'The Battle of Westminster': developing the social identity model of crowd behaviour in order to explain the initiation and development of collective conflict

S. D. REICHER

Department of Psychology, University of Exeter, U.K.

Abstract

This paper aims to extend the social identity approach to crowd behaviour (Reicher, 1984, 1987) in order to understand how crowd events, and crowd conflict in particular, develop over time. The analysis derives from a detailed account of a violent confrontation between students and police during a demonstration held in November 1988 — the so-called 'Battle of Westminster'. It focuses on how students came to be involved in the conflict, how the conflict spread and upon the psychological consequences of involvement. This analysis is used to develop general hypotheses concerning the initiation and development of collective conflict. It is concluded that, while the social identity model is of use in understanding these phenomena, it is necessary to recognize how social categories are constructed and reconstructed in the dynamics of intergroup interaction.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years classic accounts of crowd behaviour such as those of Le Bon (1895, trans. 1947) and Allport (1924) have come under increasing attack (Graumann & Moscovici, 1986; McPhail, 1991; Nye, 1975; Reicher, 1987; Reicher & Potter, 1985; Turner & Killian, 1987). On a theoretical level, such approaches have been criticized as removing crowd action from its social context and hence explaining what are outcomes of social processes in terms of invariant features of the crowd.

Empirically, the problem with such desocialized explanations is that they fail to account for the social shape of crowd action. Historical studies show that crowd events cannot be reduced to a generic set of behaviours. While some crowds may be destructive and violent, others can show remarkable levels of restraint even when subject to extreme provocation (King, 1963; Moore, 1978). Even when violence occurs, events are selective and patterned (Feagin & Hahn, 1973; Fogelson, 1971; Stephenson, 1979).

Addressee for correspondence: Dr. S. D. Reicher, Department of Psychology, University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4QG, U.K.

What is more, the patterning of crowd action tends to make sense when viewed in terms of the ideologies associated with the collectivities who were involved (Davis, 1978; Reddy, 1977; Smith, 1980; Thompson, 1971, 1991).

Not surprisingly, then, those concerned with crowd action across the social sciences have, either explicitly or implicitly, criticized the traditional psychological accounts and, in particular, sought to reveal the meaningful nature of crowd action. The historian E. P. Thompson shows the importance of studying the collective perceptions of the actors themselves if we wish to understand how they respond to circumstances (Thompson, 1971, 1991). In political and sociological studies of social movements there has been a similar shift towards studying how grievances are interpreted and how collective ideologies arouse people's commitment to action (Donati, 1992; Gamson, Fireman & Rytina, 1982; Klandermans, 1984; Klandermans, Kriesi & Tarrow, 1988). In particular, a number of theorists (Friedman & McAdam, 1992; Gamson, 1992; Melucci, 1988; Touraine, 1991) stress the importance of actors assuming a collective identity if they are to act in concert. This identity is viewed as a cultural product which forms the basis for interpreting social reality and defining goals.

While these approaches are heavily reliant on psychological concepts, there have been few attempts to examine the processes whereby collective perceptions and identities are constructed and the precise dynamics by which they shape action. One obvious exception is work on emergent norm theory (Turner & Killian, 1987) which proposes that crowd events are shaped by collective norms emerging in the situation itself. This occurs in a period of milling which precedes action. The words and deeds of prominent individuals offer potential norms which are then taken on as a means of defining the situation and determining appropriate actions. As more people follow them so the norms become more established and more influential to yet more others. While this approach avoids the irrationalism of traditional psychological approaches and while it does pay close attention to the immediate realities of crowd events, it is open to two major objections. Firstly, the account of how norms emerge is inadequate to deal with situations where crowds act and change rapidly without much time for prior milling (Wright, 1978; McPhail, 1991). Secondly, the character of the norms that emerge is determined by the predispositions of prominent individuals, or (when different suggestions are offered) by the predispositions of those in the crowd. Hence, even if norms are formed through group interactions, they are given an individualistic underpinning. This makes it difficult to explain the cultural bases of crowd influence and action.

Reicher (1982, 1984, 1987) seeks to lay the basis for such an explanation upon the tenets of self-categorization theory (Turner, 1982; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). According to SCT, defining oneself as a member of a social category is the precondition for group behaviour. Such social identification entails a process of self-stereotyping whereby group members seek to conform to the beliefs and standards by which the category is defined — which themselves will be evolving products of history and culture. Consequently, the shift from individual to group behaviour involves a shift from personal to social identity and hence the emergence of cultural standards as a basis for behavioural control.

The distinctive nature of crowds derives from the problem of applying general standards to particular contexts. Crowds tend to exist in novel, ambiguous and fluid situations such that it is hard to apply routinized norms of behaviour. They also tend to be unstructured such that both organized debate and the use of a formal hierarchy to provide authoritative interpretations are ruled out. Hence crowd members face the

challenge of having to translate their superordinate social identity into a situational identity without the formal means of doing so. One way of solving this dilemma is by infering the nature of group identity from the behaviour of those seen as typical group members (what J. Turner calls 'the inductive aspect of categorization') — but only insofar as this behaviour is consonant with the broader standards.

Reicher (1984, 1987) illustrates this perspective through an analysis of the 'St. Pauls riot' of April 1980. By concentrating on what happened once the conflict was under way, it was possible to show that actions which were consonant with the social identity of crowd members generalized amongst them, while actions which were dissonant with this identity were either ignored or actively stopped. Yet, while the 'St. Paul's' study supports the idea that social identities may provide the psychological mediation between cultural beliefs and the pattern of crowd behaviour, it shares two limitations with those other approaches which insist on ideological influences upon collective action. First of all, social identity is taken as a given which determines action. Without addressing the processes through which identity is constructed there is a danger that conflict, if not tied to the nature of crowds in general, will be seen as inhering in the nature of specific crowds. More generally, such determinism denies crowds any role in transforming society — an obvious shortcoming in the light of recent events in Eastern Europe.

Secondly, while a social dimension is incorporated through the stress on collective ideologies and intragroup processes, scant regard is paid to intergroup dynamics. The analysis seeks to explain crowd events entirely by looking at the perceptions of crowd members. No account is taken of police perceptions and actions or of how the actions of one party affect the subsequent perceptions and actions of the other. Even critical studies only partially replace the crowd in its social context.

