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Crowds, context and identity: Dynamic categorization processes in the 'poll tax riot'

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ABSTRACT

Reicher has recently developed the social identity model of crowd behaviour based on self-categorization theory (SCT). This model begins to tackle the thorny theoretical problems posed by the dynamic nature of crowd action (Reicher, 1996b). The present paper describes an ethnographic study of a crowd event in which there were changes in the inter-group relationships over time. It is suggested that the laboratory evidence in support of SCT is complemented by ethnographic research of this type. By exploring situations in which definitions of context and/or categories are not purposefully manipulated, we can demonstrate the explanatory power of a dynamic and interactive approach to social categorization.

KEY WORDS

crowds ▪ ethnography ▪ inter-group behaviour ▪ self-categorization ▪ social identity

Introduction

The crowd is a dynamic phenomenon, both in the sense that it is associated with social change and in the fact that participants in crowd events may have their ideas and ideologies transformed through such participation (Drury & Reicher, in press; Green, 1990; Mann, 1973; Thompson, 1991). The examples of the French Revolution of 1789, the American civil rights movement of the 1960s and the 'Velvet' revolutions in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s are vivid illustrations (e.g. Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Boesel et al., 1971; McAdam, 1989; Nye, 1975).

Reicher (1984, 1987, 1996a, 1996b, 1997) argues that a greater understanding of psychological processes in crowd events can help us to tackle the key problem of social theory: that human activity can operate as both a product and a producer of social relations (Asch, 1952; Giddens, 1979). Grasping the richness of crowd processes, then, has implications beyond the particular questions motivating crowd psychology.

The elaborated social identity model of the crowd (Drury & Reicher, in press; Reicher, 1984, 1987, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Stott & Reicher, 1998a) goes some way towards offering a social psychological explanation of this key question, and apparent paradox, in social theory. The model suggests that members of a crowd act in terms of shared social identity. The defining dimensions of this identity determine both the normative limits of action (what people do) and the extent of participation (who joins in). Thus, the model succeeds where irrationalist accounts (e.g. Colman, 1991; Diener, 1980; Le Bon, 1895/1947; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1983) fail in explaining both the variety and the normative dimensions of crowd action.

The social identity model is based upon self-categorization theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994). The premise of SCT is that collective behaviour and social influence are only possible on the basis of shared self-categorization. This self-categorization emerges from a set of comparative judgements within a particular social context. Categorization and context are linked to the extent that where context changes so too does self-definition. In this way, SCT offers an interactionist account of the creative–created nature of human activity. This becomes clearer when SCT is compared with other possible accounts of the categorization process.

SCT versus social cognition accounts of social categorization

In much of their published research over the last ten years, SCT researchers have been engaging with the claims of the dominant social cognition account

over the nature of social categorization (Oakes, 1996). In the social cognition account, the metaphor of the subject is that of the 'cognitive miser', seeking short cuts in situations of cognitive 'load' (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Fiske & Taylor, 1991) where social categories are employed to simplify complex social information (e.g. Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987; McRae et al., 1994; Taylor, 1981a, 1981b). Instead of perceiving people veridically as individuals, in terms of their inherent attributes, perceivers are said to impose social schemas or categories upon them. The result is understood to be a simplified and hence distorted form of person perception.

By contrast, SCT shifts the emphasis away from the power of cognition to impose categories on the role of contexts to afford them in interaction with the perceivers' background theories, goals and beliefs. Since social groups are irreducible to their individual members, perceiving others in terms of their group membership can have more adequacy than grasping them merely as individuals (Tajfel, 1978). SCT argues that categorization is the psychological basis from which we are able to engage with these group level social relations (Oakes et al., 1991, 1994; Turner & Oakes, 1997; Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994). Thus, in the SCT account, the perception of people in terms of social categories is argued to be a function of our need to form a relationship with social reality rather than a misleading distortion.

More specifically, the social cognition account conceptualizes categories as relatively fixed schematic representations pre-existing social interaction. By contrast, SCT proposes that categories reflect a fluid process of judgement (drawing upon background knowledge and theories) that best 'fit' a set of relative differences and similarities within a specific frame of reference (referred to as the 'meta contrast ratio'). By changing the comparative context, or frame of reference, one can observe corresponding changes in the form and content of categorizations of self and other. Evidence to support SCT's suggestion of the flexible relationship between context and categorization is provided, for example, by a study of stereotypes of Americans, Iraqis and Australians during the Gulf War. Changes in perceivers' frames of reference led to changes in the nature and importance of particular trait-terms associated with particular social categories. Since 'cognitive load' was constant across the different conditions, this study undermines the social cognition account (Haslam et al., 1992).

SCT proposes that categories function to define a perceiver's place within a dynamic social context. They arise from a comparative context which involves the perceiver as an interactive component. The perceiver's emergent identity then functions to provide a psychological perspective from which to represent the relevant aspects of a particular social context and

governs their collective actions within it (Haslam et al., 1998; Turner & Oakes, 1997; Turner et al., 1994). Thus, 'far from reducing or impoverishing perceptual experience, categorization enriches and expands it' (Oakes, 1996: 106).

The inter-group dynamics of categorization

Ironically, some researchers read SCT as positing a one-sided cognitivist account of the categorization process. Such readings suggest that SCT defines categories essentially as in-the-head cognitive – and hence individual – entities. For example, Rapley (1998: 327) argues that SCT proposes a model of social categories as 'individual, deterministic, cognitive attributes'. Thus, SCT is sometimes seen as little different from the social cognition account which Turner and his co-workers have set out to oppose.

