Gestalt of a Group

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In the recent past, we have seen news reports in the media regarding police response to group activities like the Occupy Movement. Protests are often couched by their participants as Gandhi-Style ordeals and, by purpose and intention, perhaps that is their original design. The peaceful protesters that desire to sit-in merely to be present or be a bother also become the prey of some of the bad elements in society. So they legitimately need police protection. On the other hand, there are also those who may arrive or are in the design, to incite the crowd to commit acts of aggression, hostility, and violence toward those whom they might mark as enemies of the cause. Peaceful protest and gathering organizers can make no warranties or guarantees that it will remain as such. As police officers, we know that through our experience and training.

If one thinks about it, a police officer’s acting within the law when using force is what makes it legal or not, in the theoretical sense. However, what makes any use of force actually legal is the officer’s and the department’s ability to persuasively explain why the force was reasonable and necessary. Words, behaviors, and gestures are often the only things regarded as “evidence” when a use of force is under review. While they are a valuable source of information, there are meta-communications and micro-expressions that tip us off to whom might be unfriendly people in the crowd or an escalation in some that can lead to trouble. The thing about meta-communications (the implied message behind the expressed message) or micro-expressions (subtle facial expressions that reveal feelings one is trying to hide), is we often get a “gut-feeling” from these while not being able to identify them in our awareness. Sometimes, it takes reflection on our own experience to pin-point that moment when things seemed to go south.

According to behavioral science, there are cause and effect relationships that drive human attitudes, thoughts, feelings, and ultimately behaviors. In other words, there is an antecedent assumed to exist that precipitated the behavioral outcome (Polkinghorne, 1984). There is a particular world-view that is foundational to the behavioral assumptions. This world-view assumes that (1) there are universal laws that govern all things in the universe, (2) for every effect or outcome, there is a sufficient cause, (3) all things can be reduced to their fundamental pieces (atomism/elementalism), including human thought and behavior, and (4) all accepted “truths” must be observable and measureable. Metaphysical concepts like right and wrong, good and evil, and even experiential phenomena like love and hate do not really “exist” in time and space and are therefore irrelevant to science; they are simply ignored or denied (Polkinghorne, 1984). However, an alternate view considers human experience and relationships as fundamental to the human condition. Once the dominant view failed to explain and predict more than the most simple problems of human behavior, issues like why people do, think, and are motivated toward acting and thinking irrationally is leftover. How do somewhat unpredictable outcomes emerge out of human interactions and relations?

The concept of emergence comes from a contemporary view called systems theory. Any group (two or more) of people forms a system. Each system is part of a larger system, still. Therefore, there is an emergent quality from its interdependent influences between the people of the group. Therefore, rather than seeing people as individuals that add up to a group, the group becomes something new based on the fact that it is constituted by its distinct parts. Like a water molecule, hydrogen is itself a gas and oxygen is too a gas, but together emerges a colorless, tasteless, liquid with properties unique to it. For example, water has surface tension, expands when it turns to a solid, and is essential to sustain biological life. That means, these two atoms on their own are entirely different than they are when they are with one another (Polkinghorne, 1984). We see that people can manifest different personalities when in the company of different groups of which they are members.

Let’s look at an example from film that demonstrates how two people form a system, but when they come into contact in the context of the larger frame’s system, the system they form together begins to collapse. Colors is an 1980s film about Los Angeles gangs and police. Sean Penn plays a younger officer (McGavin) to his counterpart senior partner played by Robert Duvall. At an early point in the film, McGavin makes a date with a Latina working at a drive-in restaurant. They go on a date and seem to have an emerging fondness and affection for one another. In the date scene, issues about her being a “homegirl” and he being a cop come up and they handle it
delicately by parting ways before he has driven her too far into her Barrio. This means that they terminate the night without his traditionally “seeing her safely home.” After a conflict and a break up, McGavin is involved in a gang raid on a house and finds her wrapping up a sexual encounter with a gang-banger. They are both humiliated, but McGavin is in her world and he is regarded as the outsider/intruder (Lewis, Solo & Hopper, 2001). What emerges as romantic in one frame turns into conflict in another because the two are no longer in their system, but in the system from which they belong in their everyday lives.

