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# Steve Reicher on Crowd Psychology

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**Nigel Warburton:** We know that groups can be dangerous. Mob-mentality takes over, and ordinary people become capable of terrible things, right? But is the psychology of group behavior as straightforward as that? Steve Reicher has done extensive research on how people behave collectively. He has a more nuanced and more optimistic view, a view that includes the possibility that group mentality can bring out the best in us, as well as the worst.

**David Edmonds:** Steve Reicher, welcome to Social Science Bites.

**Stephen Reicher:** Hello.

**David Edmonds:** The topic we are talking about today is groups and psychology. How did you get into this topic?

**Stephen Reicher:** Whether it's a reconstruction or not, I always tell myself a particular story as to how this happened. I came from a very nice, polite background, very well brought up, and in my first year at university, we had an occupation, it was the days when we had occupations, and it was over a nursery, we wanted a nursery, although the real issue was about women's access to university, and I was a bit frightened of these things, and I wasn't the sort of student that went into occupations, and I remember there was a big vote, and the vote was for the occupation, and I felt, well, since I voted, I should go along, and I remember going into the Senate House, occupying the Senate House, and sitting there in these meetings that would go on all night, and the fascinating thing was at the same time I was taking part in these huge collective events, I was learning about the psychology of groups, and it was telling me how groups are irrational, and how, in groups, people become more emotional, and they become less thoughtful, and so on, that they lose their selves, and then I would go back after my lectures to the occupation, and take part in what, for me, were the most intellectually exhilarating, committed, meaningful occasions I'd had in my entire life. So the empowering experience of groups was completely at odds with the psychology that I was learning.

**David Edmonds:** And, since then, a couple of decades ago, you've been studying how groups behave?

**Stephen Reicher:** That's very polite of you, sadly it's more than a couple of decades. Yes, I've been very interested in, broadly speaking, the psychology of groups, and how we behave in groups, and how we are transformed by groups, and what groups have to say about the nature of human sociality, and at the same time, I've been really interested in groups as a source of change, a source of resistance, in a sense, you could summarize the

literature as saying 'groups are bad for you'; groups take rational individuals, they take moral individuals, and they turn them into immoral idiots, and I've been trying to contest that notion, but also to explain how that notion comes about, because I think if you go to the origins of social psychology, the origins of crowd psychology, it comes about in the 19th century, specifically in France, which was, at that time, in the Third Republic, very unstable, buffeted by various collective movements, populism, religious movements, above all trade union movements, and crowd psychology grew up as a defense of the status quo, it was an attempt to say these people are mad, what they're doing is illegitimate. It was precisely because of the power of crowds, that the powerful were afraid of crowds, and thought to pathologize them, so there's clear politics to this anti-collectivism, a clear conservative, elitist politics.

**David Edmonds:** And the idea, from those who were worried about groups, is that you somehow become irrational in groups, that your self is somehow submerged into something bigger and scarier?

**Stephen Reicher:** Absolutely, I mean, the classic text in this regard is a book by Gustave le Bon written in 1895 called *The Crowd*, probably the most influential psychology text of all time. Moscovici, the French social psychologist, argues that it doesn't only theorize, it created the mass politics of the 20th and the 21st century, and le Bon's book was cited by Mussolini, by Goebbels; *Mein Kampf* has been called a poor person's *The Crowd*. He argues, when we get together in a crowd, we literally become submerged in the crowd, we lose our individuality. Because individuality is the basis of our judgments, of reason, we become subject to contagion, we can't resist any passing idea or emotion, and moreover, because we have lost our rational, conscious personality, we regress to something more primitive, something more brutal, the quote I always like, and roughly he says 'it will be noticed that the characteristics of crowds, their fickleness, their emotionality, their incapacity of reason, is reminiscent of inferior forms of humanity, savages and children', so there's a clear racism, 19th century racism, and ageism, and elsewhere there is sexism which inhabits that view. In brief, it's the mad mob view, it's a view that you see every time you see collective behavioral riots, it's the fact that these people aren't protesting about anything, they don't have any grievances, they don't had any reason, they are 'mad', so we've got nothing to ask about ourselves, and the inequalities of our society, we can just point at them and say it's just about them.