Arguably, the space for such a misreading to arise lies in part in the empirical methods used to examine the interactional processes predicted by SCT. What can be witnessed in the literature is an almost exclusive reliance by SCT researchers on the experimental method. The experimental situation, in which subjects have definitions of context effectively created for them, may well give a good imitation of much of everyday life in which people are not necessarily arguing or acting to change their social context. Because of its emphasis on control, however, it is difficult to explore situations where conflict and change *are* occurring within the experimental paradigm.

Thus, while it has demonstrated clearly and powerfully the role of context in producing particular forms of subjectivity, the experimental approach is limited in its ability to demonstrate the pathway from subjectivity to context. In other words, experimental research has been crucial in generating and supporting many of the predictions of SCT; yet those aspects which make it truly interactionist – the role of resistance and social action in categorization – remain relatively under-explored. This in turn, we suggest, is due to the relative absence of methodological approaches capable of tracking the ongoing dynamics of context and categorization over time.

Outside the laboratory, definitions of context are not always clearly defined but are potentially an active site of struggle. This is particularly the case in crowd events, where disagreement and attempts to change the context may be their whole raison d'etre (Fine & Millar, 1985; Reddy, 1977; Thompson, 1991; Tilly et al., 1975). Because crowd action can be understood as the rational acting out of social categories (Reicher, 1984, 1987, 1996a), observing changes during a crowd event provides the opportunity to explore the dynamic nature of social categories themselves. In other words, a systematic examination of crowd events offers a fertile area in which not only to validate

Reicher's social identity model of crowd behaviour but also to demonstrate the importance of a dynamic reading of SCT.

The present study

The rationale of the present paper is to examine the dynamics of categorization during a changing crowd event. The paper describes an ethnographic study of the 'poll tax riot' in which there was a development from peaceful protest to 'violent' confrontation with the police among large sections of the crowd.

In line with SCT, it is expected that subjects' self-categorizations will change, in both form and content, where their understanding of their social context changes. In addition, the study aims to demonstrate the role of the subjects' resistance and social action in this process of change. In doing so, the analysis is intended to complement the laboratory work of SCT and provide a corrective to cognitivist and individualistic readings of the theory.

Methods

Ethnography as a data-gathering approach

Milgram and Toch (1969) recommend the method of participant observation, or ethnography, as the ideal approach for studying crowd events. Ethnography is supremely opportunistic, being adaptive to possible changes in its research topic and setting, open to the unexpected and allowing the gathering of a wide variety of data (Burgess, 1982; Green, 1993; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Whyte, 1984), including soundtrack recordings, documents and interviews – both contemporaneous and post hoc. Ethnography, more than any other approach, therefore offers the flexibility necessary to track the processes underlying collective behaviour during unpredictable events such as demonstrations, riots and other crowd episodes.

One of the advantages of the ethnographic approach is that it is designed precisely for accessing subjects' own concepts and categories, and contrasts with the usual design of the laboratory experiment in which not only the range of categorizations but also their form (e.g. trait-like as opposed to relational or verb-based) is restricted by the experimenter. As a framework, it enables – and thus includes the advantages of – the semi-structured interview (flexibility, probing, etc.), but has the added benefit of allowing the collection of different sources of contemporaneous as well as post hoc data.

There were three criteria for choosing a crowd event for ethnographic

research on social categorization processes. First, the event had to be one at which the researcher could participate as a fellow crowd member while at the same time being able to gather a certain amount of data. Second, given the stipulations of Reicher's (1996b, 1997) model of inter-group dynamics, the event had to be one where there was a certain amount of conflict between crowd members and others (this is a judgement that could only be made post hoc, of course). Third, the movement of which the crowd event was a part had to be open enough for the researchers to be able to approach participants of both sides afterwards to carry out (further) interviews.

The 1990 Trafalgar Square poll tax demonstration and riot was the event chosen. One of the researchers participated in the demonstration, and was present amongst the crowd during much of the riot. During this time, he managed to take notes and speak to a number of other participants. Subsequently, the researchers were able to collect interview data (with both demonstrators and police), video recordings and other material. A full list of data sources is given in the Appendix.

Analytic approach

The analytic approach comprises two parts. In the first place, a consensual account of the event was constructed, using different sources (researcher observations, video recordings, and comments from demonstrators, police and press) (see Denzin, 1989). Consensus is operationalized in terms of agreement between different sources (demonstrators on the one hand and police or press on the other) or between statements by any of these sources and photographs or videos. Where accounts diverge or only one source makes a claim in relation to an event involving both campaign participants and others, references are given. This consensual account both guides the reader and serves to identify some of the patterns of behaviour that need to be explained in the analysis proper.

In the second place, participants' accounts are analysed using principles broadly within the tradition of thematic analysis (Kellehear, 1993), as in the studies by Reicher (1984, 1987, 1996a) and Stott & Reicher (1998a, 1998b). The analysis concerns participants' perceptions in relation to this consensual evidence. There are well-aired objections to taking participants' accounts as evidence of participant understandings, particularly concerning crowd events involving conflictual norms (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1989); but, to the extent that an analysis of such accounts is able to provide an adequate explanation of the contours of the crowd event itself (as agreed by different sides and different sources), then it provides explanatory power and, for that alone, would seem justified.

The analysis consists of an organization of the material according to questions derived from the recent work on the social identity model (Reicher, 1984, 1987). Thus, material was read to identify how crowd participants defined themselves and their social worlds at different times during the crowd event: what was the content of collective identity; who counted as 'ingroup' and who 'outgroup'; and what actions were understood as legitimate and possible.

