

Every man for himself - or for the group?
How crowd solidarity can arise in an emergency:
An interview study of disaster survivors

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Abstract

In early theorizing, mass reactions to emergencies were understood as involving individualized panic in the crowd. More recent accounts coming from sociological small group theory have emphasized sociality in crowd behaviour in emergencies – in particular the role of pre-existing social bonds and norms. But insufficient attention has been given to the possible role of psychological group formation as an explanation for the co-operative behaviour so commonly manifested amongst strangers in such crowds. This poster describes a study testing the interlinked claims (1) that co-operation rather than panic will predominate in mass responses to emergencies, 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 shared threat posed by the emergency itself creates a sense of solidarity amongst strangers. Results of qualitative and quantitative analysis of interviews with 21 survivors of 11 different emergency events were in line with these claims. While these findings provide support for some existing models of mass emergency behaviour, they also point to the need for a new theoretical approach to such phenomena, using self-categorization theory.

Introduction

Collective reactions to emergencies and disasters are commonly described in the mass media as cases of 'panic'. The concept of 'panic' suggests that crowd reactions to an emergency will be disproportionate to the danger and will be highly 'contagious': 'instinct' will overwhelm socialization, any collective bonds will dissolve, and personal survival becomes the overriding concern, resulting in disorganized and selfish behaviours.

However, panic is actually rare. For example, an analysis of the behaviour of evacuees from the World Trade Center disaster found that 'classic panic action or people behaving in an irrational manner was noted in [just] 1/124 (0.8%) cases' (Blake et al., 2004; p. 5).

By contrast, normative accounts point to the continuity between ordinary and emergency collective behaviour. Both are said to be governed by norms and roles. This would account for the evidence, for example, of men helping women, of assistance to the elderly, and of orderly queuing, even in the most dire circumstances.

However, it has also been suggested that crowds in emergencies develop a sense of we-ness or solidarity. This would explain why some people help strangers, even at risk to themselves. Such a process fits with the predictions of self-categorization theory (SCT), which suggests that shared fate is a possible antecedent of shared self-categorization and hence concern for others.

Hypotheses.

H1: There will be little evidence of panic; helping should predominate over personally 'selfish' behaviour.

H2: There will be evidence of norms and roles.

H3: There will be evidence of we-ness, which results from shared perceived threat, and which results in helping of others.

Method

Sample

Twenty-one interviewees were recruited from 11 emergency (or perceived emergency) events, involving: (1) a crowd, (2) the perceived threat of death, but (3) in which there is the (diminishing) possibility of escape.

The events included: sinking of the Jupiter (1988), sinking of the Oceana (1991), Hillsborough (UK) football stadium disaster (1989), Ghana football stadium 'stampede' (2001), Bradford (UK) football stadium fire (1985), Harrods bomb, (1983), Fatboy Slim beach party (2002) and Canary Wharf (UK) emergency evacuation (2001).

Data-gathering and analysis

Interviews lasted around 60 minutes each. Participants were asked to describe events and about their own and others' feelings and behaviours. Transcribed material was first subject to a thematic analysis. An independent judge then rated each transcript for strength of perceived threat, we-ness, amount of help versus personal selfishness and so on. These ratings were then analysed statistically.

H1: The myth of mass panic

Interviewees were typically explicit that, though there was fear, there was in fact no widespread uncontrolled, competitive, irrational and personally selfish behaviour:

I don't think people did lose control of their emotions and I think the restraint shown by .. particularly several of the.. individuals that I've mentioned I've talked about ..[] It's it should be source of great pride to those people I think because, you know, they were clearly in control of their own emotions and their own physical insecurity, I mean a lot of people were very.. as I was, you know.. you're being pushed, you're being crushed when you're hot and bothered, you're beginning to fear for your own personal safety, and yet they were I think controlling or tempering their emotions to help.. try and remedy the situation and help others who were clearly struggling.

(Hillsborough 2)

Consistent with the hypothesis that mass panic is a myth, there were more accounts of helping behaviours than personally selfish behaviours:

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, you know, no-one was .. although everyone was cramming to get in we all kind of filed everywhere when we should have done....

(Jupiter 3)

Thus, total incidents of help (given, received, observed; \underline{M} = 3.90) significantly outnumbered total incidents of personally selfish behaviour (given, received, observed; \underline{M} = 1.52), $t(20) = 3.43$, $p = 0.003$.

H2: Evidence of norms and roles

The interviews were replete with examples of people acting within role and of everyday rules of conduct being observed: teachers took responsibility for children, children listened to teachers, and, commonly, people queued in an orderly manner:

she [a teacher] was sort of marshalling kids from all different schools, because that's the sort of thing (she) does..

(Jupiter 1)

going up the stairs it wasn't at all anarchic you know.. it was very kind of almost traditional, really (Fatboy Slim 1)

More interviewees (11) referred to normal rules of conduct operating than did not (5), a difference which approached significance (Pearson's $\chi^2(1) = 2.25$, $p = 0.13$); and more interviewees (15) gave examples of others acting within role than those who didn't give such examples (2), Pearson's $\chi^2(1) = 9.94$, $p = 0.002$.

H3: Perceived threat, we-ness and helping

Int. How would you describe those who were in the evacuation with you? Is there any phrase or word you would use to describe them?