This paper aims to explore the possibility that these two issues may be interlinked. That is to say, a static view of social identity derives from looking at only one phase of intergroup relations and therefore an understanding of category change may be achieved by examining intragroup processes in the context of developing intergroup relations. In order to investigate this it is necessary for the scope of enquiry to be broader than in the 'St. Pauls' study: as well as looking at the period where crowd conflict is in progress, it is necessary to look at how conflict is initiated and generalized. Such a perspective is provided through an investigation of the so-called 'Battle of Westminster' in which British student demonstrators entered into conflict with the police. The analysis concentrates on how the conflict originated and how it developed. A detailed investigation of the events themselves will be used in order to draw some general theoretical conclusions.

STUDYING THE EVENTS

An explanation of method

On 24th November 1988, the National Union of Students organized a demonstration in order to protest against plans to replace student grants with student loans. While most demonstrators followed the official route of the march to a park in South London, a portion went to Westminster Bridge in an attempt to reach the Houses of

Parliament. Here they were blocked by the police and this led to the conflict which is the focus of this analysis.

While the original aim was to analyse the perspectives of both police and student participants, access to the police proved very limited and only a handful of interviews besides some public statements were ultimately available. Consequently, the scope of the study is mainly limited to asking, firstly, how students entered into conflict with the police and, secondly, how the involvement of demonstrators developed in the course of the event.

The analysis is based on the following sources. Firstly, media materials including television reports, newspaper articles and student magazines were collected. Secondly, a number of private videos from student sources were made available through NUS. Thirdly, an NUS official who was chief organizer of the event and chief steward on the day was interviewed. Fourthly, three participants provided written accounts of their experiences. Fifthly, 15 participants gave tape-recorded interviews — some to psychology students who had themselves been involved in the event and the remainder to the author. Sixthly, a group of seven participants were assembled and shown a compilation video-tape of the events. They were questioned by both the principal investigator and the student researchers about their perceptions and reactions to the events portrayed in the video. They were also given a remote control device and given the freedom to stop the video at any point and make comments. Their responses were videotaped. Wherever direct quotations are used, a student (S) code number is provided and the source is indicated.

With three exceptions, all of these respondents were undergraduate students at Exeter University. This raises questions concerning the generalizability of the data to an explanation of the behaviour of demonstrators as a whole. If nothing else, the Exeter contingent was close to the rear of the demonstration and did not participate in the original breakaway to Westminster Bridge. However some claim may be made that the analysis does more than speak for the particular experience of Exeter students. These respondents were recruited to by the demonstration and came to it with the same information as the great majority of participants. They were all involved in the sites around Westminster Bridge where the major conflicts occurred and, due to the initial confusion and subsequent pushing and shoving, they became dispersed throughout the larger crowd. What information there is available from other respondents and from other sources reveals no difference between the constructions used by Exeter students and those used by students from elsewhere. Finally, insofar as the understandings articulated by Exeter students help make sense of their behaviour and that the behaviour of Exeter students is consonant with that of the mass of demonstrators, this suggests that such understandings may be of use in the understanding of crowd action in general.

Nonetheless these problems clearly mean that our data are less than ideal. Such problems are endemic in the study of crowd events, especially violent and politically sensitive events such as those involved here. Crowd members are characteristically wary of talking openly about such events. So, while every attempt was made to secure as wide a pool of respondents as possible, ultimately choice was dependent upon having contacts which facilitated trust. In such a context data are as much a consequence of opportunity as of design and should be judged accordingly.

An account of events

The following account is constructed from our multiple sources using the method of data triangulation (Denzin, 1970). The aim is not to give a value free account of what really happened, but rather to provide a basic outline of points on which there is a general consensus. This then provides a background for understanding the area where there is dissensus as to what occurred and why people acted as they did. Where the ground is, itself, a matter of dispute, the different positions are provided.

(a) On 9th November 1988, the British Conservative government published a white paper which proposed that the rights to various benefits be removed from students, that the value of the grant be frozen in monetary terms and that a system of loans be introduced to make up for the shortfall. The value of the loan would increase year on year until it amounted to 50 per cent of the total support. The National Union of Students (NUS) responded by organizing a protest event on 24th November. Originally it was planned as a 'mass lobby' of parliament. Student unions were notified, the lobby was advertised and coaches were booked to ferry students to London.

(b) By Monday 21st November NUS was aware that the number of students planning to attend the event was too large for a lobby. After urgent meetings with the police it was agreed to turn the lobby into a demonstration. This would start by the University of London Student Union in Malet Street cross the Thames over Waterloo Bridge and proceed to Mary Harmondsworth Park in South London where a rally would be held (see Figure 1 for a map of events). Afterwards those who had appointments would be allowed back to lobby their MPs. NUS phoned round student unions to communicate this new plan on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before the Thursday event.

(c) Students assembled at Malet Street from about 11.00 am on 24th November. In addition, a smaller group assembled in Vincent Square. Estimates of numbers on the demonstration vary, however the police and NUS estimates are fairly close at 16 000 and 15 000 respectively. The demonstration moved off shortly after midday. It passed over Waterloo Bridge and, unexpectedly, went counter-clockwise round the roundabout on the Southern side of the bridge. This took the marchers past the junction with York Road leading to Westminster Bridge. There were a few police here as well as some NUS stewards. The head of the march passed by and continued along the agreed route. However shortly afterwards, at about 1 pm, a group of people near the front broke through the thin cordon and went towards Westminster Bridge. Members of the Socialist Workers Student Society (SWSS) were clearly present as a block but they were still a minority in the breakaway. Most of those coming behind abandoned the official route and followed towards Westminster Bridge. By about 1.15 pm NUS stewards stopped dissuading people from going this way. At the same time those leading the official demonstration decided to go back to Westminster Bridge with the NUS banner.

