

DON'T PANIC!

Altruistic behaviour in crowd emergencies

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Abstract:

A study is being done into the psychology of crowd behaviour during emergencies, and ways of ensuring safety during mass evacuations by encouraging more altruistic behaviour. Crowd emergencies have previously been understood as involving panic and selfish behaviour. The present study tests the claims that (1) co-operation and altruistic behaviour rather than panic will predominate in mass responses to emergencies, even in situations where there is a clear threat of death; and that this is the case not only because (2) everyday norms and social roles continue to exert an influence, but also because (3) the external threat can create a sense of solidarity amongst strangers. Qualitative analysis of interviews with survivors of different emergencies supports these claims. A second study of the July 7th London bombings is on-going and also supports these claims. While these findings provide support for some existing models of mass emergency evacuation, it also points to the necessity of a new theoretical approach to the phenomena, using Self-Categorization Theory. Practical applications for the future management of crowd emergencies are also considered.

Introduction:

We are only too familiar these days with large-scale crowd emergencies, be they perceived as natural disasters, such as the Asian Tsunami and hurricane Katrina, or from human activity, such as the Sept 11th attacks on New York, and more recently, the July 7th attacks on London. Contrary to some popular expectations, these disasters did not result in whole-scale panic, and rather than descending into selfish 'irrational' behaviour there are many reports of co-operative and altruistic behaviour, even when there was a clear threat of death to participants. Much was made in the popular Press after the July 7th bombings of the London of the collective spirit of Londoners, with allusions to the Blitz and IRA campaigns. However, research suggests that altruistic behaviour in emergencies is a universal trait common to all humanity that can emerge given the right circumstances, and this should be encouraged wherever possible.

Rationale and expectations:

Early accounts of crowd behaviour (e.g. Le Bon, 1895) as an irrational mob devoid of reason have been largely discredited by psychologists (e.g. Reicher, 1987). However, the fear of mass panic still influences planners when considering how to respond to large scale emergencies. This 'Panic model' suggests that threat causes;

- a) Emotion to overwhelm reason resulting in fight or flight behaviours
- b) Dissolution of unity, causing people to act as atomised individuals
- c) Selfish behaviours such as pushing, and trampling as people escape.

The crowd is seen as a vehicle for the spread of irrational perceptions and feelings; e.g. if one person panics and behaves selfishly then everyone else will follow suit.

But psychological approaches using Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner et al, 1987) reject the irrationalist tradition of crowd behaviour. Rather than seeing crowds as an unthinking mass, prone to impulsivity and emotion, they suggest that crowd members behave within norms that are consistent with any social identity that they may have. The Social Identity Model of crowd behaviour (Reicher, 1987) has found that altruism and self-sacrifice can occur if a common identity develops amongst participants, even in the face of great risks to those involved. This is because social identity approaches assume there is a distinction between a physical gathering of people with no common goal, and a psychological crowd where people have developed a common identity through their shared fate in the face of danger. Altruistic behaviour is considered more likely in psychological crowds because the self is extended. Selfish behaviour in a psychological crowd would be also less likely as people will see others as part of self – an injury to others is an injury to me. If selfish behaviour occurs, it is usually when helping others is no longer physically possible. If following SCT we can say that the self is not only personal but also collective, then the everyday concept of 'selfish' needs to be qualified if it means to refer to people acting out of personal interest, as one could help one's collective self by helping others.

Hypotheses:

1) The myth of panic

We expected little evidence of mass panic during crowd emergencies. Moreover, we expected reports of altruistic behaviour to be greater than reports of personally selfish behaviour (e.g., pushing, barging in front of others, ignoring pleas for help)

2) From perceived threat to unity and more helping

The more likely people are to report that they felt in danger, and the greater the danger, the more likely they are to report a sense of unity and solidarity with the crowd as a whole (i.e. not just bond with friends and family but with strangers too). Consequently it also suggests that the more unity reported, the more altruistic behaviour there would be, and in direct contradiction of the panic model, altruistic behaviour may even increase with perceived danger, with unity becoming stronger as well.

Method:

Participants:

We interviewed 21 participants with experiences of 11 different events. The events included; the sinking of the Jupiter cruise ship in 1988, the Hillsborough football disaster in 1989, and the evacuation of Canary Wharf on Sept 11th 2001. Although some were not disasters in that there were no fatalities, it was considered that perception of a threat was enough, as those involved believed it was a real emergency at the time. Survivors of the July 7th London bombings are being recruited via a web-site set up since asking for people to e-mail the researchers their experiences¹ and then interviewing those who are happy to do so. Various web-postings and interviews with the media have been collected as well, and so far data has been gathered from over 100 survivors, with two interviews completed by researchers.

