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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to propose a different explanation of collective behavior and also to hypothesize how communication functions in this process. Using the experimental finding known as the "risky shift," this essay (1) summarizes the history of the risky shift, (2) presents two different theories which have been proposed to explain the finding, and (3) by employing Roger Brown's "cultural value theory," suggests how members of small groups become more risky/cautions as a function of being in the group context. Furthermore, the essay translates this theory from the context of the small group into the context of the larger collectivity. In the process, several communicative demands and requirements are suggested. The manner in which communication strategies can fulfill these demands is articulated, and potential methods for validating this explanation are offered. (Author)

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**Collective behavior and The Risky Shift:  
A Theory of Communication Strategy**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to propose a different explanation of collective behavior; and also to hypothesize how communication functions in this process. Unlike previous theories, this explanation does not rely on a group effect. Rather, it is based on the behavior of individual members of the collectivity. Using the experimental finding known as the "risky shift," this essay (1) summarizes the history of the risky shift, (2) presents two different theories which have been proposed to explain the finding, and (3) by employing Roger Brown's "cultural value theory," suggests how members of small groups become more risky/cautious as a function of being in the group context. Furthermore, the essay "translates" this theory from the context of the small group into the context of the larger collectivity. In the process, several communicative demands and requirements are suggested. The manner in which communication strategies can fulfill these demands is articulated, and potential methods for validating this explanation are offered.

## Collective Behavior and The Risky Shift:

### A Theory of Communication Strategy

Numerous attempts have been made to explain the phenomenon of "violent" collective behavior. Historically, Le Bon ascribed it to the lowered intelligence of the crowd which caused individuals to lose self control, release their primitive aggressive impulses, and be easily swayed by the slogans and harangues of their leaders.<sup>1</sup> Freud, on the other hand, thought that libidinal ties forged a group unity which manifested itself in a "group mind."<sup>2</sup> In a more contemporary theory, Turner suggests the concept of an "emerging group norm."<sup>3</sup> Generally, his theory states that a small minority of the crowd establishes aggressive behavior as the new group norm, and other members of the collectivity feel socially constrained to conform to this normative value. Finally, from the sociological frame of reference, Smelser proposes his "value-added determinants" theory of collective behavior.<sup>4</sup> Elegant in its construction, Smelser's theory formulates a series of situational variables which must exist in a given instance of collective behavior if violence is to be the result.

The purpose of this essay is to propose yet another theoretical explanation of collective behavior. This explanation, however, will differ from those previously mentioned in two important ways. First, it is intended to

emphasize strategic communication as the most important element in understanding and predicting the process of collective behavior. Its primary questions, then, are what psychological processes underlie violent collective behavior, and how are they correlated with communication variables in a manner which will explain both the exacerbation and inhibition of violent collective behavior?

Second, unlike many other psychological explanations of its type, this position does not advocate a "true group effect." The theories of Freud, Le Bon, and Turner, for example, all postulate some form of conformity effect as the primary mechanism which operates in violent collective behavior. My disagreement with the conformity paradigm lies in the fact that (1) it has been experimentally called into question by the paradigm I will propose below, and (2) in the Gestaltist framework, it relies on a true group effect--an effect which basically suggests that the whole (the group) is more than the sum of its parts (the individual members).<sup>5</sup>

My explanation, which relies on the experimental finding known as the "risky shift," predicts outcomes similar to the other theories I have mentioned, but does so by conceptualizing different psychological processes. That is, it analyzes collective behavior from the standpoint of the individual behaviors which comprise it.<sup>6</sup> Not only does