The 1990 poll tax riot: an account of the event

Background

The community charge or 'poll tax' was a flat-rate local taxation scheme intended by the Conservative government to replace rates, which were based on property values. During 1989 and early 1990, a nation-wide movement developed against the tax which culminated in a national demonstration on Saturday 31 March 1990 (Burns, 1992).

Phase 1 – assembly and march to Parliament Street

On the morning of the demonstration, large numbers of demonstrators assembled in Kennington Park. Estimates by the organizers place the numbers attending the demonstration at as high as 250,000; official police estimates place numbers in the park at 25,000 rising to a maximum of 29,700 in Trafalgar Square. Our own estimate, based on video data, accepting police estimates that when full Trafalgar Square holds 70,000 people, places the numbers on the demonstration at, at least, 75,000 people and possibly approaching the numbers suggested by the organizers.

According to eyewitnesses, at around 12.30 p.m. a vote was taken in the park, via a public address system and a show of hands, through which the crowd overwhelmingly supported a motion calling for a non-violent demonstration. The march began to move from the park at approximately 1.00 p.m. while small groups within the demonstration chanted anti-tax and anti-government slogans. At approximately 2.10 p.m., the front of the demonstration reached Parliament Street (see Figure 1). Parliament Street and Whitehall were divided down the centre of the road with a double row of interlinked metal barriers restricting the demonstrators to the east carriageway. The front of the demonstration moved north up Whitehall into the rallying point in Trafalgar Square.

During this phase of the event, the police account mentions only 'minor' incidents of conflict, such as small groups of demonstrators who were

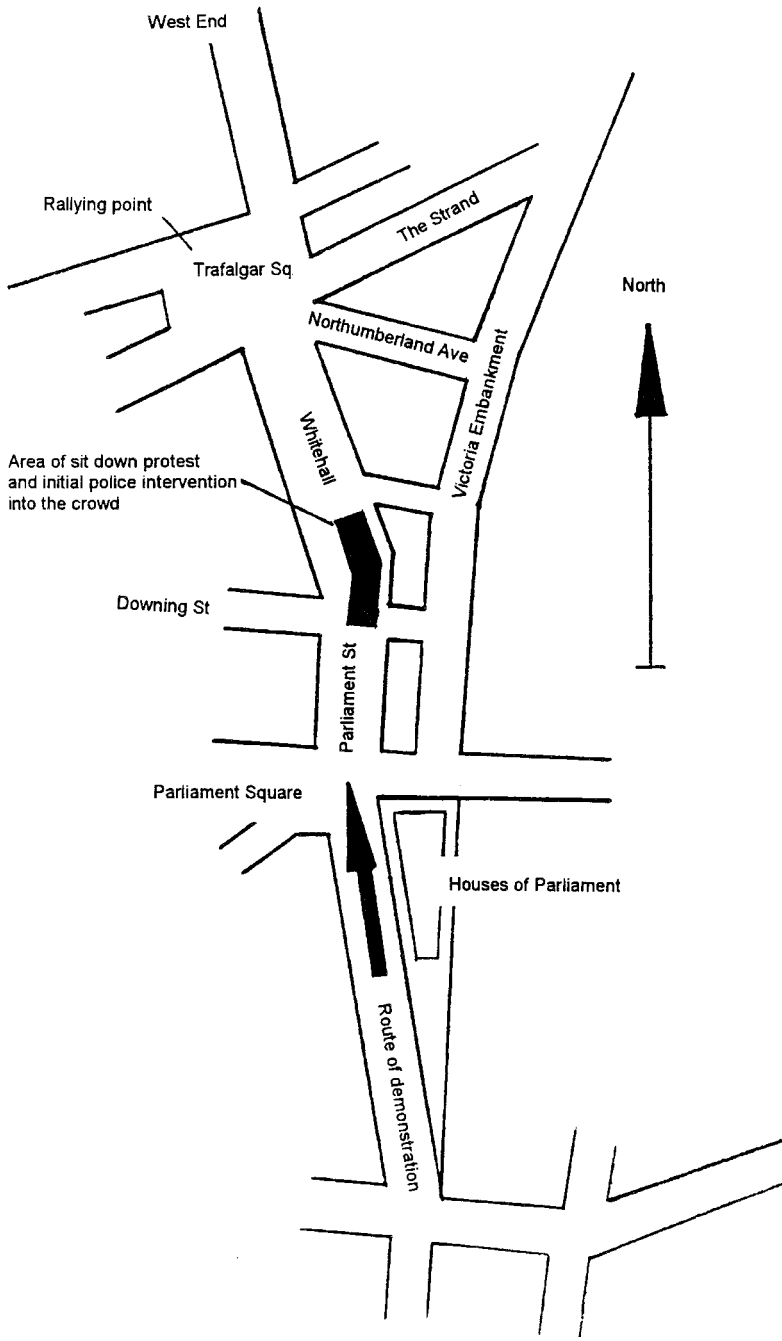

Figure 1 Plan showing the route of the latter stages of the demonstration indicating the area of sit down protest and initial police intervention

reluctant to leave the park, and the throwing of a missile at 1.30 p.m., which was followed by the arrest of several demonstrators. Other accounts indicate that this early part of the demonstration was overwhelmingly non-violent and good-humoured.

Phase 2 – initial collective conflicts in Whitehall

As demonstrators passed Downing Street, an increasing number began to stop and congregate on the east carriageway and an adjacent area of grass. By approximately 2.30 p.m., the number of stationary demonstrators in this area was so great it restricted the flow of those wishing to continue along the route of the demonstration and congestion began to develop. According to the police, verbal abuse and missiles, including two smoke bombs, were thrown at them from the crowd.

