁹ in Vancouver have been aired again and again and again. This makes for some anomalies. One police officer told of a situation in Atlantic Canada at the same time as the APEC meeting where police actions to suppress a demonstration were far more violent but because the Atlantic situation was a local event, it received hardly any coverage. At the time of APEC, police relied on the use of pepper spray; it was used with less objection from the public than has been the case after the APEC incident. The officer who sprayed the APEC pepper has been subject to endless ridicule (e.g. 'Sergeant Pepper' jokes); his family and his career have both suffered. This police officer became a scapegoat in the policing community, in part because of the repeated playing of a few seconds of footage where he was spraying people with pepper.

Pressure from editors and publishers sometimes controls what journalists are allowed to write, either by virtue of the time given or the material that will be accepted. Individuals within the media from front line journalists to editors, publishers and producers are affected by events and filter their actions through the so called 'good story' filter, the 'balanced reporting' filter and through other media cultural values that operate on a tacit (unexpressed) level. They have their own identity needs which find expression in the way in which they do their work.

As significant relational systems are multiplied vis-à-vis a protest event the interconnections increase exponentially to the point where the whole becomes a complex system. It then becomes important to include complexity theory in the composite framework used to understand what is happening during major protest crowd events.

19 At the 1997 APEC Conference in Vancouver, B.C., UBC students carrying protest signs were angry that the issue of human rights was not on the APEC agenda. The RCMP tried to clear the area but chaos erupted. Protestors tore down a fence and pepper spray was sprayed into the crowds. Later, an unapologetic Prime Minister Chrétien brushed away the pepper spray incident, saying 'For me, pepper, I put it on my plate.'

Complexity

What happens in any of these relational systems has an impact on all of the others. We can now revisit the concept of complexity in relation to protest crowds as developed by Deborah Sword:

Complex systems are dynamic, nonlinear, unpredictable and self-organizing. In complex systems, an infinite number of parts make the whole but the whole cannot be known by summing the individual parts. The parts are interdependent, meaning they influence each other in a feedback loop, not in simple action and reaction. (2003, 29)

Sword applied chaos-complexity theory to an analysis of three protest movements, focusing primarily on the protester–government relational system. In her research, she looked at the dominant and shadow systems that formed into a complex conflict system. Depending on the protest, the dominant system was comprised of those agents that had the ability to influence the conflict system in a direction supporting the policy that the protest group objected to, such as government, police, mainstream news media and industry. Protest movements and those agents generating knowledge that influenced the conflict system against the policy being protested were designated the shadow system. She demonstrated through these case studies, the non-linear, mutual dynamics in relational systems and surprising outcomes along the way.

One of the unpredictable dynamics Sword develops as part of her complexity framework is that of mimetic contagion:

Agents in complex systems are influenced by what networks they are in and what people they know are doing. If a public policy protest has already begun to attract a crowd, it will attract more of a crowd. As Gell-Mann (1994) quipped: them that has, gets. Gladwell's (2000) research into tipping points demonstrated, that in complex systems, things do not necessarily become popular by building acceptance slowly and steadily. Instead, popular things have contagiousness and unpopular things do not. If something is going to become popular, it will do so suddenly and dramatically, although the popularity may only seem sudden because the observer has not noticed the small inputs that have been accumulating to create that dramatic moment. (Sword, 2003, 32)

Mutatis mutandis, the mimetic contagion effect could happen at any point in the interactions within and between relational systems. For example, a generally peaceful law-respecting crowd that witnesses what is perceived as unjustified violence on the part of the police may, in an instance become highly agitated, mimetically mirroring and amplifying the violence they have witnessed. Likewise, police are impacted emotionally by what they see going on in a crowd.

It is clear from the introductions of protest crowds, police, targets, bystanders and media that each of these groups can represent a complex system. Bringing them all together in the context of a major protest multiplies the complexity of factors at play. At any moment, actions coming out of any of these groups can have an enormous impact on all of the other systems at play, particularly if that action comes at a bifurcation point. In the next chapter we will examine the concept of mimesis as developed by René Girard. This will provide some insight on the dynamics by which actions take on an amplified importance within complex systems.

This chapter has extended the structure of demonstrations to include the relationship of the protest crowd with the target and the bystanders including the media. Protest has a primal and a dramatic component to it. The key objective of the crowd is to get the message to the target that has the power to do something about the perceived problem and to engage the help of bystanders including the media along the way. Through the process of mimetic contagion and with a basic introduction to complexity theory we are able to project the unpredictability of crowd actions and appreciate the significance of having a framework with which to analyze crowds. The next chapter introduces mimetic theory, which will ground our understanding of mimetic contagion and reciprocal violence.