Mass Hysteria: Dancing Plague

In 1518 in France, hundreds of people danced wildly nonstop for days on end; many succumbed to the extreme exhaustion or strokes that resulted from this “dancing plague.” In 1962 in Tanganyika (an East African country now known as Tanzania), a bunch of students in a girls’ boarding school began to laugh and cry uncontrollably for a long period of time; the school had to be shut down for a while thanks to this “laughing epidemic.”

Just seven years ago in 2012, eighteen typical teenage girls in New York suddenly began to develop motor (physical) and vocal tics, much like symptoms of Tourette's syndrome. What was going on with all of these people? In these three famous cases, they were experiencing a curious phenomenon known as mass hysteria, or mass psychogenic illness. In their textbook, Social Psychology, David G. Myers and Jean M. Twenge define this as the “[s]uggestibility to problems that spread throughout a large group of people” (146).

The most commonly used explanation of mass hysteria is that it is the result of “physiological symptoms affecting the nervous system in the absence of a physical cause of illness, and which may appear in reaction to psychological distress” (Cohut). In other words, it is psychological stress converted into physiological (bodily) symptoms which, in turn, can be displayed in physical behavior. This is known as a conversion disorder. Any person can suffer from a conversion disorder, but when a large number of people suffer from it at once, that is when it can be considered as a case of mass hysteria. The phenomenon usually starts with one person or several people behaving in a certain way. Then, in order for it to be considered a hysteria, the behavior must be observed and imitated by a fairly large number of people.

The dancing plague was kicked off by one lively woman named Frau Troffea who began to rollick around in the street and a growing number of observers joined in. The laughing epidemic started with three giggling schoolgirls and soon spread to a lot of the other students. When a cheerleader named Katie Krautwurst woke up from a nap twitching and spasming and then shared her experiences on YouTube, the other seventeen girls followed suit. Also, the affected people have to live or be present in the same area. The dancers romped around together in the streets of Strasbourg, France; the girls of a Kashasha, Tanganyika boarding school laughed while the girls of Le Roy Junior-Senior High School in New York ticced. (While anyone is susceptible to falling into it, for some reason young women are especially; the girls of Tanganyika and Le Roy are just two good examples. This may be because, according to Benjamin Radford of Live Science, mass hysteria “spreads through social ties and females tend to have stronger social bonds than males.”)

This is how mass hysteria happens, but why does it happen? Why would a bunch of people start dancing, laughing, or ticcing just because they saw one person doing it? This most likely all has to do with the anxieties and concerns of a given time period and place. In the Holy Roman Empire during the 16th century, there was ongoing famine and rampant disease; that combined with the popular superstitious belief that the Catholic Saint Vitus could curse people with dancing plagues “may have triggered a stress-induced hysteria that took hold of much of the city [of Strasbourg, France in 1518]” (Andrews). After Tanganyika became an independent republic in 1961, just one year before the laughing epidemic, “the schoolgirls may have [felt of

unease about] the unfamiliar expectations imposed in-run schools and the uncertainties created by Tanganyika's independence" (Holmes). Finally, after numerous inspections for environmental contaminants in the Le Roy Junior-Senior High School building—all of which turned up negative—in the end, experts concluded that the high school girls' ticcing was stress-induced, presumably mostly due to school-related matters.

Mass hysteria can affect anyone at any time but, with the issue of spreading it, it is especially a concern nowadays. Back then, hysteria broke out only when the behavior was observed in person. Now that we have more ways to share things with others with the use of phones and social media, it can be spread faster and more effectively. Katie Krautwurst unintentionally helped spread the ticcing hysteria to the other girls after she posted that video of herself on YouTube; the news media constantly broadcasting the girls on TV also played a big role.

The two main things that can worsen mass hysteria (or aggravate the symptoms of the sufferers) are the uncertainty of the "illness" and the withholding of information from the public. Similar to how superstitious beliefs fueled the dancing plague, there were many inaccurate theories blaming environmental factors for the Le Roy ticcing epidemic. These were later proved to be wrong, yet the New York State Health Department refused to release any official diagnosis until they were eventually forced to. In the words of medical sociologist Robert Bartholomew: Their actions in this case are a textbook example of how not to handle an outbreak of mass psychogenic illness [...] In initially refusing to render a diagnosis, the department generated so much anxiety that they created a public health issue as residents feared the existence of a mystery illness. (Radford) As mass hysteria has struck people in the past, it can strike us today. The citizens of Strasbourg were worried about superstitions and disease; the schoolgirls of Tanganyika were uncertain of new circumstances after the country gained independence. Some issues Americans are concerned about today include—but are certainly not limited to—sexual assault, drugs, and racism. Who knows what stress about those things can lead us to do? The existence of this phenomenon truly shows how easily we are influenced by others around us, even if we are not consciously aware of it.