Gestalt psychology began in Germany led by researchers Kaffka and Kohler. Gestalt psychology founded the concept that our minds see interpreted wholes out of assemblies of parts. Perception is also influenced by perspective like, when looking at a picture as black on white the picture is an old woman. However, by shifting one’s focus to white on black, he or she changes the picture into a young woman. Whether it is shapes, sizes, numbers, or even objects, human minds see patterns which we take to have meaning or we put to functional purposes in our lives (Kohler, 1968). Similar to the way we hear melody, harmony and rhythm, that which separates noise and music depends upon the hearers’ abilities to find patterns in the notes. Not only are the actual notes important, but what spaces or silent places between the notes are as important to our finding a song in the sounds. So it is with our ideas about human groups. Who fits and who does not, depends on the constellation of the members and the functional purpose of the group.

Abstraction becomes a thinker’s slight-of-hand or blind spot when determining human interactions. In a protest, the various people there cannot be abstracted into simple categories like “peaceful protester, police officer, observer, journalist, etc.” Of course, these are roles and often times a starting point for which the various people in a crowd organize themselves initially. If we reflect on the interpretation done in the media regarding Occupy protests, often the police officers arriving in their protective gear is regarded as posturing in the same sense that Grossman (2009) uses it in a confrontation. There is a simple abstracted presupposition that because the police are prepared for the worst case scenario that they are also provoking it by so being prepared. The “peaceful protester” can see the officers as there to protect him or her from violent opposition or see the officers as the violent opposition. What is the grand narrative of the situation and how is it steered and by whom? We might think of that instigator but we fall prey to the elementalistic or atomist view of groups. Groups are not a collection of individuals but take on an identity and personality of their own. Group identity emerges from groups.

The group’s leadership, mission, and functioning are emergent when the group is not a formal group. Formal groups have predetermined structures, functions, roles and processes. Clear lines of authority and role clarity make formal groups more predictable. Even the actualization of such group processes are still influenced by the constellation of the group members. Panic spreads like wildfire more quickly in an informal group than a formal one in which the leaders take charge. In a crisis, people want to make rapid and effective decisions and following someone that seems to understand more about what’s going on is an easy and natural way to go.

In formal groups, the emergence is much more powerful but nuanced in its interaction. We know this from working with a crew or team of officers that sync well. The communications, team tasks, and bond are salient but seemingly take little effort among such a group. Well trained and bonded SWAT teams can communicate almost intuitively, a few detectives can tag-team finesse a confession from a suspect, and there are other examples. The point is, not only is the group greater than the sum of its individual members for police, it is so for other groups. Therefore, formal groups like gangs and other criminal organizations have codes, communications and cohesion that can help them operate as seamlessly. On a street encounter, criminals have been known to have predetermined plans and roles for, “just in case the cops stop us.” But also, many have been acquainted long enough and had experiences where they can operate quite well on the fly. Remember, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – qualitatively. So it is important to divide the members when possible, not just because it keeps them from communicating, but because psychologically it makes them “alone” in anything they try to do. Moreover, the things you can do to undermine the members’ identities as a unit helps to reduce the emergent power and motivation that such unity provides. In a sense, you are de-formalizing the formal psychological structures of the group.

What can we learn from this? Well, I think that we have to think about our group solidarity and how to improve our emergent qualities. Some officers think that their supervisors’ “team building” efforts are only to make his or her job easier and involve less drama. However, we all have experienced the “whole is greater than the parts” emergence among us when we are well connected to a group. However, back-biting and unfriendly competitions creep in among us. Conflicts can begin over disagreements, jealousies, anxieties, and other normal human dynamics. We have to understand that these de-formalize our formal structures as well as undermine the individual dignities of officers – our brothers and sisters. We are a tribe and we need to honor that membership. We also have to understand groups and emergent qualities well enough to use them for our advantage when dealing with groups and crowds, but also for increasing our unity, power, and organizational wellness.
References


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