At approximately 2.45 p.m., a small number of the demonstrators congregating opposite Downing Street began to pull apart the double row of metal barriers dividing the carriageway. Following this, roughly 30 police reinforcements were deployed on to the west carriageway opposite Downing Street and a small number of arrests were made. At around this time, approximately 400 demonstrators sat down on the east carriageway opposite Downing Street. The area remained heavily congested but relatively peaceful.

At approximately 3.10 p.m., a number of officers formed a cordon at the junction of Parliament Street and Parliament Square and diverted the remaining demonstrators via Victoria Embankment. Meanwhile, police and stewards made repeated requests to those sitting down in Whitehall to move. For some 10 minutes the group remained sitting but then stood up and began to move towards Trafalgar Square.

Up to 100 police officers in standard uniform were then deployed and entered the crowd opposite Downing Street. A number of placards were thrown at these officers, scuffles broke out and arrests were made. The police deployed in the crowd then began to push demonstrators north towards Trafalgar Square. It was at this point that large numbers of demonstrators on the carriageway first began to collectively resist the action of the police. The norms of the crowd in this area changed from chanting anti-poll tax slogans to include collective pushing of the police line; the chanting of anti-police slogans; individual verbal abuse directed at officers; collectively attempting to prevent arrests; and throwing light missiles at the police.

Following this change in crowd norms, mounted police were deployed at the rear of the crowd and formed a cordon across Whitehall. Large numbers of demonstrators turned to face this cordon and began to boo and

chant further anti-police slogans. Large numbers of police officers on foot then ran into the crowd and widespread fighting between demonstrators and the police broke out.

Mounted officers were then deployed into the crowd, at times riding at speed into areas crowded with demonstrators. Missiles including bricks and large lumps of masonry were thrown from sections of the crowd at the mounted officers. Police responded by deploying officers in 'protective clothing'[1] who, by baton-charging into the crowd, forced the remaining demonstrators north towards Trafalgar Square.

Phase 3 – the escalation of collective conflict in Trafalgar Square

In Trafalgar Square, collective conflict occurred at a number of different points, which combined at approximately 4.30 p.m. in the south-east corner of the Square. By 4.00 p.m., demonstrators, diverted earlier at Parliament Street, were now arriving from Northumberland Avenue, and adding to the congestion in the south-east corner of Trafalgar Square. Police officers in standard uniform formed a cordon across Northumberland Avenue, blocking access to the Square. At approximately 4.20 p.m., scuffles between demonstrators and officers forming the cordon occurred and an arrest was made. Immediately following the arrest, demonstrators pushed through the cordon and entered the Square. The police withdrew south into Whitehall.

At approximately the same time, a group of some 30 police officers in standard uniform forming a cordon in Whitehall just to the south of Trafalgar Square were confronted by a group of approximately 100 demonstrators. The officers withdrew and faced the group with truncheons drawn. The group then ran into the police line attacking officers with punches, kicks and weapons. The police hit back with truncheons and withdrew. Large numbers of demonstrators, still arriving at the north end of Whitehall, stood passively on the pavements to each side of the conflict. Officers in 'protective clothing' arrived and baton-charged both demonstrators directly involved in physical conflict with the police and those standing to the side. Scuffles broke out and a number of arrests were made; injuries were sustained by both demonstrators and police. By approximately 4.30 p.m., the police had cleared Whitehall of demonstrators and formed a cordon across the south entrance to the Square.

At approximately 4.30 p.m., police transit vans forming a cordon in the Strand drove, at some 30–40 m.p.h., into the densely crowded south-east corner of Trafalgar Square. Also at around this time, a British Transport Police car drove into the crowd. About 200 demonstrators used missiles including bottles, bricks, placards, plastic road cones and scaffolding to

attack the vehicles which sustained heavy damage. The car turned and drove north at high speed out of the Square; the vans forced their way south towards the police cordon in Whitehall. Officers in 'protective clothing' baton-charged into Trafalgar Square, from Whitehall, towards the vans and dispersed those demonstrators attacking them.

Officers in 'protective clothing' then began a series of baton-charges into the south-east corner of the Square. This area contained some 3000–4000 demonstrators who faced the police chanting anti-poll tax slogans. Demonstrators in the immediate vicinity of the police scattered in the face of the charges. Then, most of those demonstrators in the south-east corner, by now numbering some 2000, attacked officers with missiles and forced them to withdraw. This pattern of activity continued for some time. Many of those demonstrators within Trafalgar Square cheered and chanted anti-poll tax slogans as attacks upon the police took place. During this period, an off-licence in the south-east corner of the Square was looted.

At approximately 4.50 p.m., mounted officers rode, at gallop, from Whitehall through the crowd in the east of the Square. The officers then turned and rode back through the crowd into Whitehall, at one point riding over a female demonstrator. Shortly afterwards, smoke appeared from portacabins and the South African Embassy in the south-east corner of the Square.

Officers in 'protective clothing' once again charged into the south-east corner. Demonstrators from this area were forced north into the crowded areas in the north and east of the Square. By approximately 5.30 p.m., the police had cleared the south of the Square and pushed the remaining demonstrators into the West End where widescale looting and damage to property took place.

