Social Order in Emergency Situations

Jan. 25, 2008

http://www.public.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Societal influence

From social to societal influence

- People influence each other during their interactions (social influence)
- People don’t interact randomly; our actions are patterned by social structure
- Social structure: social institutions, organizations, groups, statuses and roles, values, and norms that add order and predictability to our private lives (p. 287)
Do social norms collapse?

✔ People’s behavior is guided by elements of social structure, such as statuses, roles, and norms
  • Status: named position that people can occupy (p. 25)
  • Role: set of expectations—rights, obligations, behaviors, duties—associated with a particular social position (p. 25)
  • Norm: culturally defined standard or rule of conduct (p. 35)

✔ Many people believe that societal influence breaks down under extreme circumstances
  • Panic: a form of behavior that involves people reacting to a real or perceived threat with irrational, frantic, selfish, and often self-destructive behavior
  • Panic is also used to mean simply “run away”

✔ Three well-studied cases
  • 1977 Beverly Hills Supper Club fire & 1979 Who concert stampede (Norris Johnson)
  • 9/11 World Trade Center attacks (Kathleen Tierney)
Crowd Behavior during 9/11

✔ Deaths determined by location
  • North tower: everyone on 92+ died, everyone below lived
  • South tower: all but four below 78th lived

✔ Pre-existing norms, statuses & roles continued to guide behavior
  • People followed procedures learned from drills
  • Cooperation, not competition, guided behavior
  • “Irrational” behavior should be seen from perspective of people in situation
  • Widespread altruistic behavior to provide assistance
Emergency dispersal characteristics

✓ Two other examples
  • Who stampede: people died in pile (3-5 bodies deep) after doors opened; people behind pile were unaware of situation)
  • B.H.S.C. fire: relaxed warning didn’t give people time to evacuate before smoke was too thick for many to find way out

✓ People don’t lose control of their minds
✓ People may lose control of their abilities to perceive, move or communicate
  ✓ Smoke or crowding may make it difficult to see
  ✓ Dense bodies may make it difficult to move
  ✓ Noise may make it difficult to communicate

✓ Social structure continues to guide people’s actions
  ✓ People escape or die with their group
  ✓ People continue to help others
  ✓ Gender roles continue to guide action
  ✓ People’s occupational roles continue to guide action
Policy implications of “panic”

✓ Researchers have found no evidence of panic
✓ Panic often used by people not in emergency situation (e.g., media, firefighters) to explain unfortunate outcome
✓ “Irrational” behavior may be completely rational for those in situation
✓ Negative policy implications for disaster safety
  ✓ Victims blamed for their deaths or injuries
  ✓ Leads to delayed warning systems when bigger problem is insufficient appreciation of danger
  ✓ Leads to calls for central control instead of recognizing advantages of improvisation
✓ General lesson: Good research on “irrational” behavior reveals the continued influence of social structure
  ✓ E.g., moral panic, crazes.