

Crowds and Collective Behavior

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Summary

The challenge for a psychology of crowds and collective behavior is to explain how large numbers of people are, spontaneously, able to act together in patterned and socially meaningful ways and, at the same time, how crowd events can bring about social and psychological change.

Classical theories, which treat crowd psychology as pathological, deny any meaning to crowd action. More recent normative and rationalist models begin to explain the coherence of crowd action but are unable to explain how that links to broader social systems of meaning. In both cases, the explanatory impasse derives from an individualistic conception of selfhood that denies any social basis to behavioral control. Such a basis is provided by the social identity approach. This proposes that crowd formation is underpinned by the development of shared social identity whereby people see themselves and others in terms of membership of a common category. This leads to three psychological transformations: members perceive the world in terms of collective values and belief systems; they coordinate themselves effectively; and hence they are empowered to realize their collective goals. These transformations explain the social form of crowd action. At the same time, crowd events are intergroup phenomena. It is through the intergroup dynamics between the crowd and an out-group (typically the police)—more specifically the way the social position of crowd members can change through the way police officers understand and respond to their actions—that change can occur. The social identity framework helps make sense of a range of phenomena beyond conflict crowds, including behavior in emergencies and disasters and the psychology of mass gatherings. The practical adequacy of the social identity approach is

demonstrated by its use in a number of applied fields, including “public order” policing, crowd and emergency management, mass gatherings, health, and pedestrian modeling.

Keywords

- [crowd psychology](#)
- [social identity](#)
- [riot](#)
- [mass emergency](#)
- [mass panic](#)
- [contagion](#)
- [mass gathering](#)
- [social influence](#)
- [collective behavior](#)

Subjects

- Social Psychology

Introduction

What is a crowd? Beginning with the earliest attempts to provide a scientific account of crowd psychology, scholars have distinguished between those “crowds” that comprise simply individuals co-present in the same space and those *psychological crowds* that seems to share a purpose or a “mentality.” While psychological crowds are the main focus of crowd psychology theories, any such theory also needs to say something about the *relation* between these two, including how a physical crowd can *become* a psychological crowd (or vice versa).

Like the term “crowd,” “collective behavior” has many referents across the social, behavioral, and comparative sciences. We use it here to refer to those phenomena that are forms of psychological crowd, including but not exclusively protest crowds, riots, social movement manifestations, mass emergency behavior, and the behavior of crowds at sports, music, religious, and ceremonial events.

A useful definition, which captures the psychological problem that theory must address, is as follows: a crowd is *a form of group in which people are*

interacting face-to-face but where there is no formal means for decision-making or direction (Reicher, [1984](#), p. 4). This definition therefore excludes the normal operation of armies and police forces (since these large groups have formal chains of command), dispersed groups (such as online communities, since they are not face-to-face), as well as most small groups (since by their small size they allow for collective decision-making). Yet clearly a theory able to explain collective behavior in psychological crowds will also be able to explain many features of behavior in armies, online communities, and small groups.

This article begins by tracing the history of theories of crowd psychology, which for a number of years were preoccupied with crowd violence. The social identity approach to crowds is outlined, which provides a general framework for the psychology of collective behavior. This approach has provided novel insights into a range of forms of collective behavior and crowd events, including mass emergencies, mass gatherings, and social influence between crowd events, and some of the psychological changes that occur beyond the events themselves. Finally, practical implications of the social identity approach are demonstrated by examples from applied fields, including “public order” policing and emergency and crowd safety management.

A History of Crowd Psychology

Classical Crowd Psychology From Taine to “De-Individuation”

Research has falsified most of the claims of the early theories of crowd psychology (Postmes & Spears, [1998](#); Reicher, [1987](#)). However, it is important to consider them, for two reasons. First, these early approaches were extremely influential. Second, they echo many “commonsense” assumptions about crowds that have persisted in both popular and high culture for many years.

The emergence of scientific crowd psychology in late-19th-century France was prompted by “social problems” in which the crowd was central (Van Ginneken, [1985](#)). There had been revolutions in 1789, 1830, and 1848. Industrialization meant both “mass” urbanization and strikes. From the perspective of the first crowd psychologists, the most shocking of all these events was the Paris Commune of 1871, in which workers in Paris violently rose up and constituted the city as an independent socialist republic (and were even more violently put down by troops).

Horrified by the Commune, Hippolyte Taine began his monumental history of the decline of civilization in France. What was novel in Taine’s work ([1876](#)) was the use of concepts from psychology and medicine to analyze the “bestial” behavior of the crowd (Stott & Drury, [2017](#)). Subsequent crowd psychologists (most notably Fournial, Tarde, and Sighele) developed these ideas, but only one of them achieved popular success: Gustave Le Bon. More than an analysis of the supposed rise of mass irrationality, Le Bon ([1965](#)) presented his crowd psychology as a practical guide for combating and harnessing the power of the crowd. He saw in the crowd a reversion to the most primordial state of a “race” or “people” (referred to as the “group mind,” or “racial unconscious” in modern commentaries). The fundamental characteristic of the psychology of crowds is their stupidity, according to Le Bon; in crowds, even the most intelligent and civilized individuals regress to the stage of “barbarians.” This regression is said to occur through three psychological mechanisms: submergence (loss of personality through anonymity in the crowd), suggestibility (similar to a hypnotic state, and based on submergence), and contagion (uncritical social influence of any passing sentiment or behavior, which is caused by suggestibility).

In the first part of the 20th century, the major challenge to Le Bon’s “group mind” approach ([1965](#)) was Floyd Allport’s behaviorist individualism ([1924](#)). Allport argued that the individual should be the proper unit of analysis in the study of crowd psychology. The arbitrary violence of people when they were in crowds, Allport argued, reflected a combination of individual predispositions (both innate and learned) and simple stimulation of other co-present individuals, which causes “fundamental drives” (self-protection, hunger, sex) to overcome the civilized values that normally control behavior.

As well as sharing Le Bon's assumption that the psychology of crowds is inherently primitive and instinctual, Allport's approach also shared some essential problems with him. Both relied on fragmentary, selective, secondary examples, rather than systematic studies of crowd events. Le Bon, Allport, and the others in the classical tradition described incidents of crowd violence shorn of their historical and intergroup contexts (Reicher, [1987](#)). The crowds Le Bon and Allport were referring to were revolutionary crowds or crowds involved in industrial disputes; and it is known that where there was violence most of this was meted out by the forces of the state on the crowd, and that crowd violence—even the most brutal—was often in response to a long sequence of attacks (Barrows, [1981](#)). But all this disappears in the accounts of the classical crowd psychologists, and crowd violence appears instead as a meaningless spasm.

