Social Order in Emergency Situations

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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
  - Smell 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.