

Psychological responses to the July 7th 2005

London bombings

Introduction:

We are a team of researchers at the University of Sussex looking at ways to ensure safe and orderly mass evacuations in emergency situations, which is funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), grant number RES-000-23-0446. We are also researching how people have coped since the 7 July attacks on London in order to advance the theory and treatment of conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). What follows is a brief synopsis of our preliminary findings as well as our response to some of the points made in the GLA report into how the authorities responded to July 7th. Please contact us at the address below if you'd like to know more about the project. Also, if you have a story you are willing to share, we would be very grateful if you could visit the web-site that was set up for survivors and eye-witnesses to record their experiences:-
please go to: www.cs.nott.ac.uk/~dzs/londonbomb/index.htm

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Research findings:

Our study is ongoing and we are gathering data in many different ways including; newspaper reports, e-mails and web-log accounts from survivors, personal accounts published in the GLA reports, an on-line questionnaire, and face to face interviews with those who are willing. In total we have gathered information from nearly 300 different reports of people's experiences of July 7th. We hope to publish our findings soon in publications such as the Lancet. We have given presentations on the findings at a number of academic and user-group conferences (including to the London Resilience Team in August 2005, and more recently at the British Psychology Society Annual social psychology conference in Birmingham, September 2006).

We also have a web-site set up with further details of our research, Press releases, and examples of work we have published or presented;

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/affiliates/panic/>

However in the meantime a few of our preliminary findings follow;

1) Far from the classic stereotype of mass panic in emergencies, we found next to no evidence for this idea. While we don't deny that there was extreme fear or panic in some individuals, this was usually confined to people screaming or crying, rather than pushing or trampling over others in an effort to escape. Furthermore, individual panic did not spread to others in general, and more often than not, other people would quickly intervene to calm down those who were distressed.

2) There were many accounts of mutual co-operation and heroism amongst individuals involved. Most of the people affected were amongst strangers yet mutual helping and concern was extremely common, sometimes involving risks to the self. This is consistent with our theory that co-operative rather than selfish behaviour is the norm in mass emergencies, as people quickly develop a common bond in the face of adversity which helps them identify and empathise with others involved in the same incident. This co-operative spirit was portrayed by some (especially in the media) as part of the 'bulldog spirit of Londoners', and while we wouldn't want to detract from the heroism and selflessness displayed by those affected, the evidence we have found

from July 7th and other mass emergencies (such as 9/11, the Asian tsunami, the Hillsborough football disaster, fires, and sinking ships) suggests that while there may be some minor cultural variations, this is largely a universal human response, rather than a particularly ‘British trait’.

3) There were some reports of selfish behaviour by individuals, but these were not usually by people caught directly up in the blasts, were usually relatively minor, and tended to be the exception rather than the rule. Some survivors often described their own behaviour as selfish as they were more concerned for themselves rather than others around them. Indeed some expressed guilt that they didn’t help others more, or even that they had survived while others did not. However, such feelings of what is known as ‘survivor guilt’ are common in survivors of disasters, and this is something that those receiving therapy for PTSD are often encouraged to work through and overcome as part of the healing process. Indeed, feeling concern for oneself rarely became overt displays of selfish behaviour, meaning that people reporting that they were selfish does not necessarily mean that they actually behaved in a selfish way that hindered others’ evacuation to safety. Moreover, we have found that if people felt they did not help, it was often because they were not physically capable, or were still in shock, and as soon as they were able to help, they usually did so.

Response to the report:

There now follows our responses to some specific points in the report that we think are relevant to what we know about behaviour in emergencies. We would be happy to answer our points in more detail and/or provide references to the findings mentioned if required:

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Introduction:

p. 9, 1.15-1.17

We agree that emergency plans focus too much on the process and needs of the emergency services rather than individuals involved and would welcome a greater consideration of the people affected by July 7th. However, ours and others’ research into crowd behaviour over the last 25 years has also led us to the conclusion that some

crowds are more than just a physical aggregate of the people involved. There is something about being in a group with a common purpose that encourages people to behave in more collective, less individualised ways that wouldn't happen if they didn't have such a common goal. Therefore, we believe that the indiscriminate threat of the bombings promoted this kind of group behaviour in people on July 7th, as they united together in the face of this threat and co-operated with each other. This doesn't usually happen on a normal day commuting on the transport system in London, as, without a uniting purpose, people in crowds on buses and trains will remain as atomized individuals who don't tend to communicate or co-operate with each other. However, once the bombs had exploded, this physical crowd of commuters packed on a crowded tube train suddenly became a psychological crowd of people with a common identity in that they had a shared humanity and a common goal of needing to escape safely.