(d) Students arriving on Westminster Bridge were met by a substantial police cordon which prevented them crossing back across the Thames to the Houses of Parliament. NUS stewards, along with the police, urged students to return to the official route of the march. A little after 1.30 pm, the NUS president, Maeve Sherlock, tried to lead a group of students away to Mary Harmondsworth Park. This contingent got as far as an underpass leading off Westminster Bridge when they were blocked by the police. This was due to the fact that groups of students were coming northwards back from the rally and attempting to get onto the bridge. After some 20 minutes of

Location of major conflict: this is the approach to Westminster Bridge where students congregated from about 1.30 until they were dispersed by mounted police around 4.15

Official route on to Mary Harmandsworth Park

Location of initial breakthrough: this is the point where students initially departed from the official route and went towards Westminster Bridge

Vincent Square

Houses of Parliament

Waterloo Bridge

Westminster Bridge

Lambeth Bridge

Vauxhall Bridge

-N-

Official route of the march

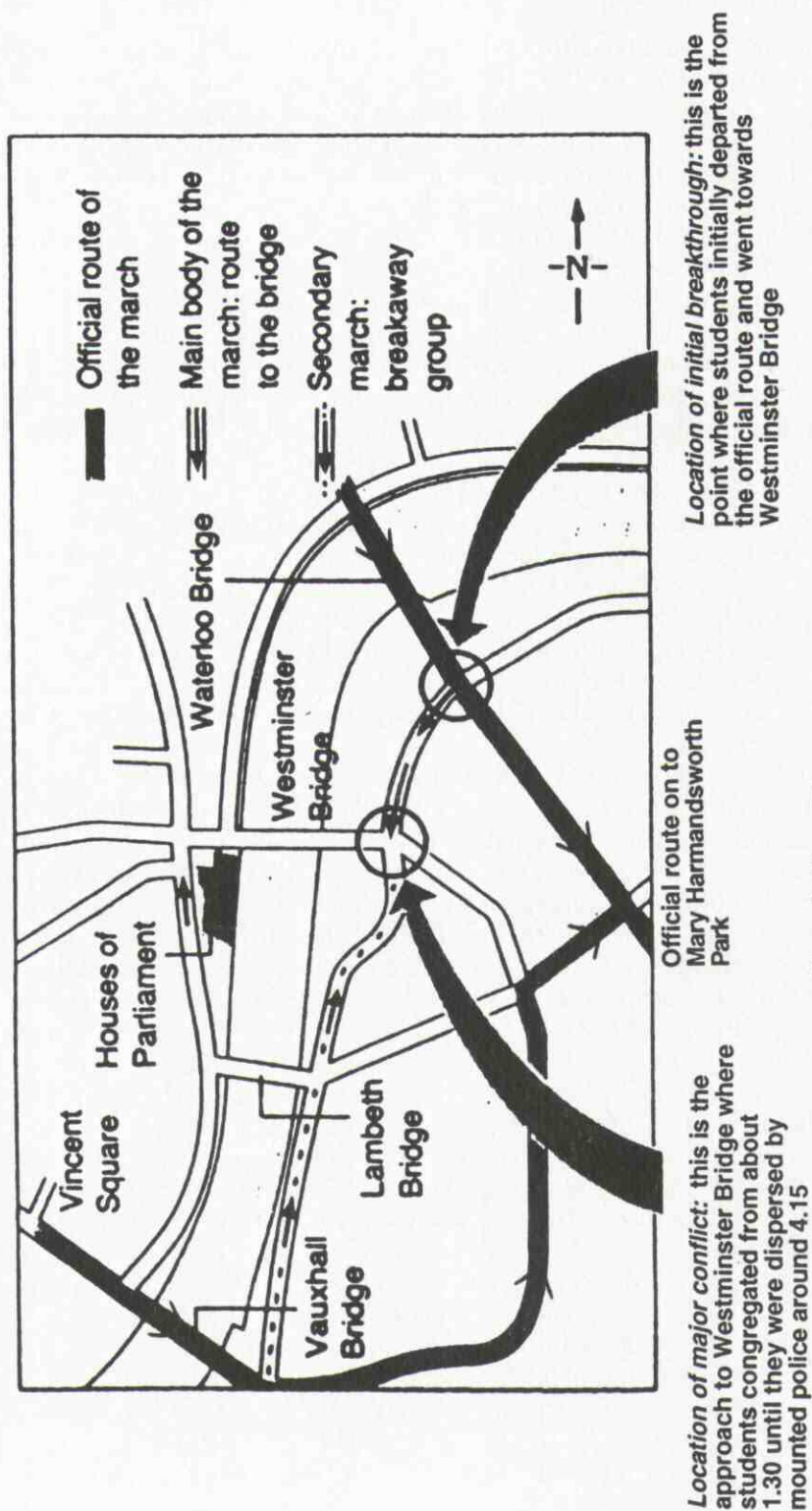Main body of the march: route to the bridge

Secondary march: breakaway group

Figure 1. Map of the events

confusion in the underpass, most of those following the NUS leader returned to Westminster Bridge.

(e) Between about 1.30 and 4 pm there was a dense crowd of students on the southern side of Westminster Bridge. Most estimates put the number at about 6000. Blocking them were some 200 foot police in front of whom were approximately two dozen mounted police. Behind these officers there was a cordon of police vans. Over time the confrontation between police and demonstrators became more aggressive. Shortly after 4 pm, a block of some 30 police horses rode into the demonstrators who scattered. Many students say that the charge was unannounced. The police, on the other hand, say that multiple warnings were given for people to disperse. Whatever the case, the great majority of students were unaware of any warning even if it was given. After the horse charge there was a relatively short period of intensified confrontation between students and police. However, by about 5 pm most of those from outside London had gone to catch their coaches home and the event was over.

(g) The following day, 25th November, these events constituted the lead story in most of the popular press. All the tabloid accounts, whether from right-wing or left-wing papers, blamed the Socialist Workers Party for the conflict. Typically, the *Sun* newspaper wrote that 'the demonstrators were whipped into a frenzy by Socialist Workers Party extremists who hijacked a rally protesting against Government plans to introduce pay-back grants'. Thus the dominant account employs classic agitator theory to explain crowd violence: a small group of anti-social individuals are able to take advantage of the fact that crowd members have lost their judgement in order to turn the mass to anti-social ends.

ANALYSING THE EVENTS

The aim of this section is to examine, firstly, why students came into confrontation with the police on Westminster Bridge and, secondly, how the conflict changed over time. Accordingly, the section is divided into two parts.