After disappearing from the textbooks for several decades, classical crowd psychology flourished again from the late 1960s in the form of “de-individuation” theories. While “de-individuation” retained key features of Le Bon's framework— anonymity/submergence, loss of self, loss of behavioral control, reduction in critical judgment, and antisocial behavior—the notion of a group mind was dropped (e.g., Zimbardo, [1970](#)). The use of the laboratory experiment in “de-individuation” studies allowed for the systematic testing—and ultimately clear debunking—of some of the distinctive claims of classical crowd psychology. Thus a comprehensive meta-analysis found little evidence that anti-normative behavior was a generic effect of anonymity—rather the content of behavior depended more on which identity and group norms were salient; and there was little evidence too for loss of self as an underlying mechanism (Postmes & Spears, [1998](#)). In conceptual replications of well-known “de-individuation” experiments, Reicher, Spears, and Postmes ([1995](#)) demonstrated that “immersion” in a group leads not to abandonment of norms but to more *conformity* to those norms, particularly where the means of immersion (such as most of the manipulations used in “de-individuation” experiments) reduce cues for personal identity and instead make salient the group context.

A basic limitation of all classical crowd psychology, from Taine to “de-individuation,” is that it does not have the concepts to explain adequately the

fact that the vast majority of psychological crowds are not violent. Likewise, these approaches cannot explain patterns of behavior in those crowds that *are* violent. A prediction easily derived from the classical tradition is that the violence of the crowd would be indiscriminate. Some of the best evidence against this claim came from historians. Thus E. P. Thompson's study ([1971](#)) of the "moral economy" of the crowd in the 18th-century food riot showed that for all the hunger and anger, targets of the crowd were highly selective and constrained by shared notions of legitimacy.

While classical crowd psychology initially focused on crowd violence, it was also applied to another social problem—that of collective behavior in emergencies and disasters. The concept of "mass panic" suggested that in such events the crowd is again a conduit of mindlessness and hence loss of behavioral control. In this view, the threat of danger causes an abandonment of existing bonds (e.g., Freud, [1985](#)) leading to both individual selfishness and self-defeating irrational behavior, and causing trampling, blocked doors, and so on. In addition, such crowds are said to be liable to contagion, meaning that "panic" reactions spread easily (e.g., Ross, [1908](#)).

As a claim about default collective behavior in an emergency, the concept of mass panic first came under attack from disaster researchers in the 1950s (see Fritz, [1996](#), and Quarantelli, [2001](#)), for three main reasons. First, the criteria for reasonable behavior is often unclear in emergencies since there is usually limited information available to those affected (Sime, [1990](#)). Second, numerous case studies (e.g., Sheppard, Rubin, Wardman, & Wessely, [2006](#)) and reviews of the literature (e.g., Quarantelli, [2001](#)) concluded that panic is "rare." Third, while some emergencies are indeed characterized by individualistic behavior (Chertkoff & Kushigian, [1999](#)), most damning for the predictions of "panic" is the consistent evidence that social support and cooperation are remarkably common among those affected (Drury, [2018](#)). Overall, then, classical explanations, which rely on concepts such as "loss of self" and "fundamental drives," cannot explain meaningful crowd behavior. They cannot easily explain cooperation or culturally defined limits to behavior. Put differently, they cannot explain the *social form* of crowd behavior—why, for example, the food rioters targeted millers and merchants and the crowd in the French Revolution targeted the aristocrats. Similarly,

concepts like “contagion” cannot explain limits to social influence—such as why the influence of the crowd demagogue does not extend to the riot police present in the same crowd (Milgram & Toch, [1969](#)). To explain all these features, different kinds of concepts were needed.

Norms and Rationality in Theories of Crowd Behavior

R. H. Turner and Killian’s emergent norm theory (ENT) (1957) was an important attempt to break from the limitations of classical crowd psychology. In bringing the concept of *social norms* into the study of crowds, their work suggested that crowd behavior was structured by shared understandings of appropriate conduct, specifying limits to behavior. Thus, there was no “spiral of contagion” (Turner, [1964](#)). Rather, borrowing from the work of Sherif ([1936](#)), they suggested that social influence was to an important degree a shared sense-making process, which developed through interpersonal interaction in the form of milling, rumor, and “keynoting” (defined as crystalizing the sentiment of the crowd).

The use of the concept of social norm served to suggest that normal social life and crowd behavior operated by the same processes. It is perhaps both a measure of the theory’s success that it has been applied to a wide variety of crowd events—and to disasters more than riots in recent decades (Lemonik, [2013](#)). However, its distinctive claims were watered down as it attempted to accommodate criticisms (McPhail, [1991](#)), such as evidence that the behaviors observed in many disasters are often based on existing social norms rather than “emergent” ones (Johnson, [1988](#)). In addition, the idea of a long process of milling to develop a norm for the situation has been shown empirically to be unnecessary (Reicher, [1984](#)).

A different criticism of emergent norm theory came from some social movement sociologists, who argued that the assumptions of “breakdown” implicit in Turner and Killian’s notions of the “extraordinary situation” and initial “normlessness” kept alive the spirit of Le Bonian irrationalism. Thus Berk’s “gaming” approach (1974) agreed with emergent norm theory that collective behavior was shaped by meanings that people shared in

interpersonal interaction. It added that in crowd events individuals always act on the basis of cost-benefit calculations that take into account their existing “tastes” and individual interests. This would appear to account for patterns of targets in urban riots, such as white-owned and high-end stores (Berk & Aldrich, [1972](#)).

While rationalist approaches like game theory rightly criticize emergent norm theory for failing to expunge traces of classical crowd psychology, they have their own limitations. Classical crowd psychology presumes the individual self as the only self and as the sole basis for rational action, but the gaming approach makes the same assumption when it refers to “interests” and “tastes.” A key point here, then, is that different models of the crowd turn on different models of the self, and both gaming and emergent norm theory fail to properly theorize the self or identity. What was still needed was a theory of the “social individual,” to explain why some behaviors (not others) become normative, and how interests can be collective—or, put differently, a theory of the psychological mechanism through which the social can shape crowd action. That theory is described in the next section.

The Social Identity Approach to Crowd Psychology

The Concept of Social Identity

The argument thus far can be simply summarized. The limitations of the approaches previously considered turn on their individualistic conception of the self. The crowd setting is seen as erasing the self (in which case behavior becomes mindless and uncontrolled), as accentuating the self (in which case behavior amplifies the idiosyncrasies of crowd members), or else as leaving the self untouched (in which case there is no distinctive crowd psychology). In all three cases, there is an inability to explain one of the core features of crowd action—its *spontaneous sociality*. That is, as historical studies in particular have revealed, the behavior of crowd members has a socially meaningful pattern even in the absence of prior planning or formal

leadership. To quote the historian William Reddy, who studied riots in Rouen over a 100-year period: “the targets of these crowds thus glitter in the eye of history as signs of labourers’ conception of the nature of society” (Reddy, [1977](#), p. 84). What is more, as the great chronicler of the French Revolution, Georges Lefebvre, suggests, this spontaneous sociality is something that is distinctive to the crowd. He argues: “in the mass, the individual, escaping the pressure of the small social groups which constitute the framework of everyday life, becomes much more sensitive to the ideas and emotions belonging to the larger collectivities of which he is also a part” (Lefebvre, [1954](#), p. 277).