J2 As as a whole group?.....I guess I'd say mutually supportive ..We were all strangers really we were certainly surrounded by strangers but most of, I mean I'd got my kids by me, but most people were split up from anybody they knew, and yet there was this sort of camaraderie like you hear about in the war times and this sort of thing .. there there was certainly a pulling together as apposed to a pulling apart.

(Jupiter 2)

Thirteen interviewees referred to a sense of 'we-ness' – solidarity, togetherness, unity, bond, comradeship – with the rest of the crowd during the emergency. Further, many of these statements occurred before we had asked whether they felt any togetherness with others in the crowd. Such we-ness was typically described as emerging over the course of the emergency itself.

The same people who described a sense of we-ness developing over time also referred to a shared sense of threat, sometimes explicitly explaining the unity in terms of the threat to the crowd as a whole:

all of a sudden everyone was one in this situ- [] when a disaster happens, I don't know, say in the war some- somewhere got bombed it was sort of that old that old English spirit where you had to club together and help one another, you know, you had to sort of do what you had to do, sort of join up as a team, and a good example of that would be when some of the fans got the hoardings and put the bodies on them and took them over to the ambulances

(Hillsborough 3)

For a few of our interviewees, the events did not represent a shared plight, however, but a personal inconvenience, with no concomitant feeling of unity. Thus, 'Fatboy Slim 3' was a beach party-goer who did not perceive any threat from the tide. While she initially approached the event with a feeling of 'being part of something', this changed very rapidly into experiencing other crowd members as antagonistic competitors for space.

The regression of perceived threat to self on level of we-ness was found to be significant, $\beta = 0.36$, $SE\ B = 0.32$, $t(16) = 1.55$, $p = 0.14$, with two anomalous or ambiguous cases removed, $\beta = 0.49$, $SE\ B = 0.31$, $t(15) = 2.18$, $p = 0.05$.

Where our interviewees talked about we-ness, they also talked about what it meant in terms of behaviour to others, which sometimes meant discarding one's own personal safety:

after events unfolded .. the behaviour of many people in that crowd and simply trying to help their fellow supporters was heroic in some cases. So I don't think in my view there was any question that there was an organic sense of... unity of crowd behaviour. It was clearly the case, you know.. it was

clearly the case that people were trying to get people who were seriously injured out of that crowd, it was seriously a case of trying to get people to hospital, get them to safety .. I just wish I'd been able to.. to prevail on a few more people not to.. put themselves in danger.

(Hillsborough 3)

Level of we-ness did indeed predict amount of helping incidents (given, received, observed), $\beta = 0.45$, $SE_B = 0.17$, $t(19) = 2.18$, $p = 0.04$. Moreover, also as expected, we-ness did not predict personally selfish behaviours (given, received, observed), $\beta = 0.28$, $SE_B = 0.07$, $t(19) = 1.27$, $p = 0.22$.

The finding of strong associations between threat and we-ness on the one hand and we-ness and helping on the other makes the case for at least a partial mediation. To complete the analysis, we looked at the direct effect of perceived threat on helping, which turned out to be non-significant, $\beta = 0.11$, $SE_B = 0.29$, $t(17) = 0.46$, $p = 0.65$. However, when helping was regressed on both threat and we-ness together, the beta value for threat became even smaller ($\beta = 0.04$, $SE_B = 0.21$, $t(16) = 0.19$, $p = 0.85$), while we-ness remained significant ($\beta = 0.49$, $SE_B = 0.17$, $t(16) = 2.27$, $p = 0.04$), again consistent with a relationship of at least partial mediation.

Discussion

The finding that helping behaviour is common crowd emergencies is well established in the literature. However, it is a finding worth repeating, because the flawed assumptions of the panic model are still evident in the planning, design and engineering of public spaces and in emergency procedures.

The results accord to some extent with normative models of collective behaviour in emergencies. On top of this, however, this study found evidence for the development of a sense of we-ness, which, as predicted, was linked to perceptions of shared fate amongst those threatened by the emergency. This accords with recent research in support of SCT showing that people are more likely to help victims previously defined as outgroup members when they categorize themselves and the victims more inclusively.

However, the unique contribution of the present study is two-fold. First, we show that the same processes underlying helping behaviour in other circumstances can operate even when the helper is in a state of extreme emotion, being threatened with injury and death. Second, the study demonstrates not only the consequences but also the antecedents of we-ness, and hence offers a dynamic account. Most of the crowds analysed in this study had no sense of we-ness – i.e. were not *psychological* crowds – before the emergency. For those that did have a sense of togetherness prior to the events, the emergency changed this not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

One of the limits of the study is that there still some variability in the dataset unaccounted for. For example, it is not clear why there was so little evidence of helping at the Ghana football 'stampede'. Other research has suggested that, in some situations, helping behaviour may not be evident not because people no longer care about others and become 'instinctual', but rather because such help becomes physically impossible due to situational constraints. A closer look at the Ghana case is necessary to determine whether this applied here.

In presenting a more positive account of the evacuating crowd than that of the 'panic' model, this study adds to a growing body of work that has served to develop alternatives to the irrationalist account influential since the time of Le Bon. According to this growing body of work, crowd behaviour needs to be understood as reflective of norms rather than anti-normative, as identity-regulated rather than involving a loss of self and hence of self-control, as historically located rather than generic, and as a function of intergroup relations rather than individual characteristics. These ideas have been consolidated in the social identity approach to crowd behaviour, which the present findings support.

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