**David Edmonds:** Can I ask what we mean by 'group,' because you're suggesting there that the group might be the mob group, the riot, but presumably there's also the football crowd, what about the class I sit in, is that a group? What about the commuters in my carriage on the Northern line in London, do we constitute a group? What is a group?

**Stephen Reicher:** That's an excellent and a key question, because of a key distinction to be made, I think, between what one might call a physical group, which is simply a set of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time, and a psychological group, which is a set of people who consider themselves as having something in common, who have a 'we' feeling, if you like, we are whatever the group might be, whatever the category might be, we are West Ham fans, if you're that irrational.

**David Edmonds:** Careful...

**Stephen Reicher:** We are socialists, we are Catholics, whatever it might be, and the best way of illustrating that is through an experience which anybody, certainly who lives in London, will have had, which is you're in that carriage, that Underground or that Overground carriage, and you're part of a physical group, there are hundreds of you crammed in, but you feel no psychological commonality, you're psychologically individual, if anybody looks over your shoulder at your newspaper, you feel violated, if they brush up against you, it makes you shudder. But then, the train breaks down, and there's one of the countless excuses from that huge book of excuses, you know, the wrong type of leaves or snow, whatever it might be, and then things change, because then you get an emergent sense of commonality. We are aggrieved commuters, by contrast with the company, we form a category, and you see people begin to turn to each other, talk to each other, I mean even sometimes share their sandwiches, which, as British people, is really extreme, so you can see we all have that experience of the transition from the physical to a psychological group, where people have, if you like, that sense of 'we'.

**David Edmonds:** One fascinating aspect of that, it seems to me, is how quickly that 'we' identity can be formed.

**Stephen Reicher:** Well, not only can it form very quickly, but it also shows us that the boundaries of 'we' and 'they' are almost infinitely malleable and change as part of a social process, so one of the key aspects, I think, of contemporary group psychology is an insistence on what one might call the 'variable self', the fact that one can move from an individual self to a collective self very quickly, but also the fact that the boundaries of selfhood can change very quickly, as well.

People, for instance, who you thought of as an out group, I mean if you take a football match you might have a sense of 'they' are the fans of the other team, but if a player collapses on the pitch, or looks as if he might die, if there's a disaster, suddenly the 'we' encompasses the other group as well, and whereas you used to be antagonistic towards them, suddenly they become people like you, you see forms of solidarity, and forms of support, and forms of help, so it points to the fact that when we look at the human social behavior, the variable self, and the processes of the variable self, and the different groups, and categories, and solidarities we form, it's absolutely essential to understand, and one of

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the reasons why I'm so interested in studying groups, and crowds in particular, is that in crowds we see those processes up close, we see categories changing, we see people beginning to become enemies of those they used to trust, and becoming intimates with those they used to disparage.

**David Edmonds:** You see it, you say. What kind of methods do you use to identify these kinds of phenomena?

**Stephen Reicher:** There are many, psychologists, in particular, who define themselves by method. I see that as a sign of insecurity. Psychology desperately wants to be taken seriously as a science, we get more funding if we are a science, apart from anything else, and we think the sign of science lies in calling a room a laboratory, and only doing experiments, and I think that's very sad. First of all, because conceptually, I think you start from your question and from what sort of evidence you need to warrant your claims, and sometimes your claims are going to be qualitative, you go for qualitative data, sometimes they'll be quantitative and you go for quantitative data, so my approach has always been multi method, to start from the question and start from the phenomena.

**David Edmonds:** Give me an example.

**Stephen Reicher:** I can give you a negative example, because this was brought home to me, very early, when I looked at the literature on crowds, and there's a lot of work, very good experimental work, on the effects of anonymity on behavior, the assumption was that people are anonymous in crowds, they are submerged, so how does anonymity affect behavior, so you get people to become anonymous by putting hoods over their head, or doing things in the dark, and then you get them to give electric shocks to people, say obscene things about their parents, all sorts of weird and wonderful studies with very clear results, but there's just one problem. When you actually go to crowds, yes, they might seem anonymous from the outside, the police might see a sea of faces, but when you're inside a crowd, on the whole, you're there with people you know, you'll often see acquaintances you've seen at different demos, we're not necessarily anonymous, so however wonderful these studies are, they're not very useful if they don't speak to the nature of the phenomenon, so for me, the first point of any scientific enquiry is to map the phenomenon.