The challenge for psychology, then, is to explain this distinctive sensibility of crowds. How is it that we shift, not from mindful to mindless behavior, but from behavior based on individual or small group concerns to behavior based on the perspective of large-scale collectivities such as nation or “race” or class? This is precisely the issue addressed by the work of Henri Tajfel and John Turner on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, [1979](#)) and its subsequent development in Turner’s self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, [1987](#))—which, jointly, are termed the social identity approach (see Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, [2010](#), for an overview).

The starting point for the social identity approach lies in a radical shift in the way the self is conceptualized—from an entity to a system. That is, it is certainly true that there are times when we define our self in terms of what makes me, as an individual, distinct from other individuals. This is our personal identity. But equally, there will be times where we define our self in terms of our group memberships (“I am British,” “I am a Catholic,” “I am a Conservative”) and what makes our group distinct from other groups. These are our social identities—and we generally have multiple social identities associated with the different groups to which we belong. While these social identities are deeply meaningful to us personally (if not more so—after all, people may be prepared to die for their country in a way that would be unthinkable for their individual interests), the meanings associated with them cannot be reduced to the person but rather are defined historically and

collectively. In this way, when social identity is salient, individuals come to act in terms of social values, norms and beliefs.

More formally, then, the self-system is made up of relations between self and other defined at different levels of abstraction, the main ones being personal (“I” vs. “you”) and collective (“we” vs. “they”). At different times and in different contexts, different parts of the self-system will be psychologically salient and will shape behavior. Early on, social identity theory, which focused on the dynamics of intergroup behavior, proposed that the shift from interpersonal to intergroup behavior is underpinned by the shift from personal to social identity (Tajfel, [1978](#)). Subsequently, self-categorization theory, which sought to develop social identity concepts into a more general model of group process, proposed that social identity is the psychological construct that makes group behavior possible (Turner, [1982](#), p. 21).

Equally, then, the starting point for social identity approaches to crowd psychology is the contention that selfhood is neither lost in the psychological crowd, nor is it simply accentuated. Rather, there is a shift in salience from personal identity to the relevant social identity. Indeed, one of the most constant findings of recent research is that, when referring to themselves, members of psychological crowds—whether demonstrators, protestors, sports fans, pilgrims, or festival-goers—invoke their category membership rather than their individuality (e.g., Hopkins et al., [2019](#); Neville & Reicher, [2011](#); Reicher, [1984](#)). Correspondingly, rather than understanding crowd psychology in terms of a simple binary of loss or else continuity of its psychological underpinnings, the various psychological transformations that occur when people shift from personal to social identity must be addressed.

The Three Transformations of Crowd Psychology

The first study of crowds from a social identity perspective was an analysis of the St Paul’s Riot of April 1980 (Reicher, [1984](#)). Similar to the historical studies described in the section “[Classical Crowd Psychology From Taine to ‘De-Individuation,’](#)” this revealed a social pattern to the targets of crowd violence: the police, financial institutions, and shops owned by outsiders

were attacked; others were left alone or else, if targeted by individuals, were actively defended by crowd members. This pattern reflected the collective understandings of the St Paul's community who (even if not all Black) saw themselves in racialized terms as a group subjected to state repression and economic exploitation by external bodies.

Drawing on the influence processes posited by self-categorization theory ("referent informational influence"—see Turner et al., [1987](#)), it was argued that once people defined themselves in terms of their St Paul's category membership, they sought to act in terms of the norms, values, and beliefs associated with that category. Unlike everyday groups, however, the situation was unprecedented and there was no formal organization to guide the group. Therefore, there were no preexisting guides as to exactly how to act. Hence, participants had to elaborate the implications of their broader category membership for how they should behave in the proximal situation, inferring this from the behaviors of other typical crowd members. Where someone threw a stone at the police this was seen to enact an anti-police norm and led to a hail of stones. However, when someone threw a stone at a bus, this was seen to be at odds with group norms and did not generalize—and even invoked active disapproval. In this way, the process of identity elaboration allowed for a changing spectrum of action, but always within clear collectively defined limits—and this then explained the socially intelligible pattern of crowd action.

In this analysis, then, the emphasis is on the cognitive shifts that flow from a shift to social identification in the crowd. Instead of being controlled by individual understandings, the behavior of crowd members is controlled by social category-based understandings: we see the world, and what matters in the world, through a collective lens.

Over time, however, analysis has both broadened our understanding of how cognition changes in the crowd and also pointed to additional shifts in social relations between people in crowd settings and in emotional experiences of crowd members. Together, these cognitive, relational, and emotional changes constitute the three transformations of crowd psychology.

Cognitive Transformations

By now, a large number of studies on a wide range of types of crowd event have shown that the way we think about the world and the way we think about ourselves shifts in the crowd as social identities become salient. We define self and other not in terms of their individual characteristics but in terms of the groups they belong to and, accordingly, we stereotype both in-group and out-group members in terms of the characteristics we associate with these respective groups (Reicher & Stott, [2011](#); Stott, Hutchison, & Drury, [2001](#); Stott & Reicher, [1998](#)). Crowd members behave, not in terms of individual-level understandings but in terms of group-level understandings, thus placing normative limits on crowd action (Reicher, [1987](#); Stott, Drury, & Reicher, [2017](#))—and, correspondingly, members are only influenced by messages that are consonant with group norms (Reicher, [1996](#)). The interests pursued in the crowd are not individual interests but rather those of the group as a whole; hence an injury to a fellow group member is an insult to our (collective) self; and the success of the group is our own success, even if we individually suffer in achieving it (Stott & Drury, [2000](#)).

However, as a number of recent studies have emphasized, social identity is not only the basis of social perception. Rather it provides a framework through which we make sense of, and evaluate all experience, including basic somatic and sensory experiences (Hackel, Coppin, Wohl, & Van Bavel, [2018](#); Reicher & Hopkins, [2016](#)). Similarly, in crowd settings, even our evaluations of basic physical conditions are transformed. Thus, in a series of studies of the Magh Mela, a huge annual Hindu festival in North India, Hopkins and colleagues have shown how physical experiences that would normally be experienced as unpleasant (such as extreme cold and loud noise) are evaluated more positively to the extent that they are seen as affirming pilgrim identity (Pandey, Stevenson, Shankar, Hopkins, & Reicher, [2014](#); Shankar et al., [2013](#)).

