

Improving crowd management practices

Research at Sussex on the dynamics of crowd behaviour has improved our understanding of the psychological effects of two distinct types of crowd participation: events that involve collective conflict against authority; and collective resilience in emergency situations. This work has had direct influence, nationally and internationally, on crowd management practices in both of these contexts.

Overview

Crowd disorder is a significant social problem that costs millions in resources and man-hours, and has considerable human cost in terms of injury, arrest and imprisonment. Previous solutions for managing such disorder have only magnified the problem (eg the use of police coercion) or infringed human rights (eg travel bans for football fans).

Historically, in emergency situations, professionals and policy-makers involved in preparedness have been concerned that crowds might panic or respond in a helpless manner, an assumption that has been the basis of paternalistic 'command and control' policies that are increasingly recognised as impractical.

The research of Dr John Drury (Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at the University of Sussex) has focused on psychological change in these two forms of crowd behaviour: in crowd disorder, the emergence of collective antagonism toward an illegitimate authority; and in mass emergencies the emergence of collective resilience. He has helped develop a more



Guidance from the European Council Resolution on measures to prevent and control violence and disturbances in connection with football cites 'key principles' of facilitation, communication and differentiation from the Elaborated Social Identity Model of crowd conflict dynamics developed by Dr Drury and colleagues. Photo reproduced by permission of Dr Clifford Stott.

comprehensive understanding of the nature of crowd participation and has done much to influence and improve crowd management in situations of crowd conflict and mass emergency.

A collaboration with Professor Steve Reicher (St Andrews) and Dr Clifford Stott (Leeds), on the psychological consequences of participation in events such as protest demonstrations, showed that crowd participants sometimes perceive their own actions as legitimate while the police perceive the same actions as illegitimate and threatening. Furthermore, action taken by the authorities against what they see as unlawful activity may be perceived by the crowd as illegitimate and indiscriminate, leading to changed

relations with the police and within the crowd. Since participants now have a common fate (and enemy), they come to share a social identity. This shared identity empowers the crowd to take action against the police, and their sense of grievance legitimises such action. Based on these findings, Drury and colleagues developed an Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) of crowd conflict dynamics, which suggests that certain forms of public-order policing (in particular, violent dispersal or containment) can radicalise and empower crowd members and create or exacerbate the disorder that such tactics were originally intended to control.



Dr Drury applied the same social identity principles to the behaviour of crowds in emergency or disaster situations to demonstrate that an emergent shared social identity forms the basis for the co-operative and co-ordinated behaviour frequently seen in these kinds of events. His study of the 7 July London bombings illustrated how social or helpful behaviour, rather than mass panic, is usually evident in emergencies and that people can rapidly form bonds with strangers. When such an emergency creates a sense of common fate, a new shared identity enhances adaptive collective responses – a concept that Drury has developed into a model of informal ‘collective resilience’.

Achieving impact

Dr Drury’s research has had major impact in two areas. In terms of policing crowds, his work has helped generate new public order practices that are being implemented by police forces in the UK and across Europe. His research on collective resilience in disasters has informed new guidance on psychosocial care for people in emergencies from organisations such as NATO and the UK’s Department of Health.

His work on policing of crowds is designed to reduce conflict between the authorities and crowds by leading crowd members to collectively self-regulate. Extrapolation from the ESIM has led to recommendations for alternative police practices that minimise rather than escalate collective conflict – recommendations that have been taken up by police forces in the UK and Europe in relation to football crowds and to public order in general. As an example, in the UK in 2009, an official report by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Constabulary, ‘Adapting to Protest’, recommended rejection of the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force in public-order policing and advised an increased use of, and training in, facilitation and communication. This report cited research by Reicher, Stott and Drury, and the ESIM now forms the basis of the current programme of reform of police public-order methods.

The principles of public-order policing based on the ESIM (ie to understand the social identity of the crowd, to facilitate crowd aims, to communicate with crowd members, and to

differentiate between crowd members rather than treat them indiscriminately) are enshrined in the key official public-order guidance manual *Keeping the Peace*, produced jointly by the National Police Improvement Agency, the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland.

There has also been international impact; for example, in 2010, guidance from the European Council Resolution on measures to prevent and control violence and disturbances in connection with football cited the ESIM ‘key principles’ of facilitation, communication and differentiation.

In contrast to previous assumptions that those in disasters might panic or respond helplessly, Drury’s research has shown that crowds have the capacity to help themselves, often without expert intervention. In 2007, an end-user report made his research findings accessible and was distributed to over 35 emergency response organisations. He gave a number of presentations to potential end-users, and representatives from the Department of Health Emergency Preparedness Division met with him to discuss how his work could contribute to new NATO guidance on psychosocial care for those affected by emergencies and disasters. As a result, the NATO guidance published in 2009 cited Drury’s London bombs study. This research is now part of the rationale for the NATO Stepped Model of Care, which builds on survivors’ psychosocial capacities rather than assuming them to be ill or helpless, and recommends practical support rather than psychiatric care for most people affected by emergencies. The key principles of the NATO guidance, and Drury’s social identity concepts, are also included in the Department of Health Emergency Preparedness Division’s 2009 document *NHS Emergency Planning Guidance*.

Future impact

Dr Drury’s research on mass emergency behaviour has been included in training and education packages delivered to a number of professional groups involved in crowd safety and emergency response. It also forms a significant part of the course material for a degree in Crowd Safety Management run for crowd safety managers. In a partnership with Public Health England, recent research



A mass decontamination exercise on the University of Sussex campus. Findings from research conducted by Dr Drury’s PhD student Holly Carter will be used to help save lives in the event of a chemical or biological emergency. Photo reproduced by permission of Public Health England.

on mass emergency decontamination by Drury’s PhD student Holly Carter has been used to inform hospital/patient decontamination ‘best practice’ guidance documents in the US. Finally, an ongoing programme of research on how informal ideas about crowd behaviour shape emergency management practices has involved working closely with crowd-safety practitioners to develop a more reflexive and theoretically informed approach.

Funding and partnership

An ESRC grant to Drury, Reicher, Schofield and Langston (2004–2007) was made for study of the effects of social identity on responses to emergency mass evacuation. A Leverhulme grant to Drury and Stott (2010–2012) was made for a study of representations of crowd behaviour in the management of mass emergencies.

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