When I started off doing work on crowds, I found the most magnificent studies actually weren't in psychology, they were in social history, they were E. P. Thompson's wonderful accounts of food riots, they were Natalie Davis' wonderful accounts of religious riots, they weren't psychology, but they mapped the phenomenon, told us what a psychology must be able to explain, so I combine methods. Let me give you a much more concrete example relating to what we were just talking about, these aspects of solidarity. On the one hand, observational studies of a whole series of crowd events shows us that under certain conditions, often when the police treat the crowd as a homogenous danger, 'kettle'

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everybody, whether they were throwing stones or not, you see the emergence of a sense of shared identity amongst people who were previously disparate, and you see forms of solidarity amongst them, people start helping each other, so I was very interested in this idea of shared identity and helping, so we did some experimental studies with a colleague, Mark Levine in Exeter. We did a series of studies on categories and helping. Very simple study: You get people who are Manchester United fans, and you talk to them as Manchester United fans, and you say well, look, we are going to do a study in another building, and as they walk along to the other building, somebody runs along, falls over, hurts themselves, wearing either a Manchester United shirt, a Liverpool shirt or a red t-shirt, and they help the person in the Manchester United shirt, not the Liverpool shirt and not the red t-shirt.

Now, often people use that as a headline, but the really interesting thing about this study was a different condition where again, we take the same people, Manchester United fans, but this time we address them as football fans, we say we are doing research on football fans, they go to the other building, somebody runs along, falls over wearing a Manchester United shirt, a Liverpool shirt or a red t-shirt. This time, because they're in group identity is more extensive, it's a football fan, and Liverpool fans are now in group, rather than out group, they help the Manchester United fan, they help the Liverpool fan, and they don't help the person in the red t-shirt, so there you have nice convergent evidence which puts together the real world phenomenon with a controlled systematic investigation showing how varying the ways in which we define identities, varies the limits of solidarity.

**David Edmonds:** A lot of academic research can seem very esoteric, but I can see how this has very, very important practical policy implications; kettling, for example, which you mentioned, which is the practice of the police putting together a group of protesters in a small area, and not letting them out, not letting others in, is a way that the police use to control crowds, and you're suggesting that this might be an ineffective method, because it creates, what, a hostile identity amongst that group?

**Stephen Reicher:** One of the things we've been studying for many years is the escalation of violence, the problem with the classic psychology, which says all groups are dangerous, and which says even reasonable people can get carried away in the crowd, is it suggests, in particular when trouble starts in a crowd, that everybody might become involved, everybody is equally dangerous, and therefore leads to practices of intervention which clamp down on everyone.

Now, we argue that, first of all, when you have intergroup violence, it's almost impossible to explain it by just looking at one party to that violence, just looking at the crowd. We need to look at the intergroup interactions, the intergroup dynamics between crowd and police. Secondly, in a number of very different types of crowd events, student demonstrations, environmentalist disputes, and so on, you can see a common dynamic of escalation,

whereby you get an initially heterogeneous crowd, some want to do more confrontational things, most people don't, trouble starts, the police see them all as dangerous, clamp down on everyone. Then people who didn't previously see themselves as anti-police, being treated as the opposition, see themselves as oppositional, and therefore you see a shift and an escalation.

The real issue about crowd behaviour and crowd violence isn't why a few people who came to be violent are violent, that's a rather banal issue, it's why so many people who came not to be violent, become involved in those dynamics, those dynamics of escalation. Now, that's a tough message to get through, because of course, when there is trouble, the first thing any government wants to do is to admit that it, its policies, or its agencies might play a role in the creation of that conflict, that the police don't just manage and control violence, they might be a party to the creation and construction of violence. On the other hand, of course, actually it's a very practical form of theory, it begins to point to very clear forms of intervention, and different forms of policing, so on the basis of the work we've done, myself and my colleagues, and this work has been led by Clifford Stott, and also with John Drury who's at Sussex. We've talked about facilitative policing, policing which starts off by asking what are the groups in the crowd? What are their different identities and intentions, which ones can we facilitate, and if the police start from the question not 'what can we stop?' but 'what can we allow and how can we help people?', then you get a very different set of dynamics.

