

The Baiting Crowd in Episodes of Threatened Suicide

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This study examines 21 cases in which crowds were present when a disturbed person threatened to jump off a building, bridge, or tower. Baiting or jeering occurred in 10 of the cases. Analysis of newspaper accounts of the episodes suggests several deindividuation factors that might contribute to the baiting phenomenon: membership in a large crowd, the cover of nighttime, and physical distance between crowd and victim (all factors associated with anonymity). The baiting phenomenon was also associated with warm temperatures and long duration of episode. These factors suggest leads for more systematic investigation.

The man on a narrow ledge who threatens to hurl himself to a messy death is a haunting image in fact and fiction (Feiffer, 1962; Greer, 1980). My present interest in this phenomenon lies not in the motives and intention of the victim but in the conduct of the crowd of bystanders who witness the event. In those instances where news of a suicide threat draws spectators to the site, the crowd's reaction may include curiosity (in New York City on the night of July 27, 1938, thousands of persons waited, some for 11 hours, until John Warde jumped from a 17th-floor hotel ledge), callousness (Galbraith, 1955, relates that during the Wall Street crash of 1929 large crowds near the Stock Exchange spotted a workman on the roof of a building whom they, assuming he intended to commit suicide, impatiently urged to jump), and concern (in Los Angeles on January 19, 1981, Muhammad Ali was cheered after he successfully talked a man out of jumping from a ninth-floor window).

We assume that most people are concerned for the life and well-being of others. It comes as a surprise to learn that crowds gathered at the site of a suicide threat have been known to taunt and urge the victim to

jump. The aim of this paper is (a) to point out the existence of the suicide-baiting crowd and to invite attention to it as a problem for investigation and (b) to look for explanations for the callousness of spectators who jeer and taunt the victim.

LeBon's (1896) analysis of the antisocial aspect of crowd behavior provides a starting point for the investigation of the suicide-baiting crowd. Le Bon attempted to explain why people in crowds feel free to gratify their "savage, destructive" instincts. He found that the explanation lay in two factors that are most apparent in large crowds: invincibility and anonymity. "The individual forming part of a crowd acquires . . . a sentiment of invincible power which allows him to yield to instincts." Moreover, "a crowd being anonymous, and in consequence irresponsible, the sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals disappears entirely" (p. 30).

Zimbardo (1969), who gave contemporary expression to LeBon's ideas, postulated that membership in a crowd creates a psychological state of diminished identity and self awareness (known as *deindividuation*) that leads in turn to unrestrained behavior. Zimbardo listed a number of factors, many of them associated with crowds, that produce deindividuation: anonymity, diffused responsibility, size, activity, a novel unstructured situation, arousal due to noise, and fatigue.

To seek evidence for the occurrence of conditions associated with deindividuation in suicide-baiting crowds, I analyzed newspaper accounts of episodes in which crowds

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were present when a person threatened to jump off a building, bridge, or tower. The logic of the exercise was to determine whether conditions associated with deindividuation were present in crowds where baiting occurred and, conversely, were absent from crowds in which members were either silent or concerned. There may be many reasons for baiting, including cathartic release of individual frustration and hostility, entertainment during a boring wait, and a cynical belief that the threat is fake. Since it is impossible to pin down the motives of crowd members in such episodes, I confined the analysis to reportable variables.¹

In my examination of the baiting phenomenon, I searched all listings for *suicides and suicide attempts* in the *New York Times Index* for 1964–1979. I found 166 cases in which people threatened suicide by jumping ($n = 49$) or succeeded in committing suicide by leaping from a building, bridge, tower, or cliff ($n = 117$). Within that sample, I made a note of all cases in which spectators or crowds were mentioned in the account. I found 15 such cases, all of them males and, with one exception, occurring in New York City. In 4 cases the victim was taunted and urged to jump by spectators, and in the remaining 11 no baiting was reported. This sample of 15 cases was supplemented by accounts of 6 baiting crowds published in other sources, such as the *Chicago Tribune*. These 6 incidents occurred in Miami, Florida (1); Dania, Florida (2); Norman, Oklahoma (1); Johannesburg, South Africa (1); and Rome, Italy (1). Of the 6 victims, 5 were male. I then analyzed the augmented sample of 21 cases (see Table 1) for location of incident (e.g., Empire State Building), position of the victim (e.g., 10th-floor ledge), date and time of day, duration of episode, crowd size (when reported), and spectator behavior during and after the incident. Size of crowd, time of incident, and distance between victim and crowd all relate to the factor of anonymity, the major antecedent condition in Zimbardo's analysis of antisocial crowds.