The initiation of conflict

Student perceptions

Students decided to go to London on 24th November on the basis that they would be able to lobby their MPs on the loans issue. The Exeter student paper *Exepose* of 14–21.11.88 devotes its front page to the 'Loans Lobby'. The article beings: 'This Thursday (24th November) is your chance to express your views to your member of Parliament'. The wording is taken from a national NUS poster advertising the 'Lobby of Parliament'. It was only when they boarded coaches on the day that most participants became aware that there would be a demonstration and, in the case of Exeter students amongst others, given a map of the march route. However there was remaining uncertainty concerning the relationship between the demonstration and the lobby. This ambiguity was expressed during the interview with S2, one of the organizers of the Exeter contingent:

Q: *Do you think a lot of people were actually intending to get to Westminster and get to their MPs and things?*

S13:   *Well that was the nature of the march. The idea was that there would be a lobby of parliament but until we got there we were fairly unclear of the route and the process that would take — whether individuals would be allowed to go in and see their MPs and lobby and whether it would be the whole body of the march.*

Upon arrival in London, Exeter students were in the rear section of the demonstration. Like the great majority of participants, they were behind when the original breakaway occurred. When they came to the junction with York Road, neither police nor NUS stewards were stopping people going towards Westminster Bridge. Some people were telling them to continue straight on the original route, others were telling them to go to the bridge. Participants represented the situation as very confused:

S10:   *Well, um, it was a bit chaotic really. We didn't really know where we were going or what we were supposed to be doing. Um, we, eventually all sort of assembled, um, by the bridge.*

This statement almost takes it for granted that students should go to the bridge. Similarly, S9 stated in his interview that he 'instinctively' went towards the bridge. Where an explicit reason was given for this choice of direction, it was either that this was where most people were going or, more commonly, that it made sense to go towards parliament because the aim was to get to MPs. As S15 put it, 'the whole objective was to let parliament know that we were there'. The understanding that students were present in order to put their view to parliament was also exemplified in a chant of 'can you hear us in the House' which was repeatedly taken up by demonstrators. In the group discussion, participants responded as follows when the chant came up on the video of events:

S22:   *Everyone was singing that.*
S19:   *That was a brilliant one because everyone was singing that.*
S22:   *Yeah and that really summed up what we were there for more than anything else.*
S24:   *Yeah.*

However, it is not just that participants wanted to get to parliament. The ability to get to the Palace of Westminster and to be heard from their MPs is presented as a democratic right, as can be seen from the following extracts — the first by a student captured on one of the private videos, the second by one of the Exeter interviewees:

'We weren't breaking the law, we weren't doing anything. We just wanted to get across the bridge and go and stand outside Westminster and let them know what we thought about the country'.

S10:   *I don't see why we shouldn't have been allowed to get across the bridge. I mean for goodness sake it's a public highway or whatever you call it.*

Insofar as students perceive that they have a right to cross the bridge, they also perceive the police action in preventing them from crossing as illegitimate. Thus S7 expressed anger at not being allowed across to parliament despite having an appointment with an MP. S4 spoke more generally:

S4: *I couldn't see any harm in letting [the demonstrators] across the bridge to make their point. You know, they wanted to be heard and I just thought that by walking along the bridge it wasn't going to create trouble. I personally did not want to cross the bridge because of all the police but I couldn't understand why they wouldn't let the whole crowd across.*

This extract shows that a belief in the right of students to get to parliament does not necessarily lead to an individual attempting to cross Westminster Bridge him or herself. Indeed, both S7 and S4 followed the NUS banner when Maeve Sherlock attempted to get students to go to the official rally. Thus, although at this early stage there was a division between those who followed NUS and police directions to leave Westminster Bridge and those who ignored them, it does not seem to be dependent upon a difference in perceptions of rights or of the police action. Rather, the issue seems to be one of empowerment:

S12: *So I, along with the majority of the march, headed for the bridge. There was, however, no chance of getting onto the bridge because of the numbers of police vans and policemen blocking it off. We stayed there for about 20 minutes, but it wasn't getting anywhere, so we thought we might as well head for the rally.*

Those who followed official instructions in trying to leave, but found their way blocked once again, returned to the bridge with highly critical views of police action and a loss of trust in the police. S16's statement contains the following passage:

S16: *On Westminster Bridge told variously and sporadically to go back left to our rally — we no longer trust this copper — we know the route is blocked.*

By approximately 2 pm, then, the demonstrators on the bridge — whether they had tried to leave or not — believed that they had been forced to remain on the bridge by illegitimate police action.

From perception to action

Once students considered that they had a right to get to Westminster, anything which denied that right or which signified the possible denial of that right was seen as a provocation. S14 mentioned that the presence of police horses and police in riot gear made people feel scared and angry. Likewise, S10 claimed that:

S10: *We have got a right to air our views. I think the police presence probably is necessary to a certain degree, maybe to protect members of the public who aren't on the demonstration. But I think that such a, um, I can't even think of the word, such, such a sort of overbearing presence, you know, on horses, and looking as if they're gonna charge all the time is, is, unnecessary and it just aggravates the situation. I'm sure it just creates more hostility.*

What evidence is available from the police side suggests that they saw the students in terms that were similar to the way students saw them. All participating officers who were interviewed mentioned the sessional order which prohibits demonstrations within a mile of the Palace of Westminster while the House is sitting. Yet, as one interviewee pointed out, the ground commander has liberty to interpret what constitutes a demonstration and may sometimes allow people to proceed towards parliament in small

groups. It seems that this option was denied to the students because they were perceived as dangerous. The officer in charge on Westminster Bridge, Chief Superintendent Allen Evershed, was quoted as follows in the *Daily Mail* of 25.11.88:

> '*At the start of the march the majority of students were very well behaved but a small minority, who we believe may have been from an organization called the Socialist Workers Students' Society, seemed intent on causing trouble. But after the march was somehow diverted the atmosphere became much more hostile. Certain people appeared to be agitating the students and they made repeated attempts to break through the police ranks and march on Parliament*'.

Thus, at least for the officer giving the orders, the student demonstration constituted not only a technical breach of the law but also a threat to law and order. Thus, the perceptions of the two groups relate to each other as mirror images. The students considered that they had a right to cross the bridge and that the mere presence of the police was illegitimate. The police considered that there was no right to be on the bridge and that the mere presence of demonstrators in its vicinity was illegitimate. In this context a pattern of action and reaction was generated which led to violence.