Relational Transformations

The second transformation that social identity processes bring about is a shift in social relations between crowd members toward greater intimacy.

This is not simply a matter of social identification (“I see myself as a member of this social category”) but of *shared* social identification (“we see each other as members of this social category”) whereby people come to consider that members of the crowd think of themselves as constituting a common “we” (Hopkins et al., [2019](#); Neville & Reicher, [2011](#)). Or, to put it slightly differently, shared social identity involves crowd members ceasing to think of their fellows as “other” but rather as part of a common extended self. In this situation, what happens to other members happens to one’s (social) self. Their fate is my fate. Moreover, there is also an assumption that others will likewise respond to my fate as if it were their fate.

In the general group literature, there is a growing body of work showing the consequence of such a sense of “we-ness” on social relations. It leads to a sense of trust and respect between people (Tyler & Blader, [2001](#)), to greater mutual support and helping (Levine, Evans, Prosser, & Reicher, [2005](#)), and to reduction of disgust at sensual contact with them (Reicher, Templeton, Neville, Ferrari, & Drury, [2016](#)). In crowds, in contrast to the assumption that density is always aversive and that spatial needs always personal (Sommer, [1969](#)), a sense of we-ness leads to greater tolerance for physical proximity to others (Novelli, Drury, & Reicher, [2010](#)) and enjoyment of being in the most dense locations (Novelli, Drury, Reicher, & Stott, [2013](#)). The culmination of all this is that shared social identity enables group members better to coordinate, cooperate, and co-act with each other. They become a more coherent and potent unit.

Evidence for such cooperation and coordination was apparent from some of the first social identity analyses of crowd events. For instance, Reicher ([1996](#)) shows how strangers in a student protest would intervene to stop others getting arrested by the police even at the risk of being arrested themselves. But only more recently have such phenomena become a focus of crowd research—and in two areas in particular. One is the study of collective behavior in emergencies and disasters, and the other is the study of mass gatherings.

Relational Transformations in Emergencies and Disasters

As has been shown, a fatal flaw of “mass panic” as an explanation of default behavior in emergencies and disasters is the consistent evidence of social support and cooperation among survivors. Three kinds of explanations have been offered for this evidence. First, *normative* explanations suggest that people continue to conform to the same rules, roles, and schemas that shape their behavior in everyday life (e.g., Donald & Canter, [1992](#); Johnson, [1988](#)). However, people have many different norms they might conform to, and without further psychological specification, a social norm explanation merely re-describes behavior.

A second explanation is in terms of *existing relationships*, reflecting the extensive evidence that people orient first to family members and friends in emergencies (Mawson, [2007](#)). However, this explanation is also insufficient given the evidence of widespread solidarity with *strangers*, even in the presence of threat and in the absence of attachment figures (e.g., Bartolucci & Magni, [2017](#)).

A third explanation focuses on the emergent groups that arise from perceptions of common fate (Fritz, [1996](#)) and suggests that shared social identity among survivors is the crucial mediating mechanism between such perceptions of common fate and cooperative behavior in emergencies (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, [2009a](#), [2009b](#)). Sometimes existing group boundaries are dissolved in such events (Fritz, [1996](#)). But at other times there are no salient group memberships immediately prior to the emergency. This was evident in a study of the July 7, 2005, London bombings, in which the survivors were commuters who described a lack of connection with those around them in normal circumstances but a new sense of togetherness immediately following the explosion, leading some of them to take personal risks to help strangers (Drury et al., [2009b](#)).

In emergencies and disasters, people not only give support but also perceive and expect it (Kaniasty, [2020](#)), enabling anticipation of others’ actions and hence facilitating coordination. A survey of survivors of an earthquake and tsunami in Chile in 2010 found that common fate predicted social identification with others affected by the disaster, which in turn predicted both giving emotional social support and (indirectly, through expected support) participation in coordinated support activities for the whole

community such as restoring electricity supplies (Drury, Brown, González, & Miranda, [2016](#)).

The evidence from emergencies and disasters therefore turns early crowd theory on its head. Rather than the stress of emergencies reducing sociality and thus increasing danger, in many emergencies there is an emergent shared social identity that is the basis of mutual support and hence collective resilience (Drury, [2018](#)).

Relational Transformations in Mass Gatherings

Considering mass gatherings, especially religious mass gatherings, we also see the emergence of a sense of “we-ness” among pilgrims. This again leads to multiple forms of cooperation and support among crowd members—albeit that the forms of cooperation that are appropriate in a religious festival are very different from those necessary in a disaster. Thus, in a study of the Magh Mela, it was found that people sometimes show active forms of cooperation by commission (such as physically supporting the elderly during rituals of bathing in the Ganges) but also by omission (avoiding gossip and giving others space to pursue their spiritual activities). Similar intimacies are found in studies of the Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca) (Alnabulsi, Drury, & Templeton, [2018](#)). Moreover Alnabulsi and Drury ([2014](#)) found that, to the extent that people identified with the rest of the crowd they were more comfortable in dense physical proximity to others, which they saw as providing them with support in a potentially dangerously crowded situation.

Emotional Transformations

Thus far it has been shown how social identity provides crowd members with a common understanding of their social world and a common sense of their interests in this world. It has also been shown how shared identity allows crowd members to act together more effectively in the pursuit of these interests. That is, in the crowd people shift from acting individually for different ends to acting together for the same end. This makes them far more able to overcome obstacles that stand in the way of them achieving these ends. Indeed, one of the most striking features of crowd events is the

sense of *empowerment* among participants as they develop a sense of shared identity and begin to become aligned psychologically and behaviorally. Thus, Drury and Reicher ([1999](#)) describe a demonstration in which an initially disparate set of protestors came to see themselves as a single group and thereby felt better able to break through a police cordon and reach their goal of entering a Council meeting to register their dissent.

Such empowerment, then, increases the ability of crowd members to enact their social identity and to shape the world according to their own collective vision. To build on Lefebvre ([1954](#)), it is not just that we act as a social subject in the crowd, the crowd is one of the few places where we feel and are able to make our own world. Most of the time, we live in a world and according to rules made by others. In crowds, we are better able to make our own rules and others must dance to our tune (Reicher, [2015](#)).

This phenomenon of social identity enactment has variously been called “collective self-realization” (CSR; Khan et al., [2015](#); Reicher & Haslam, [2006](#)) and “collective self-objectification” (CSO; Drury & Reicher, [2005](#), [2009](#)). It has important conceptual ramifications. For the root of anti-collectivistic and anti-crowd sentiment is the notion that people lose agency and subjecthood in the mass, becoming more like automata than persons. The evidence suggests the precise opposite. It is perhaps only in the crowd that most people are agentic, that they can act on their own terms and make their own history, that they cease to be objects of others’ control, and that they achieve full subjecthood.¹

And for this reason, CSO/CSR is experienced as intensely positive. Many researchers have noted positive sentiment as a key characteristic of crowds (e.g., Páez, Rimé, Basabe, Włodarczyk, & Zumeta, [2015](#); Sullivan, [2018](#)).