The following extract from the *New York Times* for June 8, 1964, is an example of the data source:

A Puerto Rican handyman perched on a 10th floor ledge

for an hour yesterday morning as many persons in a crowd of 500 on upper Broadway shouted at him in Spanish and English to jump. Even as cries of "Jump!" and "Brinca!" rang out, policemen pulled the man to safety from the narrow ledge at 3495 Broadway, the north-west corner of 143rd Street.

Results and Discussion

No claims can be made for the completeness or representativeness of this small sample of 21 cases. Accordingly, inferential statistics are not strictly applicable for data analysis, although they will be cited as an indication of the strength of relationships.

Incidence of Baiting

The baiting crowd is a rare phenomenon. The *New York Times Index*'s list of 166 threatened and actual suicides revealed that crowds were present at only 15 of the episodes (9%). Only 4 of the 15 cases (17%) were associated with baiting. Accordingly, a crowd of bystanders at a suicide threat does not invariably become a jeering, taunting mob.

Seriousness of the Baiting Crowd

Analysis of crowd reactions in the 10 baiting cases analyzed in Table 1 (2 of which ended in death) suggests that the crowd was genuinely aggressive and not mock serious in its conduct. In at least 3 cases of averted suicide ("Figueros," "Polizzi," and unidentified patient 1969 in Table 1), the crowd jeered when rescues were effected. In the "Polizzi" case the crowd screamed obscenities and threw stones and debris at the rescue squad. There can be no doubt that the baiting crowd is indeed a callous mob.

¹ The archival method used here is similar to that used by Watson (1973) in his test of a deindividuation hypothesis. Watson's analysis of 23 cultures selected from a sample in the Human Relations Area files revealed a significant positive relationship between deindividuation (altering appearance before battle by wearing masks, face and body paint, special warriors' garments) and extreme aggression in warfare. The limitations of the archival method for a clear test of the deindividuation hypothesis are readily acknowledged by Watson (1973, p. 344).

Table 1
Particulars of Baiting and Nonbaiting Incidents

Victim	Date	Source	Place	Location and position	Time of day	Duration	Crowd size
Baiting incidents (n = 10)							
Threatened jumps Richard Reinemann	April 14, 1964	NYT	Albany, N.Y.	12th floor, Dewitt Clinton Hotel	9-11 P.M.	2 hr.	4,000
Jose Figueros	June 8, 1964	NYT	New York City	10th floor, 3495 Broadway	Morning	1 hr.	500
Unidentified male patient	Oct. 12, 1969	NYT	New York City	9th floor, Mt. Sinai Hospital	4:15-7 P.M.	3 hr.	300
Unidentified male (referred to in "Figueros")	June 1964	NYT	New York City	Brooklyn Bridge cable	?	?	Passersby
Unidentified male	June 1971	Australian	Rome, Italy	Top of Coliseum	After midnight	Minutes	Hundreds
Gloria Polizzi	Sept. 29, 1973	Chicago Tribune	Dania, Fla.	150-ft. water tower	"Last night"	2 hr.	500
Unidentified male vagrant (Referred to in "Polizzi")	Sept. 1973	Chicago Tribune	Dania, Fla.	150-ft. water tower	?	?	<300
Actual jumps							
Frank Green	Sept. 23, 1967	Daily Oklahoman	Norman, Okla.	12th floor dorm, Univ. Oklahoma	6:30-6:45 P.M.	15 min.	200+
Unidentified male	Aug. 17, 1973	Knight Newspaper Service	Miami, Fla.	Bridge	?	?	"A group"
Amos Gexella	Aug. 12, 1975	Adelaide News	Johannesburg, South Africa	6th floor	"Afternoon's entertainment"	2 hr.	300 (est. from photo)
Nonbaiting incidents (n = 11)							
Threatened jumps John Sloan	Dec. 25, 1972	NYT	New York City	17th floor, St. Regis Hotel	2:45 P.M.	3+ hr.	"Crowd gathered"

