
The Leverhulme Trust

Awards in Focus

Representations of crowd behaviour in the management of mass emergencies

Studies have consistently shown that mass emergency behaviour is orderly and cooperative. However, there are various popular representations of such events – called ‘disaster myths’ – which include mass panic, social pathology, disorder and chaos. These myths suggest that crowds in emergencies are psychologically vulnerable and in need of top-down expert care and control.

Our research in the related field of crowd protest has demonstrated a pattern whereby certain forms of police intervention can inadvertently create and escalate the mass conflict that senior police seek to prevent.

One factor in this recurring pattern is the adoption by senior police officers of pathologising representations of the crowd (e.g. inherent crowd irrationality and tendencies to violence). These representations parallel the disaster myths surrounding mass emergencies. The research on police-crowd conflict shows how particular representations of crowd psychology inform crowd management practices, often with negative and unforeseen consequences. Our central research question is the extent to which a parallel process occurs in mass emergencies.

The existence of disaster myths in the public is widely acknowledged, but there has yet to be a survey of their endorsement by UK crowd managers. The research that I will be conducting through the support of a Research Project Grant will comprise first such a descriptive survey to document the opinions of those in positions of responsibility for the preparation for and management of mass emergencies.

The second part of the project involves an analysis of official guidance documentation, to determine whether such myths have endorsement by policy-makers and others in higher authority on the management of mass emergencies.



View of the 2002 Big Beach Boutique II, Brighton, UK, 17th July 2002. Released to PD by en:User [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:AJB83_AJB83]

Finally, we will examine how police and event managers’ representations of crowd events operate in practice, through a case study of two large dance-parties which took place on Brighton Beach.

The first, in 2002, overwhelmed the local authorities, stewards and emergency services, as it was dangerously overcrowded.

A follow-up event in 2007 was more closely controlled, being ticket only (rather than free). The question here is to what extent were the decisions of the organisers of the second event shaped by their concerns about potential disaster, following the earlier event? What was the balance between these fears, positive representations of the party crowd, and logistical and legal considerations? Finally, to what extent did attempts to prevent ‘disaster’ (a) limit the enjoyment of party-goers, and (b) undermine party-goers’ practical and psychological abilities independently to care for each at moments of stress during the event?

We will be working alongside relevant end-users and existing contacts across the country. The results of this

project will develop our theoretical work showing how crowd behaviours vary in relation to the way crowds are managed. This in turn will feed into the practical advice we provide to relevant agencies. Our overall aim is to enhance the scientific input in good practice in all forms of crowd management and policy.

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John was awarded a Research Project Grant in June 2010; providing £83,075 over 24 months.