Durkheim ([1995](#)) captured this bubbling excitement in the term “effervescence.”

Traditionally—in psychology at least—such strong emotion has been taken as evidence for the loss of rational thought. Studies in very different types of crowds suggest, however, that there are three main reasons why crowds are associated with strong positive emotions. First, the presence of others serves to *validate* the emotions expressed, enhancing their intensity (Hopkins et al., [2019](#); Neville & Reicher, [2011](#)). Second, because others are understood as

an extension of self in such events, they are perceived to provide *support* for one's needs as a category member (Hopkins et al., [2016](#)). And third for those crowds that act to change features of their world in line with their social identity there is the exhilaration that comes from empowerment, or CSO/CSR. Hopkins et al. ([2016](#)), for instance, show that intense emotional positivity among pilgrims at the Magh Mela flows in part from the sense of intimacy with their fellows and from the ability to overcome the constraints of everyday life and fully devote themselves to the spiritual. Stott and colleagues (Ball et al., [2019](#); Reicher & Stott, [2011](#); Stott et al., [2017](#), [2018](#)), detail a similar joy among urban rioters, which flows from a reversal of everyday social relations where they feel controlled by the police to one in which the rioters control events and force the police to be responsive to them.

Processes of Change

So far, social identification along with shared social identity have been taken as givens and the consequences examined principally for intra-crowd processes: collective understanding, social relations among crowd members, and collective experience. Thus, an attempt has been made to explain how the shape of crowd action is socially determined. However, it isn't just that crowds bring people together to express pre-defined social identities. As was evident even in the study of the St Paul's riot (Reicher, [1984](#)), social identity, the relations between people, and the ways that they act can all be changed in the course of crowd events. The day after the riot, St Paul's residents defined their group as far more confident and worthy of respect, and felt far more able to defy the police. Crowds, then, are characterized not just by social determination but also by psychological change. An adequate psychology of crowds must therefore address processes of change. These are addressed on three levels: change within events, spread and change between events, and change beyond the crowd itself.

Change in Events—The Elaborated Social Identity Model of Crowds (ESIM)

In order to complement the study of social determination in crowds with an analysis of psychological change, it is necessary to complement the analysis of intragroup processes with an analysis of intergroup processes. For crowd events do not just involve the crowd, they characteristically involve other groups, notably the police. Thus, how events unfold cannot be understood by limiting the analytic gaze to just one of these parties. The nature of the interactions between the two must be examined. And indeed, ESIM developed from the observation of a particular pattern of interaction that was associated with the emergence of generalized conflict in crowds that were initially opposed to violence.

This pattern, first described in a student demonstration (Reicher, [1996](#)), was subsequently seen in a number of collective events, from football matches (Stott & Reicher, [1998](#)) to tax protests (Stott & Drury, [2000](#)), to anti-roads campaigns (Drury & Reicher, [2000](#)) to urban riots (Stott et al., [2017](#)). It involved the following stages:

1. A heterogeneous crowd gathers, made up of multiple groups, the majority non-confrontational, a minority confrontational.
2. The police perceive the crowd as constituting a homogeneous threat and hence respond with actions designed to prevent all crowd members from pursuing their goals (e.g., by setting up cordons; by surrounding and containing the crowd; by charging and dispersing the crowd).
3. A shared sense of identity and of unity emerges among the crowd, centered on the perceived illegitimacy of the police out-group. Such unity produces a sense of empowerment and leads crowd members to challenge the police.
4. The response of the crowd serves to confirm initial police perceptions of crowd danger and leads them to escalate their repressive measures. This leads in turn to an increasingly unified crowd challenge and to an escalating spiral of conflict.

Consequent upon this pattern of interaction are a number of psychological changes, most comprehensively documented in Drury's series of studies of a campaign against the building of the M11 link road through East London (Drury & Reicher, [2000](#), [2005](#); Drury, Reicher, & Stott, [2003](#)) During this campaign, many local protestors changed their identity, coming to see themselves as radical and oppositional. They changed their understanding of the social world and of specific groups such as the police, going from a "consensus" view in which the authorities neutrally manage society to a "conflict" view in which different groups have fundamentally opposed interests and the authorities serve the interests of the powerful. They also changed their views of other groups across time and space—including not only other anti-roads protestors across the country, but also the Ogoni tribe fighting Shell in Nigeria, and striking miners fighting the government in the 1980s—coming to see them as part of a common category of those fighting against injustice, and subject to the same police repression as themselves. They also changed their views concerning the purpose of their campaign, from a narrow defense of their neighborhood to broad opposition to the government road-building program and indeed to attacks on the environment. Finally, they changed their criteria for evaluating the success of the campaign, from stopping the road being built through their neighborhood to standing up to the police and roadbuilders and exposing their illegitimacy to the wider public.

In order to explain how intergroup dynamics produce such thoroughgoing changes, ESIM interrogates the very nature of social identity. This is conceptualized as a representation of self in social relations (see Elcheroth & Reicher, [2017](#)). Thus, for instance, to define oneself as American is to conceptualize the world as organized in terms of national categories along with the way in which the United States relates to other nation-states. It follows that any change in one's social relations to others opens the way to a change in social identity. In interactive contexts, this can happen not only through one's own actions, but also through the way in which out-groups understand and respond to one's actions.

Thus, in crowds, where members act on one understanding of their social position ("we are respectable demonstrators exerting our democratic rights")

but these actions lead to a different understanding by an out-group such as the police (“they are a dangerous crowd who constitute a threat to the social order”) and where, moreover, that out-group has the ability to impose their understanding on the crowd (by deploying their resources to contain or disperse the crowd)—if, in other words, the police have the power to reposition crowd members—then the conditions of identity change are produced.

To put the argument more simply, where crowd members see themselves as “respectable” but are treated by the police as oppositional then they will begin to see themselves as oppositional. They will become more sympathetic to those radical voices in the crowd that characterize the police as an opposition. Moreover, to the extent that the actions imposed by the police are seen as illegitimate this legitimizes resistance to them (which may include violent conflict); and to the extent such police actions are seen as indiscriminate they create a sense of common fate and hence unify a previous disparate crowd, in which cases people will feel both more willing and more empowered to express their oppositionalism in action (Drury, Evripdou, & Van Zomeren, [2015](#); Drury & Reicher, [2009](#)).

