



REVIEW ARTICLE

# The psychology of health and well-being in mass gatherings: A review and a research agenda



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**Abstract** Mass gatherings bring large numbers of people into physical proximity. Typically, this physical proximity has been assumed to contribute to ill health (e.g., through being stressful, facilitating infection transmission, etc.). In this paper, we add a new dimension to the emerging field of mass gatherings medicine. Drawing on psychological research concerning group processes, we consider the psychological transformations that occur when people become part of a crowd. We then consider how these transformations may have various consequences for health and well-being. Some of these consequences may be positive. For example, a sense of shared identity amongst participants may encourage participants to view others as a source of social support which in turn contributes to a sense of health and well-being. However, some consequences may be negative. Thus, this same sense of shared identity may result in a loss of disgust at the prospect of sharing resources (e.g., drinking utensils) which could, in turn, facilitate infection transmission. These, and related issues, are illustrated with research conducted at the Magh Mela (North India). We conclude with an agenda for future research concerning health practices at mass gatherings.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we draw on contemporary psychological understandings of crowd processes in order to add a new dimension to the emerging field of mass gatherings medicine. First, we consider research on the psychological transformations that occur when people become part of a crowd. Second, we review how these impact health and well-being. Third, we identify an agenda for future research.

Mass gatherings medicine addresses the health dangers that arise when large numbers of people come together for religious events (e.g., the Hajj or the North Indian Magh Mela), sporting events (e.g., the Olympics) or music festivals (e.g., Glastonbury). Mere proximity to so many people makes exposure to infection more likely [1]. Such risks are compounded by the rudimentary living conditions (e.g., poor sanitation) and the noise and crowding [2,3] that tend to characterise such events. These conditions bring their own health risks, and moreover, may make people less resilient (and less careful) in relation to the dangers of infection transmission. Altogether, this leads to well-documented risks of infection within both major religious [4–6] and nonreligious gatherings [1].

There is also potential for infection to spread beyond the gatherings themselves: people may come from many countries, mingle in the crowd, share their infections, and then take them home. In this way, mass gatherings can transform local outbreaks into global pandemics [7]. Not surprisingly, then, mass gatherings medicine research focuses on physical processes of disease transmission and views mass gatherings as a health problem.

This agenda has proved highly productive. It has motivated efforts to mitigate health risks through good planning, effective surveillance, and the implementation of basic prophylactic measures—such as wearing face masks [8,9]. Our intention is not to question such excellent work. Rather, we argue that the present agenda is partial in two important ways, and that the existing work needs to be complemented by an additional stream of studies and interventions.

Our first concern is that current work addresses physical factors in disease transmission but ignores psychological factors. Typically, the crowd is taken to be significant in terms of the simple number of people who are present and how the large number of people increases the probability of disease transmission. This overlooks the psychological transformations that occur when people become part of a crowd and how these shape behaviours relevant to disease transmission in particular and to health and well-being more generally.

Our second concern is that the emphasis on physical factors encourages a focus upon the negative impact of mass gatherings on health, thereby contributing to an approach to crowds which views them purely as a problem. Once one examines the psychological transformations that occur in crowds, the way is opened to a more nuanced approach which addresses both the health benefits and the health costs of mass gathering participation. Furthermore, it opens the way to practical interventions which not only mitigate risks, but also can harness the potential for mass gatherings to be a source of public health.

We start by outlining the social psychology of mass gatherings. We then consider how these social psychological processes may give rise to both health benefits and health risks. From this, we consider the types of intervention which could tip the balance from risks to benefits. Sometimes we draw on a solid research base. Sometimes we can be little more than illustrative because the necessary research remains to be done. Accordingly, we finish by outlining an agenda for future research into the psychological dimension of health and ill health at mass gatherings.

## 2. The psychology of mass gatherings

There is a longstanding view that when people enter crowds they lose their sense of self, lose their sense of judgement, and become capable of the most extreme actions [10]. However, over the last half century, this view has lost academic credibility. Instead, drawing on the social identity approach to group processes [11,12] (probably the most influential contemporary approach to

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