The students saw police action in pushing them from the bridge as aggressive and responded by pushing back. This led the police into pushing back more aggressively through the use of mounted police. Such action in turn confirmed the student perception of the police as hostile and led them, in turn, to push harder. Over time the pushing and shoving became increasingly intense. This process is illustrated, from the student point of view, in three extracts taken from the group discussion. The first extract shows how the use of horses to move students back is perceived as an unprovoked attack:

> S18:   *They were permanently kicking [police horses] into you, I mean ...*
> S22, S23, S24: *Yeah*
> S18:   *... it wasn't a matter of just having horses there and saying 'right you can't go anywhere' they were sitting there and kicking them and making sure they were charging towards you.*

The second extract shows how, in asserting their right to be on the bridge, demonstrators become committed to the pushing:

> S24:   *The thing was, most people didn't want any violence, they just wanted to stay somewhere. Because I got pushed through the line of the police and found myself in a kind of void and I thought what do I do now? I run that way and I get arrested or I hit a policeman which I didn't particularly want to do, so I went back in, went back a few rows and started pushing again.*

The third extract occurred in response to a segment of the video where a surge by students has pinned the police forces back against a barrier of police vans and illustrates the cycle of escalation:

> S22:   *You can see the drive of the students there, like you can see it all the way back there where people were pushing forward very quickly like a rugby scrum, a massive rugby scrum. And when they turn back, the police are pushing back very fast and people are locking arms trying to stop being pushed back ...*
> S21:   *Yeah*

S22: *...and then the odd person would go in and grab someone, and when people were trying to break through, a few individuals did break through, I saw a few who just got grabbed and arrested and given a bit of a kicking just like that. And after that happened a few times people weren't particularly interested in trying to get through the police line.*

In time, then, the confrontation escalated into fighting. Video evidence shows that, as one group surged forward, those at the front were pressed against outgroup members who often responded by lashing out. Again, students represented the action of the police as unprovoked aggression and their own response as a contingent reaction. Police attempts to effect arrests were seen as random and unjustified acts. S9, one of the organizers of a contingent from Reading, stated that one simply had to be 'in the wrong place at the wrong time' to get arrested. Such arrests were therefore resisted, leading the police into conflict with more students and causing more arrests to be made. In this way the clashes become more widespread and more intense. Several such incidents occurred on the video, and are commented on in the group discussion:

S21: *When people were taken a lot of students would rush round isolating the students who had taken them and pull the student back.*

S22: *That was how we were getting most the helmets and things. That's how they were coming. I mean the police would go in, I mean they would get them off them as well. Generally it was either by the police line getting lost in the crowd or by someone going to snatch someone and getting outwitted and out-smarted, pushed back without getting the arrest and losing their helmet in the process. And so it had a double sort of thing, particularly when you were at the front you could see that pattern emerging. So every time you saw a helmet you knew they had tried to arrest someone and failed.*

Q: *So people were helping people they didn't know.*

All: *Yes, Oh definitely.*

S23: *That's how JC [an Exeter University student] got arrested.*

While resistance was applauded, actions by demonstrators which seemed offensive rather than defensive gained more limited support within the crowd. Video evidence shows that missiles thrown at the police elicited no collective approval. Those in the group discussion reported that the perpetrators were booed and told to stop. This was partly because some of the missiles were hitting demonstrators and partly because it was seen as possibly leading to police retaliation. Both S5 and S12 stated that they thought it would just give 'them an excuse'. Overall, then, the demonstrators described their action as a defence against police attack. They certainly saw nothing to provoke the police in their behaviour. Hence, when the mounted police were used to disperse the crowd, the action was seen as entirely unjustified. Not only are student actions described as insufficient to warrant such extreme action (they weren't causing much trouble according to S5 and the charge was 'without provocation' according to S6), but also, as several of our respondents stressed, the demonstration was beginning to disperse in any case. The sense of outrage is perhaps best expressed by a student quoted in the *Guardian* newspaper (25.11.88): 'it was unnecessary unprovoked violence with no warning'.

Change in conflict

In describing the initiation of conflict, the crowd has largely been referred to as if it constitutes a single and homogenous entity. However, up until the conflict with police began on Westminster Bridge, students repeatedly stressed the heterogenous nature of the demonstration. S10 stated that 'there wasn't a great feeling of togetherness until we actually assembled on the bridge'. Even those on the bridge were initially divided into numerous small groupings:

S19   *Basically it was group, group of friends within the group . . .*
S22, S23:   *Yeah*
S19:   *. . . and they kind of wandered off as groups of friends and they discussed, um, tried to find out first of all what was going on and then those groups split up between the people who wanted to go forward and those who were happier staying back: people who wanted confrontation and people who didn't.*

The major division is between those who are more and less confrontational. Characteristically, this is expressed as a distinction between militants (either defined as members of particular groups or in generic terms) and the rest. Thus S12 referred to left-wingers trying to cause trouble by urging people to march on parliament while S16 divided the student presence from the militants who were 'inciting crowd behaviour'. Our respondents talked of these militants as being unrepresentative of and even oppressive towards 'students'. S5 expressed anger that the presence of 'militant Socialist Worker etc.' would give 'the media an excuse to write us off as 'raving lefties' rather than representative of what the majority of students feel about loans'. Similarly:

S7:   *What happened was, sort of left wing people — some people had decided, had got to the front of the blockade under the bridge that had been shut off, and they came back and they were chanting 'storm the bridge, storm the bridge'.*
Q: *And who were they? I mean, were they left-wing?*
S7:   *Um, I think they must have been Socialist Worker to be perfectly honest. Their approach was quite forcible and, you know, they forced it on the people around them.*

As the events developed on Westminster Bridge, accounts of the categories involved changed dramatically. To start with, the stress on heterogeneity and disunity was replaced by an emphasis on homogeneity and unity. Thus S14 and S15, talking together of the emerging confrontation, agreed that 'we were a united force against them as a united force'. In the group discussion the emergence of unity in the context of conflict with the police was acknowledged more explicitly:

S22:   *To some extent there was a feeling of there was the students and there was the police and you knew which side you were on so you had to be up the front with the students, you know. And there was a lot of crowd empathy getting, building up at this point and so it seemed quite clear the thing to do was to get to the front.*

This sense of unity was also invoked in order to explain the mutual support provided amongst crowd members:

S21: *As you are in a crowd like that people get isolated very quickly so that all the people with you are students and basically they are all the same and the reason why you were there was to go and oppose the government's plans and you acted as a collective body and that was seen throughout the way people chipped in to help each other.*