It is clear from this that, for crowd members, re-construing their own identity is bound up with re-construing the identity of the police. It is also clear that change in identity is bound up with a changing worldview, in this case toward a world rooted in social antagonisms. Thus, others standing in opposition to the police will become part of an extended in-group. And success in such an antagonistic world starts with confronting the power of the authorities. If identity is bound up with a broader understanding of social relations, this explains why the processes that bring about identity change will also bring about a series of changes in one’s understanding of how one relates to others and how one should act in the world.

There is one final point that needs to be stressed. Although, to date, the emphasis in empirical studies has been about changes toward radicalism and escalation of conflict in crowd events, ESIM is not simply a model of radicalization, nor is it simply a model of change. On the one hand, then, if

crowd members see themselves as in opposition to the police but are repositioned as “respectable,” then one would expect deradicalization of identity. This is precisely what Stott has found in his studies of football crowds, where the police altered their focus toward respecting fans and facilitating their collective goals. In such contexts, fans re-construe the police as allies, reject confrontation, and indeed collectively self-regulate in cases where individuals act in confrontational ways (Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, [2008](#)).

On the other hand, ESIM dynamics require a number of conditions for the production of change. These include (a) an asymmetry of perception in the way crowd members see themselves and the way they are perceived by the police, (b) the use of police power to constrain the crowd, and (c) sufficient empowerment in the crowd to challenge police constraint. These conditions are relatively rare. In most cases the police will see crowds as crowd members see themselves and their actions will confirm the ways crowd members understand themselves and their world. Even if they don't, the police won't often consider it necessary to act against the crowd (say, when there are no sensitive targets nearby). And even if they do act against the crowd, crowd members won't often feel able to challenge them (say, where their numbers are too low; Drury & Reicher, [2005](#)). In other words, ESIM may well specify when change occurs, but equally it explains when (and why) it does not.

Change Between Events

Most research on crowds has been restricted to the study of single events or else, as in the No M11 Link Road campaign previously discussed, to multiple events involving the same pool of people. However, often, crowd events come in waves involving entirely different participants. This is particularly true of urban riots, whether in the United States in the 1960s (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, [1968](#)), the United Kingdom in the 1980s (Waddington, Jones, & Critcher, [1989](#)) or, more recently, the U.K. riots of 2011 (Reicher & Stott, [2011](#)). In each case, an initial riot quickly led to riots elsewhere across the whole country. Indeed, the intensity of previous riots is

among the most important predictors of when and where further riots occur, over and above other important factors such as deprivation (Myers, [2010](#)).

How, then do we explain the nature of this spread?

Both descriptively and in explanations of the spread of riots, one concept has dominated: contagion, the notion that psychological states are transmitted automatically between people like a disease, a concept that goes back as far as the works of Espinas on sociality in animals (Barrows, [1981](#)). Writing of the 2011 riots, Slutkin ([2011](#)) suggests: “That violence is an epidemic is not a metaphor; it is a scientific fact. . . . Once the event is triggered, it moves from person to person, block to block, town to town. This pattern is not unique to London: it is evident in past riots throughout the US, from Cincinnati to Crown Heights in New York to the Los Angeles riots ignited by the Rodney King beating.”

However, there are two major problems with such an argument. On the one hand, it does not explain why different places, though equally exposed to an earlier riot, respond in different ways. In some places people do riot, in other places they do not, in yet others they turn out to prevent riots or else to clean up the damage that previously occurred. On the other hand, it does not explain the differing nature of the riots in different places. As has been noted, for instance, the initial riot of 2011, in Tottenham, North London, was principally an anti-police event. That was also true of some of the ensuing riots, but others were “commodity riots” more centered on looting and yet others were “class riots” aimed at symbols of wealth and privilege (Ball & Drury, [2012](#)).

Today, many sociologists and criminologists reject the irrationalist associations of the term “contagion,” redefining it as rational choice based on individual participants’ judgement and communication (e.g., Myers, [2010](#)). In a similar way to the “contagion” concept, however, rational choice and communication require more social psychological specification to explain both why people in some locations and not others join in with rioting and why some people are more influential than others.

From a social identity perspective, influence and the process of spread is neither automatic nor indiscriminate. Mere exposure to others rioting is not enough to make others more likely to react themselves. Rather one must look

at the categorical relations between those involved in earlier riots and those who observe them. However, that covers the relationship of observers both to the rioters and to the authorities. What is more, the observers can be either local community members in different places or else the authorities. Taking these distinctions into account suggests a number of processes of spread.

Starting with community members as observers, a first process is based on common identification with those rioting elsewhere. The Tottenham riot was very much centered on a shared understanding of racist policing, having developed from a police shooting of a local young Black man (Stott et al., [2017](#)). A common identification as both anti-police and linked to Tottenham was especially apparent in Brixton, another relatively Black area of London. The fact that Brixton residents saw themselves in the Tottenham rioters and that these latter provided a normative frame for their own action was critical to the onset and development of the riot in this locality (Drury et al., [2020](#)).

The second process involves observers who don't necessarily perceive the rioters as part of a common in-group but who do see the police as a common out-group and who, in witnessing the vulnerability of the police, feel empowered to act in ways that would normally be prevented by police action. This was the case in Croydon and Clapham, other districts in South London, where rioters expressed less shared identification with the Tottenham rioters than was the case for Brixton participants, but who felt able to defy the police. However, the police themselves were often not their primary target. Rather, they defied the police in order to loot and attack property. In this way, as the riots came to involve different groups with different collective grievances, it not only spread but also change its character (Drury et al., [2020](#); Stott et al., [2018](#)).

Finally, shifting from the community to the police as observers, previous riots can make officers more sensitive to the possibility of further disturbances and more concerned with the consequences (in the aftermath of the Tottenham riot, the police came under sustained political attack from the government for failing to intervene quickly or strongly enough).² Such

circumstances will make the police alter their criteria for intervention and make them more likely to intervene earlier and use more force even under conditions of limited threat (Cronin & Reicher, [2009](#)). Moreover, following the dynamics of ESIM described, such intervention may produce a sense of police illegitimacy and collective empowerment among crowd members, leading to an escalation of violence that might not otherwise occur. An example of these dynamics comes from Salford, where strong police action against a relatively minor incident drew in more crowd members and led to a significant conflict (Drury et al., in preparation).

Change Beyond Events

Until very recently, the study of crowd dynamics has been restricted to what happens in crowds. But a number of studies have begun to ask the question “does what happens in the crowd stay in the crowd?” If not, in what ways and through what processes do crowd events have impacts beyond the crowd? These questions are of considerable significance because they speak to the overall importance of crowds and crowd studies (Reicher, [2017](#)). Are crowd events relatively rare and exceptional phenomena that tell us little about everyday psychology and society, and hence can never be more than a niche interest? Or do they play an important role in shaping everyday psychology and society, in which case crowd analysis acquires much greater significance?