**David Edmonds:** And has it itself been tested? Does it work?

**Stephen Reicher:** Yes, it has been tested. The first time it was used was at the European Football Championships in Portugal in 2004. Interestingly in Portugal, there are two different police forces: one in one part of the country, and another in the Algarve. Now, Clifford used these principles, worked with the police, in the larger part of the country, there wasn't any trouble, in the Algarve, they used traditional policing, and they had two or three riots, so there's pretty good evidence.

But what's even more interesting is that if the police facilitate the larger crowd, then if there begins to be trouble, people in the crowd self-police. I'll give you a couple of examples of that, one reasonably banal, and I think one much more consequential. The banal one, then again, this is Clifford's work on the World Cup in 1998. England fans were seen as very dangerous; Scotland fans were seen as good fun, 'boisterous bonhomie' was the term that was used, which is a nice way of saying getting drunk and doing outrageous things, but with a smile on your face. Now, because the England fans were seen as so negative, and were challenged and came under attack, after a while, what you did if you were a fan, even if you didn't want trouble, was to look for the biggest and meanest person, and stand near them

in order to defend yourself. The dynamics led to those who cause trouble becoming more central, more prototypical, more influential.

Amongst the Scottish fans, if anybody started to fight, or started causing trouble, other fans would leap on them and say, 'no, we don't want to lose our reputation.' This wasn't the matter of the individuals, domestically, Scottish football is every bit as violent, if not more violent, it's much more those intergroup dynamics, that if you see a whole group as pariahs, treat them all as pariahs, you'll reap what you sow.

Now, one of the things that interested me greatly in recent times is whether we can take these dynamics of escalation, and apply them not in situations where people confront each other in huge numbers, but where you might have one member of a group interacting with a member of another group, it's an inter-individual interaction at one level, but they interact as members of groups, so we looked at the interactions between the police and various minorities, and the one which is most newsworthy at the moment were Muslim minorities. The site which became clearest was the airport, and what you would find was Muslims would come home because they saw themselves as fully Scottish, but they would be treated as oppositional, as other, there would be misrecognition, and in that misrecognition was something very, very painful. People were hurt, not because they didn't see themselves as Scottish, precisely because they did.

When you begin to treat all members of a group as potentially disloyal, if you subject them to special surveillance which tells them that they're in doubt, you begin to give more credibility to voices who might say 'the state is your enemy', and what's more, you might undermine their willingness to interact and to give information to the authorities. Paradoxically, that surveillance from the outside doesn't increase the amount of information you get, it decreases it because people aren't willing to talk to you, so I think these dynamics of escalation which you see incredibly clearly in crowds, talk to far more widespread and everyday phenomena in our society.

**David Edmonds:** We've mainly been talking about groups as a negative phenomena, but you see them as potentially very positive?

**Stephen Reicher:** One of the most important aspects of all my work is to say let's challenge this anti-collective pathologizing view of groups. There's a wonderful study of crowds in the French Revolution by a French historian, written in 1952, Lefebvre, where he says perhaps it's only in the crowd that people lose their petty day-to-day concern, and act as the subjects of history. In other words, they express collective understandings, they express group ideologies, but there's a wider point. It goes back to actually my very first lectures in social psychology, which were by Henri Tajfel, who was a Polish Jew who during the Second World War was interned as a French prisoner of war, but always had the shadow of being discovered as a Jew, and dying as a result, and you might think that for someone in that

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situation, he would subscribe to this notion that groups are terrible things, that after all it's through group processes that Nazis killed Jews.

Henri indeed developed Social Identity Theory, which many people see as a theory of discrimination between groups. The argument is that if you identify yourself as a member of a group, and you want to give meaning to that identity, it can only be done in comparison with other groups, who we are only makes sense in comparison to who you are, and if we assume that people want to define their group positively, they can only do so by defining other groups negatively, so you have this process of differentiation where we define ourselves as better than you. Many people use that to say, well here's yet another theory of how groups make you biased, and make you act negatively. But they miss the point, because for Henri that was a starting point, he said there might be this psychological dynamic whereby we want our groups to be positive, but we live in a real world where there is inequality, where whether you like it or not, you're ascribed to groups which are negatively defined, you are defined as black in a racist world, as a woman in a sexist world, as a Jew in an anti-Semitic world, as gay in a homophobic world.