The first hour- establishing what happened:

p.12, 2.3

We agree with the assertion that in the immediate aftermath of the explosions, people needed to be given more information about what had happened and what to do. We believe that historically, crowds have rarely been trusted by those in authority to act upon information in a sensible way, and so information is not shared enough with people caught up in disasters for fear of their inability to receive or act upon such information. Previously, there has often been a fear amongst those involved in crowd management that knowing the full extent of the threat facing them would cause crowd members to descend into blind, irrational panic and so hamper their safe, efficient evacuation. However, in a broad range of the literature of disasters, and all the emergencies we have looked at, we have found no evidence to support this idea, and we would argue that giving people clear, unambiguous information about the threat they face, and more importantly how they can escape from it, could actually improve the safety and efficiency of any evacuation. We are pleased to say that those emergency planners we have spoken to are starting to listen to us in this respect and seem keen to facilitate improved communication with crowds in emergencies. We have also come across little evidence to support the idea that at a senior level a decision was made to deliberately withhold information from the public, although we

have come across reports of individual Police officers on July 7th withholding or giving conflicting information in the immediate aftermath of the bombs, which added to the general confusion present.

What seems more likely is that organisations such as the Police and some sections of the media waited until they had independently verified information before releasing it to the public, so they were not spreading unsubstantiated rumours. We believe that this is a sensible policy, as information during such events inevitably gets out one way or another, and trying to unduly delay or prevent this process simply means that those sources will not be trusted in any future emergencies. However, we realise that in the pressure to get the story out first, some media organisations may wait for less time and independent confirmation than others before releasing their reports.

The first hour- the uninjured and walking wounded:

p.63, recommendations 22 & 23

We agree with the need for communication from authority figures to those affected by a major incident. We are continuing to research this area, but it appears that people in times of extreme stress and fear, such as mass emergencies do look towards trusted figures of authority for guidance. On July 7th these authority figures did not have to be members of the emergency services or London Underground staff, and we have received accounts of self-appointed leader figures emerging amongst passengers on the trains in the confusion immediately after the bombs went off. However, people rarely follow any authority figure without question, and the figure needs to be trusted by crowd members and seen as representative of the crowd for people to follow their instructions. In support of this, we have received one report where two leader figures emerged on one carriage of the Piccadilly Line train bombed. The one who was calmer and offered more sensible advice, telling people to stay put and await rescue was listened to more by people on the train than the one who was more agitated and shouting that everyone needed to get off immediately. Therefore, we would argue that while people do seek information from authority figures, they need to trust and identify with the source if they are to believe the information and then act upon it.

p.66, recommendation 27

We support the recommendation that safety notices be installed inside tube trains, but such information needs to be clear, unambiguous, and easily followed if people are to use it effectively in any emergency. Large amounts of indigestible text are unlikely to be either read or remembered by many people before an emergency happens. Notices that appeal to the collective spirit of passengers rather than seeing them as isolated individuals (e.g. referring to them as consumers or customers) may also be more effective in generating the sense of shared identity that we believe will make co-operative behaviour more likely.

p.82 recommendations 35 & 36

We agree with the recommendation that in the event of a major incident in London, a senior officer from the MPS should be appointed to act as police spokesperson throughout the day. This would have the advantage that information would come from a consistent source and so would be more likely to be trusted. However, it should also be recognised that information from the MPS may not be equally trusted by all areas of the community, and so attempts should be made to liaise with the different media that different areas of the community may listen to and trust (such as local radio and TV stations) and attempt to pass information through these sources as well.

The following weeks- support for survivors

p.102, 10.1

We are pleased that the report recognises the different kinds of support that survivors may require, especially the need for some to be in contact with other survivors of the same incident. From our research findings we would argue that this is a development of the shared sense of identity that can emerge amongst people affected by the same emergency, and that some may derive comfort from contact with other people who have shared the same experience, as it is easier for them to understand what they are all going through. This is something that we intend to research in much more detail, and we plan to evaluate the role social support plays in helping people cope with PTSD after disasters. Therefore, we are applying for more funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to do this when our current funding budget runs out in April 2007.

Recommendations 48 &49

We support fully the recommendations to assist with the provision of support and formation and maintenance of ways in which survivors can keep in contact with each other. In the period after a major disaster it is vital for survivors to have useful practical and social support available before they are formally screened for PTSD at 4-6 weeks after the incident. However, it is important to ensure that survivor groups can also maintain their privacy and independence, as the benefits that we believe may come from having a shared sense of identity may be less apparent if such independence is compromised, and they feel that their shared identity is under threat.

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We do not have any detailed comments to make on the reports from individuals and groups affected by July 7th, other than we believe it was certainly a worthwhile endeavour to hear people's accounts and validate their own personal experiences. The accounts are also consistent with our findings that within the chaos and human suffering, there were reports of general co-operation, individual acts of heroism, little selfish behaviour, and no mass panic.