

In it together: Research reveals the joy of the crowd

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The crowd - heaven or hell? It depends on how you identify with the crowd, say researchers.

The rush-hour commute or Oxford Street at Christmas are rarely much fun, but for some the experience of a packed crowd can be highly enjoyable, a research project led by University of Sussex psychologist Dr John Drury has found.

The findings, published today (Wednesday 13 November 2013) in the open access journal *PLOS ONE*, explain why people actually seek out and find pleasure in dense, crowded areas.

Psychologists from the University of Sussex, University of St Andrews

and the University of Leeds surveyed people at an outdoor music event (a Fatboy Slim gig in Brighton) and a protest march against NHS changes.

The researchers found that [social identity](#) was a key factor in predicting positive emotions in both crowds and that people's social identification with the crowd led them to seek out and enjoy more dense locations.

The studies were carried out at the University of Sussex. Dr David Novelli, now at the University of Hertfordshire, surveyed a sample of participants and interviewed some of them.

Dr John Drury, who supervised the research, says: 'Brightonians will remember the Big Beach Boutique of 2002 when 250,000 people packed onto the beach to see Hove-based DJ Fatboy Slim.

"That was a very crowded event indeed. Yet, among our survey participants, the more they defined themselves as part of the crowd the less likely they were to report feeling too crowded."

The study was carried out with the support of local organisations involved in health and safety at live music events. It helps explain why from the outside a crowd might look hellish but is actually a heavenly experience for many participants. For music events, the [crowd](#) itself is a key part of the attraction.

Dr Drury also argues that the findings also have important implications for psychology: "There is an idea in psychology that we have a relatively fixed need for 'personal space'. This would mean that other people are inevitably a threat to our comfort.

"But this wrongly assumes that we each have just one [identity](#) – a personal identity. Our findings are part of a body of work that shows that

we have multiple identities based on our group memberships.

"The salience of different identities varies according to social context. At those times when people share a social identity with us, their presence is not an invasion of our space at all. They are not 'other' – they are 'us'."

More information: 'Crowdedness mediates the effect of social identification on positive emotion in a crowd: A survey of two crowd events', Drury, J., Novelli, D., Reicher, S. & Stott, C., *PLOS ONE* (13 Nov 2013). [dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0078983](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0078983)

Provided by University of Sussex

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