Why Crowds Act

Three ways to explain collective behavior

SS24.S.11a "Compare and contrast the major theories of collective behavior, including contagion theory, convergence theory, and emergent norm theory.*"

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline how each theory explains the start of group action, and circle one clue an observer could use to test each explanation.

What Makes a Crowd Move?

1. At a street festival, a sudden shout sends people rushing toward an empty intersection. No one seems to know who shouted or why. Contagion theory explains collective behavior as feelings and actions spreading through a crowd, much as excitement can spread at a game. People may copy those nearby without checking the original cause. In this view, close contact and shared emotion help turn separate individuals into a group acting together. A rush does not prove that everyone lost judgment, however. An observer would need to look for signs that people followed others rather than a plan they brought with them.

2. At a town meeting, residents arrive already angry about a proposed park closure. Several have planned to speak, and many share a goal: keeping the park open. When one person begins chanting, others join. Convergence theory focuses on the people who gather rather than on an emotion created by the gathering. People with similar concerns or intentions are drawn to the same place, where they can act together. The chanting may be loud, but the crowd did not invent the residents' concern. To investigate this explanation, an observer could ask what participants believed and planned before they arrived.

3. After a storm cuts power at a library, visitors wait in a dark lobby. No rule tells them how to respond. Someone switches on a phone light and points toward the exit; others hold their lights up and guide people outside in a quiet line. Emergent norm theory emphasizes how people develop a shared rule for action in an uncertain situation. They watch one another, treat certain actions as appropriate, and adjust their behavior. This account does not require everyone to share a plan beforehand or to copy a feeling blindly. An observer might notice who proposed the first action and how others responded.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How would contagion theory and convergence theory explain the different starting points of the festival rush and the town meeting chant?

2. How does the timing of a shared way to act differ between the park meeting and the library evacuation?

3. People follow others at both the festival and the library. What difference between contagion theory and emergent norm theory does this similarity hide?

4. Suppose a video shows only the moment a crowd begins acting together. Why might that video be insufficient to choose between contagion theory and convergence theory?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine people outside a stadium's closed main gate suddenly begin moving toward a second entrance. In 4 to 6 sentences, explain how two different theories could account for the same movement and name one observation that would help you decide between them.

ANSWER KEY

Why Crowds Act

HIGH SCHOOL · SS24.S.11a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline how each theory explains the start of group action, and circle one clue an observer could use to test each explanation. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How would contagion theory and convergence theory explain the different starting points of the festival rush and the town meeting chant?	**Contagion theory points to people copying actions or feelings that spread through the festival crowd. Convergence theory points to the residents' shared concern and intentions before they gathered.**
2	How does the timing of a shared way to act differ between the park meeting and the library evacuation?	**The park residents shared a goal before they gathered, as convergence theory emphasizes. The library visitors developed a way to act after the power failed, as emergent norm theory emphasizes.**
3	People follow others at both the festival and the library. What difference between contagion theory and emergent norm theory does this similarity hide?	**Contagion theory emphasizes actions and feelings spreading as people copy others. Emergent norm theory emphasizes people treating an action as appropriate and developing a shared rule for the situation.**
4	Suppose a video shows only the moment a crowd begins acting together. Why might that video be insufficient to choose between contagion theory and convergence theory?	**The video might show people following others, but not whether they arrived with similar plans or concerns. An observer would need evidence about what participants believed or planned beforehand.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Contagion theory would suggest that people saw others hurry and copied their movement without knowing why. Convergence theory would suggest that many people had already decided to use the second entrance. Both accounts explain a crowd moving together, but they differ on whether people had a plan beforehand. I would ask people when they learned about the second entrance. If most had planned to use it before arriving, convergence theory would fit better.

Accept comparisons that accurately distinguish what each theory emphasizes. For Your Turn, accept any two theories if both explanations fit the new situation and the proposed observation could help distinguish them.