(table continued)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Victim	Date	Source	Place	Location and position	Time of day	Duration	Crowd size
Trendell Terry	Oct. 13, 1972	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	17th floor, 1370 Broadway	12:20–2:20 P.M.	2 hr.	“Thousands”
James Weber	Jan. 1, 1974	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	Brooklyn Bridge	1:30 P.M.	1 hr.	some spectators applauded rescue
John Marabella	June 14, 1974	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	15th-floor Roof, 55 W. 42nd St.	5–5:30 P.M.	30 min.	“Thousands”
John Roland	Sept. 21, 1974	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	Brooklyn Bridge	“Afternoon”	1+ hr.	100
Raymond Gonzales	July 30, 1978	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	Triborough Bridge	1:30–2:30 P.M.	1 hr.	Hundreds of motorists looked on
Raymond Lopez	Oct. 31, 1973	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	5th-floor roof, 226 E. 85th St.	9 A.M.	“6 min. struggle”	200 (other roofs, windows)
Actual jumps “Red,” a derelict	Aug. 10, 1968	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	Top of light ship mast (65 ft.), Pier 16	9:30 A.M.–4 P.M.	7 hr.	50
Samuel Burns	Nov. 19, 1972	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	26th Floor, 2420 Hunter Ave., Bronx	12:15–1 P.M.	45 min.	100
Ronald Ravetz	Feb. 3, 1976	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	86th Floor, Empire State Bldg.	4:30 P.M.	Minutes	50 on same level; tourists pleaded not to jump
Mark Mataya	May 5, 1974	<i>NYT</i>	New York City	23rd floor, 2928 W. 5th St.	?	90+ min.	Passersby

Note. *NYT* = *New York Times*; est. = estimated.

Anonymity Factors

The data, although incomplete, provide evidence of the operation of three anonymity-inducing factors in baiting episodes: a large crowd, cover of darkness, and substantial distance between victim and crowd (anonymity from victim).

Crowd size. Table 2 shows that baiting was more common in large crowds (300 or more) than in small crowds (less than 300) ($p = .16$, exact test). People in large crowds are able to hide behind a shield of anonymity from police (LeBon, 1896) and may experience diminished self-awareness (Zimbardo, 1969). In large crowds people are able to diffuse or shift responsibility for their conduct (Darley & Latané, 1968). There is also a greater probability that in a large crowd at least one stupid or sadistic person will be found who is prepared to cry "Jump!" and thereby provide a model for suggestible others to follow.

Cover of darkness. According to Zimbardo (1969), dim lighting is also conducive to deindividuation because it contributes to anonymity. Table 2 reveals that most baiting

episodes occurred in or toward nighttime (after 6 P.M.) whereas nonbaiting was confined entirely to daylight hours ($p = .007$, Fisher exact test). Note, however, that darkness is not essential for baiting to occur, as evidenced by the "Figueros" case (Table 1), which took place on a summer morning.

Physical distance between victim and crowd. Physical separation of crowd and victim may contribute to the process of "dehumanizing" the victim, an aspect of deindividuation (Zimbardo, 1969). Where the person is physically close and therefore can identify—and be identified—baiting should be rare (Milgram, 1965; Zimbardo, 1969). The data appear to suggest the opposite of this, as Table 2 reveals that baiting occurred when the victim was on or below the 12th floor and no baiting occurred when the victim was above the 12th floor ($p = .004$, Fisher exact test). However, a close analysis of Table 1 reveals, consistent with the hypothesis, that no baiting occurred when spectators were in close proximity to the victim ("Ravetz," in which tourists on the same level attempted to prevent his leap from the 86th floor of the Empire State

Table 2
Baiting and Nonbaiting Crowds Compared for Crowd Size, Time of Episode, Position of Victim, Duration of Episode, and Month of Episode

Factor	Baiting ($n = 10$)	Nonbaiting ($n = 11$)	p , Fisher exact test
Crowd size			
<300	2	5	
300 or more	6	3	.16
No information	2	3	
Time of episode			
Before 6 P.M.	3	10	
After 6 P.M.	5	0	.007
No information	2	1	
Position of victim			
On or below 12th floor	5	1	
Higher than 12th floor	0	6	.004
No information (bridges, towers)	5	4	
Duration of episode			
<2 hr.	2	8	
2 hr. or longer	4	3	.14
No information	4	0	
Month of episode			
June–September	8	4	.06
October–May	2	7	

Building, and "Lopez," in which people watched from adjoining roofs and windows). Nor did baiting occur in those cases where spectators were so far removed from the victim that jeers and taunts would go unheard and unnoticed (the 15th, 17th, 17th, 23rd, and 26th floors, respectively). Baiting occurred only in the five intermediate cases where the victims were on the 6th, 9th, 10th, 12th, and 12th floors, respectively—sufficiently removed to be anonymous but close enough to be able to torment the victim.

These findings suggest a curvilinear relationship between physical proximity and baiting. If the victim is close it is difficult to feel anonymous, but if the victim is far away the kind of crowd-victim interaction that characterizes baiting is impossible—exchange of profanities, heckling, throwing objects.