So the interesting question is, given that psychological dynamic, how does it play out in real world situations, under what conditions do we succumb to this inequality, and under what conditions do we challenge it? And Henri's argument was that turns into a question of when do we act as individuals trying to work within the system, and survive and thrive despite our group membership, and when do we band together, in terms of our group membership, to challenge that inequality. So it might be that group processes lead to racism, but it's through group processes, it's through the civil rights movement, that you challenge racism. It is through groups that the powerless gain the power to challenge their inequality, so the question of change, and the question of creating a more equal world is fundamentally a question of how and when do people act together in to challenging that, and if you develop a whole ethos which says that groups are bad for you, in effect what you're doing is you're warning people off the very resource they have to change things.

**David Edmonds:** But also, I guess at the root of this is a question about what we are, I mean whether we are individuals, or whether we are best understood as part of some kind of collective.

**Stephen Reicher:** I do think that's an absolutely critical question, and what classic psychology tell us is that agency is a function of the sovereign individual, that the loan individual with their personal values, and their personal norms, acts in meaningful and rational ways, and the group somehow subverts that agency, it takes that agency away, what Le Bon is saying is you don't only lose morality, and you don't only lose control, you lose agency. In the crowd you can no longer think for yourself, and you're blown like a leaf in the wind by any passing idea or emotion, and I think work on crowds shows precisely the

opposite because when you see yourself as a member of a group, first of all, that provides, if you like, a scaffold for making sense of the world, for saying what counts, for understanding your relations to others, the group isn't something which takes away an understanding of the world, it's something which positions you from which you can understand your world and act in your world, but it's more than that, because the other thing the crowd does, of course, is it brings you together to empower you to act together to enact your understanding, and let me give you what, for me, was a very nice example of that.

I teach a final year seminar on crowds, and every year, I say to students, for reasons we've been discussing, go out and experience some sort of crowd, understand the phenomenon before we start looking at the explanations of it in psychology. One year, the students went away, and they came back and they were ecstatic in the next seminar, which is relatively rare – students are not normally that ecstatic in my seminars, and I said, 'well, tell me what happened' and they said, 'well, we went to a Make Poverty History demo', it was the year of the G8 in Scotland, and they said 'it was fantastic, for the first time in our lives, we were telling governments what to do, rather than governments telling us what to do', so the passion of crowds was not a passion that was counter-posed to reason, it was a passion which derived precisely from the fact that for the first time in their lives, they saw themselves as agents, not pawns, as the agents who make history, and that's why Lefebvre's comment, perhaps only in the crowd we become subjects of history, is so important and so profound for understanding the collective scaffolding of human agency.

**David Edmonds:** And if we accept that groups can be agents for change, obviously they can be, they can be forces for good and they can be forces for evil, does that mean you have to take a normative stance as a social scientist, to adjudicate between these different kinds of groups?

**Stephen Reicher:** What I certainly think you have to do is to be aware of those normative issues, and make a clear distinction between normative and analytic issues. One of the questions people would always ask me, when I made arguments like this, would be, 'Well, what about Nuremberg rallies?', and my response would be on the one hand, I suspect that for the individuals involved, they were exhilarating and empowering, and they might even have been good for their individual health. As for the consequences of those actions, then of course they would be extremely bad for the health of everybody else, but where, if we are concerned about the consequences of these rallies, does the problem lie?

Now, on the whole, the classic approach is to say, well it lies in the inherent psychology of the group, that's why they go out and they murder and destroy, and my argument would be no, the problem lies in the specific norms and values of those groups. The problem isn't group psychology, it is, if you like, at the ideological and the political level, and what we mustn't do is confuse those two levels, and the real problem of much classic psychology is it

takes a political preference, and it turns it into a cognitive hierarchy. In other words, it's a political preference for individualism is turned into the claim that the individual is somehow cognitively more able and superior to the group, and that's what I want to contest.

**David Edmonds:** Steve Reicher, thank you very much.

**Stephen Reicher:** Thank you.