Issues of significance

Despite some disparities in the descriptions by the police and those involved in the demonstration, it is clear that collective conflict, involving large numbers of demonstrators, began *after* initial police interventions. Moreover, it is clear that collective conflict was limited to attacks against the police until the later stages of the event. The central issues here then revolve around the question of how it was that a demonstration that explicitly rejected conflict and contained little or no conflict during its early stages developed into such widespread 'public disorder' involving anything up to 5000 people. In addition, why was it that conflict developed when and where it did? Once it had developed, why was it that the police were the object of hostility from the crowd? Moreover, why was it that those engaged in conflict engendered

such widespread support among those within the crowd? If, as Reicher (1984, 1987, 1996a, 1996b, 1997) following SCT argues, collective action is underpinned by self-categorization processes, then, to address these issues, we must turn to questions concerning the categorization processes at work during the demonstration. We must ask what categories participants used to understand themselves and those around them, and whether these categories changed in both form and content during the different stages of this event.

Analysis

The following section of the analysis is divided into five sub-sections reflecting participants' perceptions at different stages in the event: (1) crowd participants' definitions of their own action during the early stage of the demonstration; (2) police definitions of this same action; (3) crowd participants' definitions of the police intervention; (4) crowd participants' conceptions of the legitimacy of conflictual action after the police intervention; and, finally, (5) crowd participants' conceptions of the possibility of conflictual action after the police intervention.

For each substantive claim about participants' perceptions discussed below, a broad indication is given of the degree of consensus found in the data. Each presented extract is that which was considered to best illustrate the major themes identified in the thematic analysis.

Participants' perceptions of a peaceful crowd

All of the participants we spoke to defined the demonstration during its early stages as a means for a variety of diverse groups and individuals to legitimately express their collective opposition to an unjust tax.

> *What united all these different people?*
> Thinking the poll tax was really unfair. There was a feeling of, you know, you were quite justified to be there, which you don't always get on a lot of demonstrations. You know, this is going to be a good day out. I think the combination of the single issue and this feeling that you were doing the right thing.
>
> (Interview; R)

While accepting a collective relationship to the issue of the tax, some participants drew a distinction between themselves and 'extremist' factions who they understood to be associated with conflictual action. However, all those

interviewed were explicit about the extent to which everyone on the demonstration during this early stage shared a norm of non-violence.

> The mood was confident but not aggressive. A vote was taken as a statement of intent that demonstrators wanted a peaceful march. It looked as though every hand in the park was raised.
>
> (Participant account; D)

When in Whitehall, the first author interviewed some of the participants in the area. While some of them indicated their deliberate intention of standing to protest outside the home of the Prime Minister, others said they perceived the heavy congestion as a product of the large numbers on the demonstration filling the route beyond its capacity. In the following extract, recorded in Whitehall at the time, a participant indicates how she was standing in this area simply because she was unable to continue on account of the sheer density of people.

> *Why aren't you walking up to Trafalgar Square?*
> Well as far as I understand it because Trafalgar Square is full.
>
> (Field notes)

We have seen from the consensual account that, as the congestion intensified, there were some isolated incidents of missile throwing and abuse directed towards the police. In addition, a sit down protest took place. However, participants who were in the area, while accepting that missiles were thrown, stressed the legitimate and non-violent nature of the majority of protesters' behaviour. This suggests that they perceived the conflictual activity of a minority as relatively trivial and not posing any threat to the level of order on the demonstration as a whole.

> The only slight confrontation was when I got to Downing Street where people had just started doing a sit down protest. Once every 10 minutes, like, an empty beer can would like clatter and, in fact, reach the pavement sort of 10 feet in front of the police. There was no real threat to public order or anything like that.
>
> (Participant account; A)

In sum, therefore, crowd members defined themselves in terms of action – protest against the poll tax – and distinguished themselves from the minority in the crowd whose actions were not peaceful. The context, then, was understood as one in which peaceful protest against the illegitimate poll tax was consensually legitimate.

Police perceptions of a dangerous crowd

In contrast to crowd participants' perceptions, police officers we spoke to saw these isolated incidents of conflict, combined with the sit down protest, as a threat to public order. The account of a senior officer in Whitehall at the time reflects a perception of crowd processes leading to a potential for disorder among the majority of demonstrators standing opposite Downing Street just prior to police intervention.

> *Did you think that there was something in the nature of the crowd that made people more susceptible to this minority trying to influence people?*
> I don't know, it's always hard. I think there were 2000 people causing us problems. Some of those, I am sure, the vast majority were good law abiding people under normal circumstances. But, when you are in a group like that, I am sure that, the fever of the cause, the fever of the day, the throwing and everything else, they get locked together and think 'oh we are part of this'. Something disengages in their brain. I am not a medical man or an expert in crowd behaviour, but something goes and they become part of the crowd.
>
> (Interview; Z)

Officers describing the event also emphasized the volatility of the crowd. Under the provisions of the 1986 Public Order Act, the legislation in force at the time of this event, all demonstrations must agree their route with the police beforehand. The police were concerned to remain in control of the crowd at all times and to limit crowd action to that which had been agreed. Deviations from the agreed route were seen as incipient disorder. Thus, the spontaneous nature of the sit down protest, the initial refusal of those sitting down to move on, and some minor incidents of conflict may have led the police to understand the situation not only as conflictual, but also as carrying the potential for more widespread disorder. Consequently, the police would have been predisposed to act in order to prevent the escalation of a relatively minor conflict into one with very serious consequences, possibly even the destruction of important government offices. A senior police officer explains the potential for escalation in terms of psychological processes assumed to be operating within crowds.

