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## Talking about Hillsborough: 'panic' as discourse in survivors' accounts of the 1989 football stadium disaster

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**Talking about a tragedy:  
'Panic' as discourse in survivors' accounts of the 1989  
Hillsborough disaster**

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Keywords:	Mass panic, disaster myths, social identity, collective resilience, Hillsborough football disaster
Abstract:	Popular representations of crowd behaviour in disasters are often characterized by irrationalist discourses, in particular 'mass panic' despite their rejection by current scientific research. This paper reports an analysis of four survivors' accounts of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster to investigate if and how they used the term 'panic'. Reference to 'panic' occurred frequently, but more detailed analysis found that their accounts did not match the classic criteria for 'mass panic' (e.g. uncontrolled emotion, and selfish behaviour). Indeed, participants referred to 'orderly' behaviour, and co-operation, even when they said the threat of death was present. 'Panic' was therefore being used as a description of events that was not consistent. A discourse analysis of usage suggests that participants used 'panic' to convey feelings of fear and distress, but also to apportion culpability towards the actions of the police who were considered responsible for the tragedy. It is concluded that the term 'panic' is so deeply embedded in popular discourse that people may use it even when they have reason to reject its irrationalist implications. Alternative discourses that emphasise collective resilience in disasters are suggested.

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### Abstract

Popular representations of crowd behaviour in disasters are often characterized by irrationalist discourses, in particular 'mass panic' despite their rejection by current scientific research. This paper reports an analysis of four survivors' accounts of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster to investigate if and how they used the term 'panic'. Reference to 'panic' occurred frequently, but more detailed analysis found that their accounts did not match the classic criteria for 'mass panic' (e.g. uncontrolled emotion, and selfish behaviour). Indeed, participants referred to 'orderly' behaviour, and co-operation, even when they said the threat of death was present. 'Panic' was therefore being used as a description of events that was not consistent. A discourse analysis of usage suggests that participants used 'panic' to convey feelings of fear and distress, but also to apportion culpability towards the actions of the police who were considered responsible for the tragedy. It is concluded that the term 'panic' is so deeply embedded in popular discourse that people may use it even when they have reason to reject its irrationalist implications. Alternative discourses that emphasise collective resilience in disasters are suggested.

### Introduction

The advice 'don't panic!' is commonly heard during emergencies, the underlying assumption being that people may behave irrationally otherwise. The concept of mass 'panic' has been largely rejected in academic circles, as there is little evidence that it actually occurs in emergencies (Aguirre, Torres, Gill, & Hotchkiss, 2011; Jacob, Mawson, Payton & Guignard, 2008; Quarantelli, 2001; Sheppard, Rubin, Warman & Wessely, 2006; Sime, 1990). However, the term is used frequently in media<sup>1</sup> and popular accounts of disasters (Dynes, 2003; Fahy Proulx & Aiman, 2012). As well as its easy availability, it affords certain strategic functions. Thus, as a post hoc explanation, 'panic' can be used to suggest that any casualties can be explained (at least in part) by the 'panicked' behaviour of those affected (Garcia, 2011), or even to deflect blame from the management of venues where tragedies have occurred (Chertkoff & Kushigian, 1999).

This paper presents an analysis of survivors' descriptions of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster. The study was carried out as part of a larger study into mass emergency behaviour (Drury, Cocking & Reicher, 2009a), which was itself a contribution to a wider project across the social sciences and humanities to combat irrationalist theories of the crowd. In psychology, irrationalist accounts are particularly associated with the ideas of Le Bon (1895), who suggested that 'submergence' in the crowd leads to the loss of the conscious personality and its replacement by the primitive 'racial unconscious'. Studies from the perspectives of history, political science and sociology have each shown, against Le Bon's predictions of mindless indiscriminate violence in crowds, that behaviour in even the most conflictual crowd events is shaped and limited by shared conceptions of legitimacy, leading to restraint, discrimination and selectivity in targets (e.g. McPhail, 1991; Turner & Killian, 1987). Within social psychology, the anti-irrationalist argument was developed by Reicher (2001) using the concept of social identity:

*Being part of a psychological crowd (as opposed to a set of people who simply happen to be co-present) doesn't entail a loss of identity, but a shift to a more relevant social identity (p.195)*