Returning to the topic of mass pilgrimages, it is known that attendance at these events can change attitudes and identities for some time afterward (e.g., Clingingsmith, Khwajam, & Kremer, [2009](#)). Recent research has evidenced the social identity basis of such changes. Khan et al.’s longitudinal study (2016) of the Magh Mela found that pilgrims’ shared social identity with the crowd predicted increased social identification as a Hindu.

Alnabulsi, Drury, Vignoles, and Oogink ([2020](#)) found evidence of more positive attitudes among Hajj pilgrims toward non-Muslims as well as other Muslim groups. Less expectedly perhaps, attendance at the Mela has been found to increase both physical and mental well-being (Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan, & Reicher, [2012](#)).

When it came to how these changes were brought about, overlapping but distinct processes were involved. Thus, in the case of enhanced identification, the critical precursor was the sense of collective self-objectification/realization, itself contingent on shared social identity among crowd members (Khan et al., [2016](#)). That is, insofar as social identity is understood as a representation of how the world is, or should be, then experiencing the reality of such a world makes the identity more viable and meaningful to people. For changed attitudes to other groups, contact and shared identity with the crowd were the crucial factors (Alnabulsi et al., [2020](#)). In the case of well-being, the critical precursor was “relationality”—the shift toward intimate and supportive social relations among crowd members, though this too was contingent on social identification and shared social identity. More specifically, such relationality provided people with a sense that they would be supported by other group members. And if those group members were present when they returned home, they felt better able to deal with the challenges posed by everyday life, hence impacting their physical and their mental well-being (Khan et al., [2015](#)). In the case of protest crowds, the changes in identity toward a “radicalized” self (Drury & Reicher, [2000](#)), and the behavioral consequences of this (including lifestyle changes in terms of diet, friendship groups, and consumption), have been shown to be sustained similarly by relational factors such as perceived social support in the campaign in-group (Vestergren, Drury, & Chiriac, [2018](#)). There is, however, one serious limitation to all this work on change beyond events. That is, if the impact of crowd events on everyday life applies only to the actual participants, then this impact will always be severely limited, for even the largest events involve only a small proportion of the members of the society as a whole. Critically, then, whether crowd events impact nonparticipants as well as participants must be addressed. Drawing on Anderson’s work ([1983](#)), work which analyzes the nation as an “imagined community,” Reicher ([2017](#)) proposes a possible mechanism. That is, Anderson argues that we can never assemble the entire nation in one place and observe it directly. Rather we have to imagine ourselves as a nation and also imagine what our nationhood means. So how can that be done? To the extent that a crowd is representative of the broader category, it becomes the

imagined community made manifest. Through observing a national crowd, we can see ourselves mirrored and observe who we are and where we stand in the world. This is true not only of nationhood, but also of other broad social categories—gender, religion, and so on.

There is some evidence to support this view. For instance, Lowery ([2016](#)) shows how crowd events following the killing of Black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and elsewhere played an important role in redefining how Black people saw themselves in the United States and how they conceptualized their relation to the police and place in U.S. society. There is also more systematic evidence to show how observing protest crowds can affect the extent to which people support their demands and construe the stability of society (Jimenez-Moya, Miranda, Drury, Saavedra, & Gonzalez, [2019](#)). Clearly, though, this is just a starting point. Crowds are clearly a significant factor in shaping and reshaping individuals and societies. But exactly how widespread these changes are remains to be investigated.

Extensions and Applications

Theories of crowd psychology have often been applied to practical social problems. This section summarizes established impacts of the social identity approach to crowds in two areas where crowd psychology has previously had a malign and dangerous influence—“public order” policing and emergency and crowd safety management. The promise of the social identity approach in two further areas—computer simulation of pedestrian movement and mass gatherings medicine—is also explored.

“Public Order” Policing

Police methods of crowd control, based on assumptions that crowds are mindless and liable to violence, reflect the long-standing anti-crowd discourse going back many years (e.g., McClelland, [1989](#)). In addition, rationales for certain police practices have sometimes been explicitly derived from the work of Le Bon and others in classical crowd psychology

(Waddington & King, [2005](#); see Reicher et al., [2007](#)). These practices include mounted charges and other forms of coercion against the whole crowd. The Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) of crowds research has demonstrated that these constitute the perceived illegitimate and indiscriminate police actions that lead to the escalation of conflict in many cases (Stott, [2009](#)). However, while U.K. and European police forces had been aware of the ESIM research since the early 2000s, it wasn't until U.K. police were faced with a highly damaging crisis of public order policing, when a member of the public was killed by police officer, that the assumptions of classical crowd psychology were removed from the official guidance and training materials (Hoggett & Stott, [2012](#)). In their place were recommendations derived from the ESIM that, instead, would minimize the potential for collective conflict. This included the principles of education (i.e., know your crowd's identity and norms), facilitation (support the crowd's legitimate aims), communication (talk to people in the crowd), and differentiation (avoid methods that are indiscriminate) (Reicher et al., [2007](#)). Among the changes that have subsequently been implemented are the introduction of protest liaison officers who use dialogue-police techniques to build rapport with protestors (Stott Scothern & Gorringer, [2013](#)). There have been parallel developments in the context of policing football crowds, where, for example, the efficiencies of the new form of policing (reducing conflict and arrest) have saved thousands of pounds in police overtime (Stott, West, & Radburn, [2018](#)).

It is fair to say that that the application of principles derived from ESIM to public order policing have been controversial at times. Some police are critical, arguing that the ESIM underestimates the potential for crowd violence and the need for coercion as a principal tool. Others argue that the "dialogue" approach amounts to a more subtle form of coercion (see Stott et al., [2013](#)), and that it excludes those forms of protest (such as disruption and violence) that may be necessary to bring about social change.³ From the 2010s onward, principles based on ESIM were written into key official public-order guidance manuals and College of Policing training modules. The effects on policing represent perhaps one of the biggest impacts social psychology has had on policy and practice since the turn of the 21st century.

Crowd Safety and Emergency Management

In the field of emergency management, practices based on assumptions of “mass panic” prevailed for a number of years. Yet critics argued that such practices can *create* the very psychological vulnerability they are intended to mitigate. For example, the imperative “don't tell them—they'll only panic” leads response agencies to restrict information, and a perceived lack of information increases public anxiety and distress and reduces efficacy (Drury et al., [2019](#)).

The research on emergent social identity in crowds in emergencies (Drury et al. [2009a](#), [2009b](#)) is consistent with some of the principles of the community resilience programs that developed after 9/11—in particular the notion that crowds of strangers are capable of forming bonds in emergencies, which allow them to respond in an adaptive way (i.e., evacuate, coordinate, care for each other), independent of the emergency services. The social identity approach has therefore provided the rationale for interventions designed to support and build upon survivors' collective psychological capacities in these events, rather than substitute for them. These interventions include prioritizing communication to give survivors the efficacy to deal with the situations they face. In numerous official guidance documents and training programs on crowd safety management at sports and live events worldwide, assumptions of “mass panic” have been replaced by references to social identity, group norms, and communication (Drury et al., [2019](#)).