> *Going back to this question of a problem there, at what point then, what sort of prompted your decision to send people in to divide the crowd?*

> My task was to keep Downing Street free and, when the first set of barriers went and there was still this group in the crowd encouraging others to go forward and take on the police lines, I thought there is no way we are going to break line, there was no way I was going to let that line be broken and people get to the gates of Downing Street with the possible consequences had they got over. I considered that I couldn't leave them there because I thought all the time that large group was there they would go for Downing Street. That must have been their ultimate intention.
>
> *You saw that was what they were doing it for?*
> Yes I thought that is what they were aiming for, let's get to Downing Street. Then I thought to myself how do I disperse this group?
>
> (Interview; Z)

As the above statement implies, it is not simply that the police perceived the crowd in the immediate area as a uniform danger, but rather that these perceptions manifested themselves in terms of police *action* towards crowd members. Having perceived the potential for serious disorder, the police chose to act against the crowd. Although the police were aware that only a minority were engaging in conflict, as the consensual account demonstrates, the police forcefully pushed the crowd as a *whole* north towards Trafalgar Square.

In terms of tactics, then, the police treated the crowd as a single unit, regardless of any individuals' prior activities or intentions. Thus, the small number of demonstrators actively engaged in conflict and those who distanced themselves from it were equally likely to be subjected to aggressive policing activity. In other words, the police had the ability to *impose* their perceptions of a uniformly dangerous crowd upon crowd members through the use of indiscriminate coercive force. The categorization of the context as one of danger, and the identity of the police as the upholders of public order, therefore entailed consequences for the subsequent action of the police.

Participants' perceptions of illegitimate police intervention

Since sections of the crowd saw themselves to be acting legitimately, it follows that they should see no legitimate reason for the police intervention. Indeed, while participants we spoke to described the action of the police during this time in a number of different ways, all of these differing descriptions stress its illegitimate nature. For example, some described the intervention as unwarranted.

> The police seemed to have completely over-reacted. There was nothing to warrant that kind of behaviour.
>
> (Participant account; Pt)

All of our participant accounts invariably stress the indiscriminate and violent behaviour of the police once they had entered the crowd.

> They were just hitting everybody and just being so violent towards everybody. I think the thing that struck me most was that there were people who weren't there for trouble, who were just there for the cause, getting beaten.
>
> (Participant account; V)

Some participants also stressed the extent to which such action in a crowded area posed a threat to demonstrators' safety; police actions were seen as life threatening. This is illustrated in the following from a crowd participant shouting at the police during a police push.

> We remember Hillsborough.[2] There is no fucking room. You are crushing people. We are trying to move, so stop pushing.
>
> (Field notes)

Hence, to summarize the analysis so far, we can identify a pattern of interaction whereby the action of crowd members led to identity-based action on the part of the police which in turn fed directly into a change in the definition of context for crowd participants.

Changes in participants' accounts of conflictual action

When describing incidents following the police intervention, our participants shifted their position not only in relationship to the police but also regarding conflict and those engaged in it. Prior to the intervention, participants portrayed conflict as anti-normative. In the extract below, the participant describes the incidents of conflict he witnessed subsequent to intervention as acceptable in the face of the perceived illegitimate behaviour of the police.

> *What did you think of those demonstrators?*
> I think they were very courageous taking the police on. They were angry. I mean the poll tax [demonstration] changed my mind about what I think about violence against the police. I felt like the police were being complete bastards.

Did you think the violence was justified?
Oh yes.

(Interview; L)

As if to emphasize its legitimate nature, conflict with the police subsequent to their intervention was described by our participants not as 'violence', but as a form of defensive action for the crowd as a whole to resist what were seen as unjustified and indiscriminately violent police actions. In other words, 'violence' came to be seen as a normative means of preventing further illegitimate police action.

> There were loads of people standing around that weren't involved in defending themselves. Every time something happened this enormous roar would go up from the crowd. So you had a group of people that were actively involved and then you had this mass of people who were not involved but were clearly supporting what was going on.
>
> (Participant account; P)

As the above quote indicates, even demonstrators who were not directly involved in conflict were understood as condoning it. Indeed, our participants describe a crowd no longer united in opposition simply to an unjust tax but now also to the actions of the police.

> *How could you tell that the crowd were united?*
> When we were faced by the police all the way through people were shouting 'you bastards'. The whole crowd was with each other. Everyone was outraged and were together in a certain feeling and together in what they did. The whole crowd seemed to have the same general feeling.
>
> (Interview; K)

Thus, the analysis suggests that, subsequent to the change in context created by the identity-based actions of the police, crowd members' definitions of their own identity changed. Whereas conflict was initially seen as anti-normative, subsequent to the police intervention, it was seen as both legitimate and normative for the crowd as a whole. What seems crucial here is that, as context changed, so too did the prototypicality of the normative dimension defining the social identity of participants.

Changes in power relations between crowd participants and police

Any redefinition of the self-categorization of demonstrators along the lines suggested by the analysis would also have been tied to a change in the power relationships between crowd participants and the police. Changes in the number perceiving conflict with the police as proper social action changed the numbers willing to engage in action to repulse the police's use of coercive force. Those willing to defend themselves would have felt supported in their action by others since everyone else was perceived as similar to self and, hence, to feel the same way. Moreover, the consensus among the new group would validate participants' views of the illegitimate nature of police action so reinforcing any potentiality to action. In the following extract, a participant describes feelings of empowerment which in turn are linked to the redefined boundaries of group membership and perceptions of legitimate social action.

> The crowd went forward, because there was so many people and there was quite a strong feeling of power being in such a big group and like I said I felt I had the right to be there.
>
> (Participant account; Tm)

As we have seen in the consensual account, participants in the immediate area of police intervention did begin to collectively resist the police attempts to disperse the crowd. Such collective conflictual action on the part of demonstrators would then have confirmed initial police fears of a uniformly hostile crowd. Such crowd action would therefore have engaged a dynamic of escalation whereby the police adopted riot tactics, so increasing the scale and intensity of intervention. Once again, the talk of the senior officer involved in the policing of the event suggests evidence for such a dynamic.

