

Unruly mob? Seldom has a reputation been so ill-deserved, says Michael Bond

Critical mass

THE protests that took place on the streets of London on the eve of the G20 summit in April lived up to many people's expectations. Around 2000 protestors turned up, and were heavily marshalled by police. There was a bit of trouble, but the police tactics – specifically, the decision to corral the entire crowd into a small area near the Bank of England, an approach known as “kettling” – kept a lid on the violence.

That, at least, is the official version of events, and it reflects a belief about crowds that is shared by police, governments and to a large degree the general public across the world: that they are hotbeds of trouble and must be contained. Trouble is seen as especially likely when something goes wrong at a large gathering. Under such circumstances, the expectation is that the crowd will lose its head and all hell will break loose.

The “unruly mob” concept is usually taken as read and used as the basis for crowd control measures and evacuation procedures across the world. Yet it is almost entirely a myth. Research into how people behave at demonstrations, sports events, music festivals and other mass gatherings shows not only that crowds nearly always act in a highly rational

way, but also that when facing an emergency, people in a crowd are more likely to cooperate than panic. Paradoxically, it is often actions such as kettling that lead to violence breaking out. Often, the best thing authorities can do is leave a crowd to its own devices.

“In many ways, crowds are the solution,” says psychologist Stephen Reicher, who studies group behaviour at the University of St Andrews, UK. Rather than being prone to irrational behaviour and violence, members of a crowd undergo a kind of identity shift that drives them to act in the best interests of themselves and everyone around them. This identity shift is often strongest in times of danger or threat. “The ‘mad mob’ is not an explanation, but a fantasy,” says Reicher.

All this has profound implications for policing and the management of public events. “The classic view of crowd psychology, which is still widespread, talks about the loss of selfhood, leaving people at best out of control and at worst generically violent,” says Reicher. “That is not only wrong, it's also counterproductive. If you believe all crowds are irrational, and that even rational people are liable to be dangerous in them, then you'll treat them accordingly, often harshly, and stop



Did police tactics at the G20 protests in London in April contain the violence – or provoke it?

people doing things they have a right to do. And that can lead to violence.”

All that said, there's no question that being part of a group can sometimes lead people to do appalling things that they would usually abhor. Examples of crowd-fuelled violence abound, from Hutu death-squads in the Rwandan genocide to racist lynch mobs in the southern states of the US. Likewise, the cover crowds offer can attract individuals who are intent on causing trouble. We can all too easily be led astray by the influence of others (*New Scientist*, 14 April 2007, p 42).



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However, crowd violence is actually extremely rare. "If 100 football matches happen on a Saturday and there is violence at one of them, we know which will appear on the front pages the next day," says Reicher. Widespread panic during crowd emergencies is also uncommon and only occurs in special circumstances, such as when escape routes start to close, says Tricia Wachtendorf of the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware in Newark. In most situations – particularly those involving large numbers of strangers – the crowd ends up behaving remarkably sensibly.

Evidence against the irrationality of crowds has been building for some time, largely from

studies of emergencies. In a study to be published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology* (DOI: 10.1348/014466608X357893), a team led by John Drury at the University of Sussex, UK, talked to survivors of 11 crowd-based disasters or near-disasters, including the 1989 Hillsborough stadium crush that killed 96 soccer fans, and a free concert by Fatboy Slim on Brighton beach in 2002 that was swamped by 250,000 people, four times as many as expected, and led to around 100 injuries. In each case, most interviewees recalled a strong sense of unity with those around them as a result of their shared experience. Rather than being competitive or antagonistic, people did their best to be ➤

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orderly and courteous – and went out of their way to help strangers. Researchers think that without such cooperation, more people could have been injured and killed.

The team found a similar pattern of solidarity and cooperative behaviour in a study of the suicide attacks in London on 7 July 2005, which led to crowds of commuters being trapped underground (*International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, vol 27, p 66). "The public in general and crowds specifically are more resilient than they are given credit for," says Drury. During disasters, governments should treat them as the "fourth emergency service", he adds.

If anything, a crowd's disinclination to panic can work against it. "It's often difficult to get people to move and act," says Wachtendorf. An analysis of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, for example, performed by the US National Institute of Standards and Technology, showed that most people prevaricated for several minutes after the planes struck, making phone calls, filing papers or shutting down their computers before attempting to escape.

