

# Collective action is good for you

**“People should get more involved in campaigns, struggles and social movements – not only in the wider interest of social change, but also for their own personal good,” argues a psychologist at Sussex.**

Research led by Dr John Drury, Lecturer in Social Psychology in SOC, has found that not only does participation in protests and demonstrations have the potential to change the world: it is actually good for you.

This was one of the findings of a large-scale interview study of protest crowds and social movements, often known as ‘collective action’.

“Many published activist accounts refer to feelings of encouragement and confidence emerging from experiences of collective action,” says John. “But it is not always clear how and why such empowerment occurs, so we aimed to explain what factors within a collective action event contribute most to such feelings.”

The study involved in-depth interviews with nearly 40 activists from a variety of backgrounds, in which over 160 collective action experiences were described. The range of events described by interviewees included traditional marches, fox-hunt sabotages, anti-capitalist street parties, environmental direct actions, industrial mass pickets – and even student occupations.

“The main factors we found to contribute to a sense of empowerment were the realization of the collective identity: the sense of movement, potential, unity and



mutual support within a crowd,” says John.

“However, what was also interesting was the centrality of emotion in the accounts. Empowering events were almost without exception described as joyous occasions. Participants experienced a deep sense of happiness and even euphoria in being involved in protest events. Simply recounting the events in the interview itself brought a smile to the faces of the interviewees.”

Psychologists have become increasingly interested in the role of positive experiences and emotions not just in making people feel good but also in promoting psychological and physical health. Uplifting experiences have been found to be associated with a variety of indicators of well-being, such as speed of physiological recovery; ability to cope with physical stressors; and the reduction of pain, anxiety and depression.

The Sussex study also involved Dr Chris Cocking and three Social Psychology students: Joseph Beale, Charlotte Hanson and Faye Rapley.