> *So the decision to move the crowd towards Trafalgar Square. Would you normally move it with people on foot?*
> It was, I didn't use the horses immediately or anybody kitted up with helmets and overalls, what I did call in was a team of 20 officers so we could actually move those troublemakers out of the way and hopefully the rest of the march we could then release . . . They tried to do that but came under a real hail of everything and it was clear that we couldn't actually deal with it with that unit. Other officers were called and they turned up in carriers or on foot or whatever and they were

> put in to try and push that crowd away and it was so bad, the attack, we then used horses.
>
> (Interview; Z)

Thus, the analysis suggests that the change in crowd members' social identity deriving from the identity-based actions of the police had consequences not only for the collective action of those within the crowd but also for that of the police. The 'context' of crowd participants' action was the illegitimate and indiscriminate attack on them by the police. The crowd action, however, comprised the 'context' for the police perceptions, and for their subsequent decision to escalate their own public order tactics. These changes are summarized in Table 1.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest an account of social categorization processes that is consistent with the elaborated social identity model of crowd action (Drury & Reicher, in press; Reicher, 1984, 1987, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Stott & Reicher, 1998a). In line with SCT, the model predicts that the limits of collective action are defined by collective identity and that only behaviours consistent with the normative dimensions of a social category become influential (Reicher, 1984, 1987). The present study found that, despite police perceptions of crowd action as irrational and normless, at each stage in the event the contours of crowd action reflected the rational acting out of the defining dimensions of the collective identity (at first in relation to the poll tax; and later in relation to the illegitimate action of the police).

Table 1 A summary of the changes in inter-group relations and consequences for prototypical behaviour during the poll tax riot

Comparative context for 'crowd' at t1	An unjust taxation system
Prototypical behaviour for 'crowd' at t1	Legitimate protest activity
Comparative context for 'police' at t1	Threat from the 'crowd'
Police deployment into the 'crowd' at t1	Coercive force used against protestors
Comparative context for 'crowd' changes at t2	From unjust tax to illegitimate 'police' action
Changes in identity and power at t2	Collective conflict against the 'police' is legitimate, possible and prototypical
Changes in 'crowd' norms at t2	Collective conflict with the 'police' occurs
Comparative context for the 'police' at t3	Increasing threat from 'crowd'

Note: t1, t2 and t3 refer to the different temporal phases of the inter-group interaction.

The analysis presented here also provides an account of 'change' in the nature of categorization of self and other that is consistent with SCT (Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994). The theory predicts that, when context changes, so too does self-categorization (see Turner et al., 1994), and that the ability to express identity-consonant action is dependent upon the nature of power relations in the inter-group context (Reicher, 1987, 1996a; Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b). Thus, the present analysis found that, when the context changed from 'poll tax protest' to 'police attack', so participants' identities changed from non-violent opposition to the former to self-defence against the latter. Further, such self-defence became possible only because the perceived police attack was seen to affect not just a violent minority but the crowd as whole. Since this analysis does not rely upon notions of 'simplification' and 'distortion', it supports an argument which understands categories as grounded in the nature of social relations. In this sense, our analysis of categorization processes provides evidence more consistent with SCT than the cognitive load account of social categorization.

The present analysis made use of a range of data sources, and it was clear that some of them (in particular the police interviews) did not necessarily require use of an ethnographic framework.[3] Yet the ethnographic framework has been crucial to the account provided here in two ways. In the first place, participation provided the researcher with an orientation; it suggested questions to ask, and meant the inclusion of a subjective viewpoint of the development of events over and above that of other participants (police and crowd members). Second, it enabled the collection of a variety of different types of data; the researchers' identity as one broadly in sympathy with the anti-poll tax movement facilitated access to sources (such as letters from prisoners, legal statements and subsequent interviews) that a participant might not wish to pass on to a 'neutral' researcher (see Fantasia, 1988; Green, 1990, 1993). The example of the study of crowds by Wright (1978) shows that it is possible to get data on such phenomena even when maintaining a distance. On the other hand, Wright conceptualized crowds within the 'collective behaviour' framework, whereby all crowds are seen as more or less interchangeable primitive entities groping towards structure; consistent with this approach, Wright collected merely descriptive data on crowd behaviour. Waddington (1992) is an example of an external account of the poll tax riot, which in some ways is consistent with the present analysis of escalation through interaction. Yet Waddington acknowledges the limits of his data (no first hand observation or interviews) – limits which would prevent the analysis of participants' categorizations of self and context offered here.

The ethnographic study presented here allows for an analysis of a dimension not readily apparent in experimental accounts of social categorization processes. Once we begin to examine a dynamic crowd event,

the interactive dimensions of self-categorization become apparent. The data suggest to us that 'context' and 'identity' are not different orders of phenomena but rather different *stages* in an ongoing intergroup interaction (Reicher, 1996a, 1996b, 1997; Stott & Reicher, 1998a, 1998b). The contours of that interaction reflect the fluctuating *power* of each of these groups to impose their own differing perceptions of 'context' on each other.

Crowd members defined the action of the 'violent' or 'disruptive' minority as non-threatening or irrelevant. The police defined it as dangerous, and acted upon their definition by intervening against the crowd as a whole (Stott & Reicher, 1998a). The intervention of the police created a struggle over the physical occupation of space which in turn imposed a common context for crowd participants such that their social relations changed. SCT would predict that a change in the nature of the social relations should correspond with a change in the form and content of participants' self-categorization. Correspondingly, we would expect the conditions of social influence to change such that those in the crowd who engaged in 'violence' against the police became prototypical for large sections of the crowd. The analysis presented above is consistent with that position.