Having established that unruly mob behaviour is the exception, researchers are now getting to grips with the psychological processes that can transform hundreds or thousands of individuals into a unit. The key, according to Drury, Reicher and others, is the recognition that you share something important with those around you, which forces you to identify with them in a meaningful way. "It is a cognitive shift,

a difference in self-appraisal, in understanding who you are and how you stand in relation to others," says Reicher.

The trigger is often a dramatic situational change such as a fire in a public place or aggressive police tactics at a protest march, but group solidarity can also arise from seemingly inconsequential circumstances, such as being stuck together in a train carriage. Reicher describes it as a shift towards intimacy: "People start agreeing with each other, trusting each other," he says. At the point when members of a crowd start to share a common social identity, the crowd goes from being a mere physical entity to a psychological unit, according to Clifford Stott at the University of Liverpool, UK, who specialises in the behaviour of soccer crowds.

United by circumstances

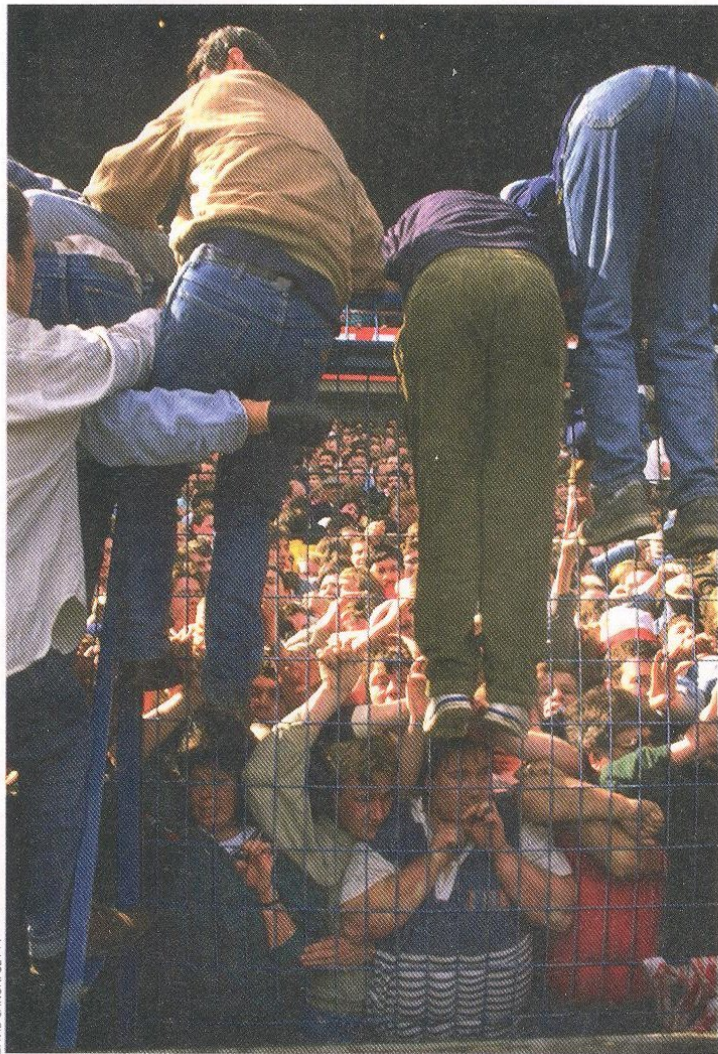
A study carried out by Drury, Reicher and David Novelli of the University of Sussex, to be published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, provides a graphic illustration of how quickly and easily we throw ourselves into "psychological crowds" united by circumstances. The researchers divided a group of volunteers into two according to whether they overestimated or underestimated the number of dots in a pattern – a deliberately arbitrary distinction. They then told each person that they would be talking to someone either from their own group or the other, and that they should arrange some chairs in preparation. Those who had been told they would be talking to a member of their own group placed the chairs on average 20 per cent closer together than those who had been told they would be talking to a member of the other group (DOI: 10.1348/014466609X449377). "We want to be closer to fellow group members, not only metaphorically but also physically, and physical proximity is a precondition for any kind of action coordination," says Reicher.