Q: *So you helped anyone as long as they were a student?*

S19: *Absolutely, yeah.*

S21: *Well you wouldn't even know that they were students — because they were demonstrating with you.*

This passage also illustrates that, in passing from an aggregate of separate categories to a single united category, the distinction between the minority of militants who desire confrontation and the majority of students who wish to avoid it fell by the wayside. Indeed, the implication is that a willingness to support others in conflict against the police was a criterion of crowd membership. Thus, at this point, groups are differentiated from the crowd in general because they are standing aside from aiding fellow members in that confrontation. Ironically, in view of the subsequent media accounts, it was denied that left-wing groups organized the confrontation. Rather they were criticised precisely for standing aside from it:

S20: *That was just spontaneous, everything that happened. It wasn't organized by anybody.*

S21: *That's the thing. 7000 SWSS just don't exist.*

S22: *Yeah, that's right. And even if they were there in those groups they obviously had their priorities more in line with us than those who were trying to sell their papers. I mean there were quite a lot of occasions when people were getting angry with people who were trying to suggest that we should have to adopt some programme when we were being pushed and shoved by the police or were thinking beyond that. You know, there were a few people who got heckled for it.*

In short, the accounts indicate a marked shift in the boundaries and the characterization of those social categories comprising the physical crowd in the course of events. Starting from a position where the crowd comprised an aggregate of small groups marching behind different banners and where most differentiated themselves from those 'militants' who represent the police as an antagonistic outgroup, a situation developed where those in the crowd were largely members of a single social category who differentiated themselves from those who were not actively involved in antagonism with the police. Moreover, in coming to see themselves as oppositional to the police, subjects also came to see the police as an opposition. This shift was particularly apparent amongst those who were attending their first demonstration. S5 stressed that the event led her to see the police 'less as sort of pillars of the community and possibly more as a threat'. For S15:

S15: *I felt really, I suppose I felt angry towards them for I felt like they, they were supporting the, actually supporting the loans. That they were supporting the government, supporting all the action against grants.*

In this sense, the events led naive demonstrators to change their conceptions of the outgroup, just as they had changed their collective self-perception, to be in line with

those of previously politicized demonstrators. For them, the police are to be categorized as a repressive arm of government. Echoing one of the chants heard on Westminster Bridge, S13 explains:

> S13:   *My attitude to the police? Thatcher's bully boys, isn't it?*
> Q: *Really? You do think that?*
> S13:   *Well they must be really. Not whiter than white they aren't.*

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This section presents some general hypotheses concerning the initiation and development of crowd conflict which derive from the preceding analysis. These hypotheses can be divided into two areas of concern. The first has to do with the conditions under which people enter into collective conflict. The second addresses the way in which involvement in collective conflict becomes generalized. Each area will be considered in turn.

Becoming involved in collective conflict

The conflict on Westminster Bridge arises out of a clash in the concepts of rights held by demonstrators and authorities. Whereas students say that their wish to get to parliament is a right and the mere presence of the police is illegitimate, the police say that there is no right to get to parliament and the mere presence of the students is illegitimate. This clash sets off a process of interaction between groups which escalates the conflict and which is marked by differing segmentation of the events by the two groups. Because each side takes its own presence for granted and sees the presence of the other as problematic, their narratives have different starting points. Students construe events as a sequence of: (A) police impede right to get to parliament (B) students attempt to get through to parliament (C) police use physical force to drive crowd back (D) students defend themselves against police attack (E) unprovoked and violent police charge. The same events are construed by the police as; (A) students threaten disruption of parliament (B) police protect parliament from disruption (C) students use physical force against police lines (D) police attempt to contain students (E) students use violence against police (F) police forced to disperse demonstrators in self-defence.

This account of interaction has to be provisional given the scanty evidence from police sources. What can be stated with more confidence is that students became involved in a process of conflict to the extent that they saw the behaviour of the police as an illegitimate attempt to stop them from acting in terms of their rights as collectively perceived. According to this position, 'initiating events' are far from random or epiphenomenal. Rather, conflict arises in contexts where two groups hold incompatible and irreconcilable notions of proper social practice and to the extent that the action of one group is construed as violating conceptions of what is right in terms of the social identity of the other.

To leave this argument as it stands, could, however, be misleading. Two qualifications are in order. First of all, as suggested in the Introduction, some groups adopt an ideology of non-violence and eschew conflict even when subject to extreme provocation. Consequently, only those groups who see violence as at least potentially

legitimate will be prepared to entertain its usage. Thus concepts of legitimacy are important on two levels. On the one hand they determine whether a crowd will enter into conflict under any circumstances. On the other hand, they are implicated in determining the precise circumstances under which crowds which do not reject violence on a principled basis will actually enter into conflict.

The second qualification is that, even where crowd members see conflict as legitimate and where outgroup action is considered to be an illegitimate infringement of rights, confrontation does not automatically ensue. The evidence from Westminster Bridge above shows that those who saw no possibility of breaching police lines attempted to leave rather than staying and shoving. Equally, the shoving increased as the police were moved back and police lines seemed vulnerable. In other words, conflict only occurs when it is seen as efficacious. The important of efficacy is increasingly recognized as a key determinant both in whether people join collective movements and the tactics such movements employ (Klandermans, 1984; Klandermans *et al.* 1988; Melucci, 1988).

With these qualifications in mind, three hypotheses can be advanced to account for the processes by which crowd members become involved in conflict.

H1

Crowd members will only enter into conflict with an outgroup where (a) conflictual behaviour is deemed legitimate (b) outgroup action is seen to violate concepts of proper social practice (c) conflictual tactics are considered an effective way to meet desired ends.

H2

The legitimacy of conflict, the concepts of proper social practice, and both the identification of ends as well as the calculation of whether these ends will be reached are all defined by reference to the collective beliefs of the relevant social category. Hence, in order to understand which actions may initiate crowd conflict it is necessary to understand the perspectives of the groups which are involved.

H3

The incidents out of which crowd originates are not incidental to the underlying causes of conflict. Rather, they are the points at which conceptual differences in the concept of proper social practice as held by different groups become concretely enacted.