Moreover, it was not simply that people perceived conflictual action towards the police as *proper* social action. By imposing a common context for participants, a more inclusive self-categorization was formed which shifted the power relations between participants and police. As others came to be seen as more similar to self ('all in the same boat' in relation to the aggression of the police), so there were increased expectations of support; participants now felt that it was *possible* to act against the police to prevent their illegitimate action without risk of being arrested. Thus, the expression of identity consonant behaviour – in this case direct and physical confrontation with the police – was dependent upon the nature of power relations in the inter-group context.

This study therefore finds support for Reicher's (1996b, 1997) suggestion that 'context' can be conceptualized in terms of identity-based action, and that it is therefore subject to change through the identity-based action of other groups. As Reicher puts it, the understandings and actions of one group may form the context within which another group frames its own understandings and actions; the second group's active response might in turn form the context for the first group; and so on. Thus, context comprises social relations which are subject to change, often in the struggle between groups over the very nature of that context. It may be true that, given a particular pre-defined context, there may be specific consequences for categorization. The present study shows how context, and hence identity, may also be *created* by subjects in inter-group interaction, depending on the historically and situationally determined balance of power (Drury & Reicher, in press; Stott & Drury, 1999).

Although the present study complements the experimental evidence for SCT by highlighting the dynamic qualities of categorization, it provides little comfort for those critics of the theory who see it as essentially cognitivist or individualistic. The present study shows that this discursive critique of SCT is unfair and unfounded. The event in question was dynamic and fluid, and categorizations employed reflected this in a way consistent with SCT. Categorizations of both context and identity were a function of changing social relations – a process in which subjects themselves were clearly implicated – rather than being explicable merely in terms of the cognitive structures of individuals.

In addition to the individualistic readings of SCT, the discursive critique is often linked with a methodological orientation which stresses the validity of in situ, naturally occurring talk over the epistemologically filtered setting of the laboratory design (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It is often argued that by stepping outside the confines of the laboratory one can observe forms of interaction inconsistent with the categorization processes posited by SCT. The present analysis was based on just such an in situ study which included naturally occurring data and interviews. Yet, even when accepting calls for a more 'open' and flexible methodological approach, the current study provides further evidence to support the SCT account over and above this powerful discursive critique.

It would appear ironic that a study of a crowd event should serve to make such methodological and conceptual points. Crowd psychology has historically been distorted by the prejudices of 'gentlemen observers', such as Gustave Le Bon, who hated and feared the 'mob' and sought to attack rather than understand its dramatic actions (Barrows, 1981; Nye, 1975; McClelland, 1989; Reicher, 1987; Reicher & Potter, 1985). Yet, in fact, as Reicher (1987, 1996b, 1997) points out, the crowd is precisely the location for examining the range of social categorization processes. Much of everyday life may be fixed in relations of relative consensus and stability – and hence predictability – through the congealment of human activity into social structures, customs, laws and so on; but crowd action is, uniquely perhaps, a situation in which stability is less certain and where context and hence identities can become altogether more fluid.

Appendix

The analysis is based on a body of data gained from six separate sources.

1 *Field notes* taken contemporaneously describing the events in question

and recorded on a hand-held tape recorder. The field notes also record conversations held with participants and shouts and chants from the crowd.

2 *Video data* obtained from a variety of sources. These include a sample from 52 hours of video coverage; video coverage from the Channel 4 programme *The Battle of Trafalgar*; video coverage from a video produced by an anarchist organization entitled *We've Got the Power.*

3 *Transcripts of 14 interviews with participants* in the days and months following the event. Interviews were conducted with participants either individually, in groups of three, or, in one case, a group of six. Participants were contacted through local contacts in colleges and political groups. Interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis, recorded on audio tape and transcribed. Only the content of the talk was the focus for the analysis; therefore the transcripts do not include pauses or intonations. This source is abbreviated as (Interview; initial of interviewee).

4 *Transcripts of 21 participants' accounts* taken in the weeks following the event. These transcripts were of tape recorded interviews conducted by a television company, Despite TV, and made available to one of the researchers via the Trafalgar Square Defendants Campaign, a legal defence group set up following the riot. The transcripts include only participants' responses, the interviewers' questions had been omitted. This source is abbreviated as (Participant account; initial of participant).

5 *Three prisoners' accounts* that were obtained through correspondence with prisoners serving custodial sentences arising from the disturbance.

6 *Police sources*. Initially, approaches were made to the Metropolitan Police in the week following the demonstration. While initially the senior officer contacted was keen to allow access to officers involved in policing the event, this access was never forthcoming. The fact that many of the cases arising from the investigation were at that time sub judice may have been a contributory factor. Subsequently, a small body of data from three participant officers was obtained by contacting another senior officer who was willing to help. One of these officers was the commanding officer of the police stationed in Whitehall during the episodes of conflict.

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Notes

1 'Protective clothing' is a term used by the police. It describes the uniform worn by officers during public order situations. It includes: a crash helmet with visor, a fireproof boiler suit, protective padding, a long baton and short round shield. This type of uniform is commonly referred to as 'riot gear'.

2 The Hillsborough stadium disaster was understood to have arisen as a result of the police misinterpreting a situation of public safety as a situation of public order (Taylor, 1990).

3 The police evidence is the weakest in the study, for reasons described in the Appendix. However, support for the analysis of police perceptions presented here comes from a study of riot-trained officers who commented on videos of the poll tax riot (Stott & Reicher, 1998a).

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