The fluidity of group psychology was also demonstrated in a 2005 experiment on English soccer fans by Mark Levine at the University of Lancaster, UK. He found that supporters of Manchester United who had been primed to think about how they felt about their team were significantly more likely to help an injured stranger if he was wearing a Manchester United shirt, rather than an unbranded shirt or one of rival team Liverpool. However, fans who were primed to think about their experience of being a football fan in general were equally likely to help strangers in Liverpool shirts and Manchester United shirts, but far less likely to help someone wearing an unbranded one (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol 31, p 443). This shows the potency of group membership,

Some of the 250,000 who turned up to see Fatboy Slim in Brighton



TIMOTHY ALLEN/AXIOM



DAVID CANON/GETTY

The 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster in Sheffield, UK

and also how fluid the boundaries can be.

This also happens in the real world, resulting in group bonding which, though transient, can override social, racial and political differences. A good example is the poll tax riots in London in 1990, when protestors from a wide spectrum of backgrounds and interest groups joined forces in the face of what they saw as overly aggressive police tactics. "You had people who were previously antagonistic – anarchists, conservatives, class-war activists – who in the context of the baton charges were united in common group membership," says Stott. This temporary homogenisation is common: think of the cohesiveness of soccer fans supporting an international team who might be hostile when supporting their own local clubs.

Not everyone agrees. One criticism is that the cohesiveness of crowds is superficial, and that people preferentially draw close to those they know or are related to and remain far less attached to strangers around them. Anthony Mawson, an epidemiologist at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, maintains that people's typical response in times of threat is to seek out people familiar to them (*Public Health Reports*, vol 123, p 555).

Strangers can develop a shared identity only when they are together "for long enough that a sense of camaraderie develops among them", he says.

Yet studies by Drury and others suggest the bonds that form between strangers in crowds are very robust, and although people might help family members first in an emergency, they will also help others irrespective of their connection to them. "What is really of interest," says Drury, "is why so many people – strangers without any formal organisation, hierarchy or means of communication – join together and act as one."

So where does this inclination come from to empathise so strongly with others on the basis of shared fate alone? Nobody is really sure, though it appears to be uniquely human. As Mark van Vugt at the University of Kent, UK, and Justin Park at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands point out, no other species appears to have the capacity to form rapid emotional attachments to large, anonymous groups (*The Psychology of Prosocial Behaviour*, published by Wiley-Blackwell next month). The tendency of people to form strong social bonds while experiencing terror together also appears a universal human trait. "This is well

known in traditional societies where boys going through puberty rituals in the transition to manhood are often put through frightening experiences," says Robin Dunbar, who studies the evolution of sociality at the University of Oxford.

Control and contain

What are the lessons from all this? One of the most important is that the current approach to managing crowds, which is all about control and containment, can be counterproductive. Police tend to assume that people in crowds are prone to random acts of violence and disorder, and treat them accordingly. But aggressive policing is likely to trigger an aggressive response as the crowd reacts collectively against the external threat. This is why many researchers consider kettling to be a bad idea. "You're treating the crowd indiscriminately, and that can change the psychology of the crowd, shifting it towards rather than away from violence," says Stott. He has found that low-profile policing can significantly reduce the aggressiveness of football crowds, and that if left alone they will usually police themselves.

Emergency services should also take note: in a situation such as a terrorist attack or fire, a crowd left to its own devices will often find the best solution. Attempts to intervene to prevent people panicking, such as restricting their movements, could make panic more likely. The key, says Wachtendorf, is to give crowds as much information as possible, as they are likely to use it wisely.

If you find yourself in a crowd emergency, the worst thing you can do is resist the group mentality. One of Drury's conclusions from his research into disasters is that the more people try to act individually – which results in competitive and disruptive behaviour – the lower everyone's chances of survival are. This is what some researchers believe happened in August 1985 when a British Airtours plane caught fire on the runway at Manchester Airport, UK, killing 55. Non-cooperative behaviour among passengers may have made it harder for people to reach the exits.

It can be hard to shake off the idea of crowds as inherently violent or dangerous, but it is worth remembering that they have also been responsible for just about every major societal change for the good in recent history, from the success of the US civil rights movement to the overthrowing of communist regimes in eastern Europe. Good leadership and individual heroics are all very well, but if you're looking for a revolution – or even just a good way out of a difficult situation – what you really need, it seems, is a crowd. ■

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