Procedure:

The interview began with the interviewees being asked to tell the story of the events as they remembered them, and then further questions were asked about theirs and others' behaviour, thoughts/ feelings, and identities. Interviews were transcribed for thematic analysis, which entailed coding up each interview in relation to the answers to the questions of interest. Thus for each interview we grouped responses relevant to the following:

- 1) Perceived threat
- 2) Emotions (own and others), and whether people were in control
- 3) Altruistic or selfish behaviours and concern for others
- 4) Calm and orderliness, and talk of panic (as well as lack of panic).
- 5) Perceptions of unity/ solidarity amongst those involved

¹ full web address follows after references

Results:

The following quotes were taken from the interviews with survivors. Data was anonymised, so only the emergency from which it was reported appears here.

The myth of Panic

Mass panic was generally absent, and any individual panic behaviour was not only isolated, but was usually tempered by others involved, rather than spreading to the crowd as a whole

1) There was no real panic - just an overwhelming sense to get out of the station quickly

2) Almost straight away our packed carriage started to fill with smoke, and people panicked immediately. Thankfully there were some level-headed people on the carriage who managed to calm everyone down

(both from July 7th London bombings)

Selfish behaviour was also rare and evacuations tended to be orderly;

1) There was no shoving, no pushing, no anything, everyone was always trying to help each other, I mean I know I was crushed for a bit but that wasn't anyone else's fault ..it was just they way I had fallen.. everyone went out in lines, [] although everyone was cramming to get in we all kind of filed everywhere when we should have done

(Jupiter ship disaster 1988)

Threat leads to more altruistic behaviour

When asked about altruistic behaviour, respondents often replied that such behaviour was common, both by individuals, and also when coordinated with others

1) Many people kept calm and tried to help one another to see if anyone was injured

2) I was very aware of people helping each other out and I was being helped myself

3) Passengers with medical experience were found, I found a tool box and we smashed a window, allowing the medical guys to enter the other train

(all from July 7th London bombings)

Shared threat helps create common identity

It was also clear that some kind of collective unity emerged in response to the threat that encouraged more altruistic behaviour.

1) We were all strangers really we were certainly surrounded by strangers [] most people were split up from anybody they knew, and yet there was this sort of camaraderie like you hear about in the war [] there was certainly a pulling together as apposed to a pulling apart.

(Jupiter ship disaster)

2) The behaviour of many people in that crowd [] trying to help their fellow supporters was heroic in some cases. So I don't think [] there was any question that there was a [] sense of unity of crowd behaviour.[] It was clearly the case that people were trying to get people who were seriously injured out of that crowd [] trying to get people to hospital, get them to safety

(Hillsborough football disaster)

Conclusion:

Results are consistent with theories that altruistic behaviour can and does occur even in life-threatening emergencies, with selfish behaviour being rare and unlikely to spread if it occurs. The assertion that irrational selfish behaviour occurs in emergencies is therefore unfounded, and so the idea of general panic in response to such events remains a myth. Altruistic behaviour also appears to be the norm rather than the exception, and this should be recognised and encouraged by emergency planners, rather than fearing mass panic as soon as a threat emerges.

Possible applications:

- 1) Emergency planners need no longer assume that people in emergencies will panic if they know the extent of the threat they face, and providing crowd members with clear, unambiguous information about the situation that they can act upon, may help ensure safety in any future large-scale emergencies as people may evacuate quicker and more efficiently without panicking.
- 2) Appealing to crowd members' collective spirit may be more effective than is currently acknowledged in encouraging a more altruistic identity and hence more altruistic behaviour. Public information campaigns on public transport systems should consider this potential for developing more altruistic identities, rather than addressing people as atomised individuals, which may encourage more selfish, and less altruistic behaviour.
- 3) Acknowledging and making provision for the findings that that people can and do behave altruistically in emergencies could provide emergency services with a large pool of potential volunteers that could help manage any emergency situation, rather than seeing them as potential obstructions that need to be moved on.

References:

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Do you have any experiences of the London bombings
you are willing to share?
if you do please visit

<http://www.cs.nott.ac.uk/~dzs/londonbomb/index.htm>