Perhaps the most concrete example of the social identity approach transforming practices in emergency response is the case of mass casualty decontamination in the event of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) incidents (Carter, Drury, Rubin, Williams, & Amlôt, [2015](#); see Drury et al., [2019](#)). Because the decontamination procedure involves removing clothes, the public can experience it as more threatening than the CBRN incident itself. Previous guidance had either neglected psychology or referred to “mass panic” and “disorder.” The result has been poor public compliance with the decontamination procedure, which increases risk of contamination both for those directly affected and for the wider public. Standard training for U.K. Fire and Rescue Service personnel has now

changed to foreground communication techniques that convey legitimacy (i.e., being treated fairly and reasonably in the decontamination process) and which thereby build shared social identity between responders and members of the public. Such shared social identity reduces anxiety and increases cooperation and compliance with the procedure (Carter et al., [2015](#)).

Computer Simulation of Pedestrian Movement

Computer models of pedestrian flow are have become a standard tool in planning for events, buildings, and transport hubs. However, until recently modelers' assumptions about the psychology of crowds has lagged behind what is known in social psychology (Sime, [1995](#)). Simulations often treat crowds as consisting of either an aggregate mass where every person is allocated identical properties and goals, or as individuals with different individual qualities. Other types of simulation acknowledge the fact that group psychological bonds exist between people in crowds but conceptualize the group only as a small group of individuals, without any capacity for identification with the rest of the crowd (see Templeton, Drury, & Philippides, [2015](#)). Research on pedestrian movement demonstrates that as well as the influence of small group formations (Moussaïd, Perozo, Garnier, Helbing, & Theraulaz, [2010](#)), if people are members of psychological crowds they walk closer to others in the crowd, which slows down the total walking speed for the crowd as a whole (Templeton, Drury, & Philippides, [2018](#)). Templeton et al. ([2015](#)) specify some of the psychological properties needed for agents in computer simulations to properly capture some basic features of crowd psychology. These include the ability of an individual to know their own group identity and perceive the group identities of others. While modelers increasingly refer to the social identity literature, few pedestrian models so far have implemented basic social identity principles (see von Sivers et al., [2016](#), for a notable exception).

Mass Gatherings Health

The discipline of mass gatherings medicine has, historically, tended to emphasize the negative effects of attendance on health—principally via increased susceptibility to infectious diseases (e.g., Memish, Stephens, Steffen, & Ahmed, [2012](#)). The recent research on the crowd psychology of mass gatherings complements this by demonstrating that psychological crowd membership can have benefits for health and well-being. As a result of this, following the 3rd International Conference on Mass Gatherings Medicine in 2017, the whole field was renamed Mass Gatherings Health (Yezli et al., [2018](#)). Indeed, a fundamental message of the psychological research is that, even if certain risks are increased, overall, mass gatherings have a positive health impact and should be encouraged as a public health intervention (Hopkins & Reicher, [2016](#)).

However, besides this general message, Hopkins and Reicher ([2017](#)) provide more detailed analysis of the ambivalent health effects of the three psychological transformations of crowd psychology. Thus, the cognitive transformation can, depending on the normative content of the relevant social identity, lead to either positive behaviors (say, abstinence from rich foods at the Magh Mela) or negative behaviors (substance abuse at music festivals). Equally, the relational transformation can alternatively lead to unsafe health practices (such as loss of disgust leading to sharing food and drink, hence increasing disease transmission) or positive practices (such as supporting people in need). And, finally, the emotional transformations can alternatively attenuate what might otherwise be stressors (such as loud noise and crowding) or lead people to expose themselves to greater risks (such as going into densely crowded spaces).

In practical terms, this has important implications in terms of health promotion and health communication at mass gatherings. On the one hand, it is important to tailor advice to the particular identities of the groups involved. There is no point urging people to act in ways that are at odds with collective beliefs. Rather, messages must be made congruent with group norms. So, for instance, rather than urging people not to share food (which goes against a communal ethos) one might stress the need to show concern for others' well-being.

On the other hand, it is important to ensure that advice comes from, or has the blessing of, in-group sources rather than out-group experts who might be seen as having different values and priorities from their audience.

Conclusions

This article has covered a wide range of collective phenomena, but, for reasons of space, there are some that have not been mentioned—including mass psychogenic illness, “crazes,” “stampedes,” and those crowds where shoppers compete physically for bargains (during Black Friday and similar sales events). However, the social identity framework described here provides the tools and concepts for addressing these and other crowd behaviors. In short, those crowds where there is competition between individuals are likely to be physical crowds, where there is low or no shared social identity, or where there is a shared norm of competition; and those crowds where there is coordination, synchrony, social influence and other evidence of relationality are likely to be psychological crowds where there is a sense of “we-ness.”

More generally, this article has sought to develop an analysis of the psychological consequences of we-ness and how this provides not only the inclination, but also the practical capability to act as social subjects—and therefore to act in ways that are coherent and socially meaningful. Moreover, complementing this analysis of intragroup processes in the crowd with an analysis of the intergroup dynamics of crowd events, enables an explanation of not only how crowds act to express social identities but also how social identities themselves can be formed and reformed in the crowd. In sum, both social determination and social change can be explained.

This helps answer a final, fundamental, question. Why research the crowd? For many years, crowds were ignored by psychologists—as indicated by their neglect in social psychology textbooks—or at most seen as a spectacular but peripheral phenomenon. The neglect might seem surprising to the layperson. The crowd is at the center of social life: national and international events,

civic celebration and major incidents, everyday experiences of sports, music, shopping, and travel. But it is also key to periods of fundamental social change. But also, as has been argued throughout this article, the crowd is equally relevant to academic concerns. It is a place where core phenomena can be investigated and understood (Reicher, [2011](#), [2017](#))—identity, influence, social relations, power, emotion, social change. While it is sometimes relegated to the margins, we suggest that the crowd should be at the core of social psychology and indeed of the social sciences.

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Notes

- 1. Philosophically speaking, the “subjecthood” of the “self-realizing” religious devotee is in fact subsumed within that of God, which is not the case for the action of the group involved in social change, whose collective action negates a relationship of alienation (see Drury, Evripidou, & Van Zomeren, [2015](#)).
- 2. [“Riots: Police Defend Handling of Crisis After Criticism.”](#)

- 3. While these criticisms of protest liaison police focus on the intended functions of dialogue policing, others focus on their use by police for more traditional goals (e.g., Out of the Woods, [2019](#))

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- [Collective Mobilization and Social Protest](#)
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