The spread of collective conflict

The collective categories utilized by demonstrators shift from the early period, where the crowd is fragmented and the majority disassociate themselves from those who advocate confrontation with the police, to the later stages, where the crowd is largely homogenous and the majority disassociate themselves from those who refuse to join confrontations with the police. Thus the spread of conflict coincides with changes in the self-categorization of crowd members. What is more, given that the ingroup is defined in relationship to the outgroup (Tajfel, 1978; Turner *et al.*, 1987) changes in the way crowd members see themselves necessarily changes their perception of others. At

the outset, the police are perceived as neutral guardians of law and order. By the end, they are seen as partisan defenders of the government interest. Consequently, an explanation of the spread of collective conflict is bound up with the relationship between collective action and social change.

Such an explanation needs to be rooted in an analysis of relations between crowd and police. To start with, both historical and contemporary research suggests that authorities tend to consider large crowds, by virtue of their numbers alone, to constitute a potential threat to public order (Fielding 1991; Stephenson, 1979; Waddington, Jones & Critcher, 1989). This pattern certainly seems to be reproduced on the loans demonstration. It was because the police saw the student crowd as dangerous that they blocked off Westminster Bridge and stopped anyone crossing it. Hence the police not only held particular views of the crowd, they also had the power to act accordingly. What is more, in using this coercive power, they acted indiscriminately upon the demonstration as a whole. Demonstrators were contained on the bridge irrespective of their original affiliations or intentions. When police horses pushed the crowd back, students were equally liable to get shoved aside or knocked over whether they had sought confrontation or not. The police tactics therefore ensured that all demonstrators shared the same experience. Insofar as common fate is a precursor of group formation (Lewin, 1948; Turner, 1982), the indiscriminate nature of police tactics can be used to explain how a fragmented mass of demonstrators came to form a psychologically homogenous crowd. The fact that the basis of their common experience was a denial of perceived rights explains why the members of this crowd were willing to enter into conflict with the police. What is more, in being brought together as a common category and in being able to presuppose the support of others in the category, crowd members gained the confidence to challenge the police and try to break their lines.

This suggests a complex and dynamic relationship between categorization, action and intergroup power relations. To the extent that outside forces have the power to impose their construction of categories in the crowd as actual commonalities or divisions between crowd members, then crowd members will construe themselves in terms that are similar to those of outside forces. However, in affecting the extent of unity amongst crowd members, their ability to resist outside action and to impose themselves on the outgroup is likewise changed. Hence the operation of outgroup power alters the character of the crowd as well as the character of intergroup power relations and thereby provides a new starting point for the next cycle of interaction.

In particular, if outside forces respond to an assumed threat in the crowd by denying the perceived rights of all crowd members, then the conditions are provided for hitherto separate categories to form a single category and for the united crowd to feel both motivated and empowered to challenge these outside forces. Therefore it is not sufficient to point to an initial confrontational minority as an explanation of collective conflict. Rather, it is necessary to analyse how the subsequent intergroup dynamics produce the conditions under which such confrontational actions may generalize. By clamping down on the whole crowd out of fear for what so-called 'agitators' might achieve, the police may create the very situation in which a majority is prepared to condone or actively join with the confrontational activities of those they previously shunned. This analysis of how collective conflict spreads can be summarized in terms of three further hypotheses.

H4

The limits of involvement in collective conflict are defined by reference to those in the crowd who perceive their rights to be denied. This will be a function of the extent to which the outgroup practically differentiates between crowd members in the imposition of constraint.

H5

The less the outgroup differentiates between crowd members the wider their common categorization, the mutual support amongst them, and hence their sense of empowerment to challenge outgroup actions will be.

H6

Where a powerful outgroup reacts to the confrontational acts of one section of the crowd by denying what others in the crowd consider to be their rights, they create the conditions for that section to gain influence and for conflict to generalize.

CONCLUSIONS

The material presented in this paper supports the view that intergroup dynamics are crucial to the onset and development of crowd conflict. However, the study is open to obvious criticism on the grounds of its reliance upon retrospective accounts in order to infer the perceptions, beliefs and categorizations of crowd members. Even assuming that individuals could have insight into these constructs, their accounts of them may arise out of a variety of strategic purposes in the immediate context (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Such considerations are particularly relevant to an event as controversial as 'the Battle of Westminster' where it is important for subjects to construct justifications for their actions and to allocate blame for the violence that occurred.

While such considerations mean that the data should be treated with caution, they do not mean that they should be discarded entirely. If accounts are influenced by the social relations in which they are produced, then the greater the similarity between the social relations of the interview and the social relations under investigation the greater the confidence that can be placed upon the resulting accounts. We tried, as far as possible, to produce such an homology. In particular, the group discussion involved people who had been together on the demonstration, responding directly to the events shown on video rather than responding to prompts from the investigators. Confidence in these responses is enhanced by the fact that the reactions in the group mirrored the reactions of the crowd itself. Frequently, the group responded to events portrayed on video with the same chants and comments as those of the demonstrators themselves. This is but one instance of many where the retrospective accounts were corroborated by contemporary evidence from videos and elsewhere.

What is more, these accounts help make sense of the events themselves. There is a clear match between respondent's accounts of legitimacy and the onset of conflict, between their accounts of their changing definitions of self and changing participation in the event and between these broadening self-definitions and the increasing

homogeneity of the crowd in terms of chanting, protecting other students from arrest and so on. The use of these accounts therefore proves useful in accounting for the pattern of events and generating new ideas — a criterion used by discourse analysts themselves to validate their interpretations.

Nonetheless, further study is clearly necessary in order to validate the hypotheses derived here and to examine their generality. If possible, such studies would at least be contemporary rather than retrospective. Not only would this overcome methodological objections, it would also allow more detailed examination of the processes by which understandings of outgroup action, ingroup identity and the relationship between the two are collectively arrived at. Ideally studies would adopt a longitudinal design. By collecting data before, during and after crowd events one could additionally ground claims about the relationship between crowd dynamics and psychological change.

Future research should also collect data from all the parties to collective conflict. For reasons that have been explained, the present study is mainly focused on demonstrators. This limits the scope of analysis. While it is possible to examine how crowd members perceived police action, how they reacted and how this changed their understandings, the examination of police perceptions and how this fed into their actions is necessarily more speculative. Hence, the study may be intergroup in the sense of showing how the actions of one group at a given moment depend upon what the outgroup is doing. However, it remains tentative when it comes to understanding the intergroup dynamics of crowd development. To understand the process whereby the actions of each group form the social reality in which the other acts, it is necessary to examine things equally from both sides.