Duration of episode. People who have been waiting for a long time become tired and irritable, a condition that gives rise to deindividuation. Table 2 shows that in the 17 cases containing information about duration of episode, baiting was more common in the 7 longer incidents (2 hours or more) than in the 10 shorter incidents (less than 2 hours) ($p = .14$, Fisher exact test). However, the relationship between duration and baiting is not strong. With "Green," jeering and heckling occurred during the episode's 15 minutes, but in the case of "Red," no baiting occurred even though the victim remained on his perch for 7 hours.

There are alternative explanations for the effect of episode duration on baiting. First, it is likely that frustration will increase with time, which gives rise to aggression on the part of the crowd. People who are kept waiting while the victim contemplates what to do are likely to sense that they are being used. Baiting may be a consequence of the belief that the "victim" is not serious and therefore deserves hostility. Seiden (Note 1) comments that crowd members who at the outset may have been curious become cynical and callous when they conclude that the person has (and had) no intention of suicide but is using the threat as a means of manipulating police and spectators. The fact that most suicide threats are not carried out may lend support to the crowd's belief that

it has been conned. Moreover, when strangers stand together over a long time conversing, joking, and offering bets about the victim's fate ("Reinemann" and "Polizzi"), they begin to develop an emergent group identity that facilitates a common action such as shouting "Jump!" Finally, it should be noted that duration of episode is related to the size of the crowd: The longer a core of observers persists, the more people will be attracted to the scene—an anonymity-inducing factor.

Other Factors

Aversive temperature. Another factor contributing to crowd aggression may be temperature. Table 2 shows that 8 of the 10 baiting incidents happened in the warm months of June to September, whereas 4 of the 11 nonbaiting incidents took place in those months ($p = .06$, Fisher exact test). We have no record of temperatures on days when baiting incidents occurred. Evidence exists, however, that rioting and collective violence are related to summer heat (Baron & Ransberger, 1978), and it is possible that heat also contributes to the frustration of the baiting crowd.

The city. Zimbardo (1969) holds that in large cities people experience anonymity in their social interactions, which contributes to generalized deindividuation and antisocial behavior. We found that New York City was the most common setting for baiting (and nonbaiting) episodes, but this fact alone does not support Zimbardo's analysis. In the first place, the prime data source, the *New York Times*, tends to report only local incidents involving baiting (see Table 1). Second, jumping from high buildings accounts for 15% of the suicides in New York City (Freedman, Kaplan, & Sadock, 1972). In terms simply of opportunity, baiting crowds are likely to be more prevalent in cities where the actual or threatened suicide rate is high, tall buildings are readily available, and large throngs of pedestrians are on the streets. Baiting occurs, however, in such improbable places as Norman, Oklahoma ("Green").

Dehumanization of victim. The callousness of the baiting crowd may also stem from the mechanisms that enable it to degrade and dehumanize the victim (cf. Bandura,

Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Zimbardo, 1969). An important factor enabling the crowd to dehumanize the victim is the stigma attached to the victim's condition, his or her inferior status as a mentally disturbed person. Crowd members may rationalize that anyone who intends to leap from a building must be crazy, and crazy people are not really human. Thus, the crowd at the "Polizzi" site dehumanized the victim by referring to her and calling out to her as a "silly bitch," "a dumb bitch." The process of dehumanization may be reinforced by any obvious racial or social class differences that set the victim apart from and "inferior" to the crowd. The crowd at "Polizzi" was predominantly black, and the distraught woman was white. A white crowd confronting a black victim might exhibit much the same conduct. But it is important to note that race and ethnic differences are not essential for baiting to occur. In the "Figueros" incident cries of "Brinca!" (jump) went up from the Spanish-speaking members of the crowd who recognized the victim as Puerto Rican.

Conclusion

Factors associated with anonymity (membership in a large crowd) appear to contribute to the phenomenon of baiting crowds at suicide incidents. Aversive temperature and a lengthy wait for something to happen may also contribute to the baiting. Because of the sampling method, the small number of cases, and the nature of the data (journalistic accounts), no strong conclusions can be drawn, but leads for further research can be adduced. Collection of a larger sample of scientific accounts of crowd behavior at actual and threatened suicides may provide answers to the following questions: Is baiting, when it occurs, the dominant crowd reaction, or is it the response of only a small, noisy subgroup of spectators? Who are the baiters? What is their age, and what are their socioeconomic characteristics? Under what

conditions do crowd members become samaritans and attempt to prevent the victim from leaping (e.g., "Ravetz"), or at least applaud a successful rescue ("Terry" and "Weber")? Answers to these questions require a finer analysis of the subtle interaction between victim and crowd (e.g., how the victim "plays" to the crowd), information about crowd composition, in-depth information about the victim, and knowledge of measures taken by police and other officials present.

Reference Note

1. Seiden, R. Personal communication, November 10, 1975.

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