In summary, there is still a long way to go in the understanding of crowd process. Nonetheless, the present study does allow for some provisional conclusions. First of all, it reaffirms the relevance of social identity and self-categorization processes to collective action. This can be seen in a number of different ways: the initiation of conflict depended upon the meaning of outgroup action in terms of the collective beliefs of the student category; joint participation in the conflict depended upon adopting a common self-categorization as student in opposition to the police: the treatment of others depended upon their categorical relationship to the self — such that individuals would risk arrest in order to defend other students with whom, on a personal level, they were unacquainted; the response to conflictual acts depended upon their consonance with categorical beliefs — thus only actions seen as 'defensive' rather than 'offensive' generalized through the crowd.

Secondly, while this analysis was based on self-categorization theory, it has implications for how the theory needs to be developed. Most notably, this concerns the relationship between intra- and intergroup levels of analysis. Self-categorization theory acknowledges this relationship by showing how the character of social categories is produced by the intergroup context (Haslam & Turner, 1992; Haslam, Turner, Oakes, McGarty & Hayes, 1992). What emerges from Westminster Bridge is that context should not be seen as an external reality that determines human actions and perceptions. Rather context is itself produced out of action on the basis of categorization. Moreover, rather than categorization and context being opposed terms, it has been shown that the categorizations employed by a first group may, as a function of intergroup power relations, form the concrete context in which a second categorizes itself, perceives the first and acts in turn towards it. Hence categorization is constantly

mutating into context and *vice versa* as a function of intergroup relations. This means that any thorough understanding of group salience, group stereotypes or group empowerment needs to be embedded in an historical study of these evolving relations between groups.

Thirdly, and finally, this study suggests that crowd action is not only socially patterned, but also that it brings about social change. Far from being the desocialized entity of classic theory, the crowd seems to embody the central paradox of all social sciences; the fact that human action is both determined by and determining of society. By examining the micro-processes whereby these two apparent opposites are resolved in the crowd, we may be in a better position to understand the wider dynamics of human social existence.

REFERENCES

Allport, F. (1924). *Social psychology*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Davis, N. Z. (1978). The rites of violence: religious riot in sixteenth century France. *Past and Present*, **59**, 51–91.

Denzin, N. (1970). *The research act*. Chicago: Aldine.

Donati, P. R. (1992). Political discourse analysis. In M. Diani and R. Eyerman (Eds), *Studying collective action*. London: Sage.

Edwards, D. and Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.

Feagin, J. R. and Hahn, M. (1973). *Ghetto revolts*. New York: Macmillan.

Fielding, N. G. (1991). *The police and social conflict*. London: Athlone.

Fogelson, R. M. (1971). *Violence in protest*. New York: Doubleday.

Friedman, D. and McAdam, D. (1992). Collective identity and activism. In A. D. Moris and C. M. Mueller (Eds), *Frontiers in social movement theory*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gamson, W. A., Fireman, B. and Rytina, S. (1982). *Encounters with unjust authority*. Homewood, Il: Dorsey Press.

Graumann, C. F. and Moscovici, S. (1986). *Changing conceptions of crowd mind and behaviour*. New York: Springer Verlag.

Haslam, S. A. and Turner, J. (1992). Context dependent variation in social stereotyping 2: the relationship between frame of reference, self-categorization and accentuation. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, **22**, 251–277.

Haslamn, S. A., Turner, J., Oakes, P., McGarty, C. and Hayes, B. (1992). Context dependent variation in social stereotyping 1: the effects of intergroup relations as mediated by social change and frame of reference. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, **22**, 3–20.

King, M. L. (1963). *Why we can't wait*. New York: Mentor.

Klandermans, B. (1984). Mobilization and participation: social-psychological expansions of resource mobilization theory. *American Sociological Review*, **49**, 583–600.

Klandermans, B., Kriesi, H. and Tarrow, S. (1988). *International social movement research* (Vol. 1). London: JAI Press.

Le Bon, G. (1895, trans. 1947). *The crowd: a study of the popular mind*. London: Ernest Benn.

Lewin, K. (1948). *Resolving social conflicts*. New York: Harper and Row.

McPhail, C. (1991). *The myth of the madding crowd*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Melucci, A. (1988). Getting involved: identity and mobilization in social movements. In B. Klandermans, H. Kriesi and S. Tarrow (Eds), *International social movement research* (Vol. 1). London: JAI Press.

Moore, B. (1978). *The social bases of obedience and revolt*. London: Macmillan.

Nye, R. A. (1975). *The origins of crowd psychology*. London: Sage.

Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology*. London: Sage.

Reddy, W. M. (1977). The textile trade and the language of the crowd at Rouen 1752–1871. *Past and Present*, **74**, 62–89.

Reicher, S. D. (1982). The determination of collective behaviour. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge: CUP and Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

Reicher, S. D. (1984). The St. Pauls riot: an explanation of the limits of crowd action in terms of a social identity model. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, **14**, 1–21.

Reicher, S. D. (1987). Crowd behaviour as social action. In J. Turner, M. Hogg, P. Oakes, S. Reicher and M. Wetherell (Eds), *Rediscovering the social group*. Oxford; Blackwell.

Reicher, S. D. and Potter, J. (1985). Psychological theory as intergroup perspective; a comparative analysis of 'scientific' and 'lay' accounts of crowd events. *Human Relations*, **30**, 1647–187.

Smith, D. (1980). Tonypandy 1910: definitions of community. *Past and Present*, **87**, 158–184.

Stephenson, J. (1979). *Popular disturbances in England 1700–1870*. London: Longman.

Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation between social groups*. London: Academic Press.

Thompson, E. P. (1971). The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century. *Past and Present*, **50**, 76–136.

Thompson, E. P. (1991). *Customs in common*. London: Merlin.

Touraine, A. (1991). *The voice and the eye*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.

Turner, J. C. (1982). Towards a cognitive definition of the social group. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turner, J., Hogg, M., Oakes, P. Reicher, S. and Wetherell, M. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Turner, R. and Killian, L. (1987). *Collective behaviour* (3rd ed). Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Waddington, D., Jones, K. and Critcher, C. (1989). *Flashpoints: studies in public disorder*. London: Routledge.

Wright, S. (1978). *Crowds and riots*. Beverley Hills: Sage.