Le Bon's (1895) concept of 'contagion' was the basis of early theories of 'mass panic' (Bendersky, 2007). Hence, recently, as part of the critique of irrationalism, the social identity concept has been extended from the topic of crowd conflict to explain the evidence of mutual support among strangers observed at many mass emergencies Drury (2012). Preliminary

<sup>1</sup> The following web-log reviews coverage of mass emergencies;  
<http://www.dontpaniccorrectingmythsaboutthecrowd.blogspot.co.uk/>

1  
2  
3 support for this Social Identity Model of Collective Resilience (SIMCR) came from studies of  
4 survivors' behaviour in the July 7<sup>th</sup> London bombings, and interviews with survivors across  
5 eleven different emergencies (Drury Cocking & Reicher 2009a&b). In the interviews we  
6 carried out, we found that disaster survivors often used the term 'panic' in their accounts, but  
7 these accounts also contradicted the notion that 'mass panic' occurred - for example by  
8 including descriptions of mutual co-operation (rather than personal selfishness) amongst  
9 other survivors. This observation draws attention to two important points.

10  
11 The first point is that references to 'panic' can be understood as part of a dominant  
12 discourse that survivors of emergencies and disasters draw upon even when they are aware  
13 of its pathologizing implications.

14 The second point is that the complexities of survivors' usage of the term 'panic' in  
15 their accounts of their behaviour has perhaps been hidden from view in previous research  
16 because of the methodologies that have been employed. A variety of methods have been  
17 used, such as archive analyses (Johnson, 1988), and behavioural or biographical data (Sime,  
18 1995). While behavioural analyses have helped develop models of disasters, accounts from  
19 survivors can overcome criticisms that subjective meaning in such events is not examined.  
20 For example, researchers have examined statements given to the police (e.g. Johnson, 1988)  
21 and press (Aguirre et al., 2011), which can illustrate some of the respondents' experiences.  
22 However, because they were collected for another purpose than academic research, such  
23 accounts may exclude pursuit of psychological issues (for example, police interviews would  
24 not cover issues of identity). More importantly, through the use of all these methods,  
25 consistency in accounts has been sought and variability has been eliminated.

26  
27 Putting these two points together, there is a case for using interviews to examine  
28 variations in participants' accounts of controversial incidents, where 'dominant (pathologizing)  
29 discourses' of events may be available, to analyse how they negotiate these discourses and  
30 the extent to which they may offer alternative 'counter discourses' of their experiences.

31 The present study therefore examines survivors' usage of the term 'panic' to  
32 understand how they might negotiate such irrationalizing discourse. Before describing the  
33 background to these particular interviews we outline how we think discourse analysis is an  
34 appropriate methodological approach for understanding participant accounts in this context.

### 35 36 *Analysing talk about crowd disasters*

37 Discourse analysis can be defined as the study of how people achieve things with language,  
38 or, in some versions, how language does things to people, sometimes despite their conscious  
39 intentions and interests. Discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992) developed from an  
40 interest in variability in talk, whereas Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk 2009; Willig, 1999)  
41 and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Willig, 2001) specifically explore how language can  
42 constrain those who use it, and how people may resist such constraints:

43  
44  
45 *'Discourse analysis [DA]...allows us to question and challenge dominant constructions*  
46 *of psychologically relevant concepts...By deconstructing such categories, we can*  
47 *demonstrate that things could be different, that our customary ways of categorising and*  
48 *ordering phenomena are reified and interest-driven rather than simple reflections of*  
49 *reality' (Willig, 1999 p.2)*

50  
51 DA suggests that while speakers may resist pathologization, their choices of words are  
52 constrained by what is culturally available. This can explain why those who would reject  
53 attributions of their own pathology in mass emergencies may nevertheless use a term that  
54 implies a 'panicked' response to such disasters.

55 There is some precedent for using DA to examine how crowds are represented (and  
56 pathologized). For instance, Drury (2002) explored press coverage of anti-paedophile protests  
57 in the UK, and found that use the term 'mob' was used to delegitimize specific crowds but  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 also served to pathologize general crowd processes. The use of the term 'panic' in disasters  
4 may also serve a similar rhetorical function, and this can be manifested at both 'macro' and  
5 'micro' levels of discourse (Van Dijk, 1993). For example, dominant discourses of the  
6 irrationality of crowd behaviour can maintain social inequality by justifying crowd management  
7 strategies that protect us from the potential excesses of 'panicking' crowds and influencing  
8 more authoritarian (and less participatory) emergency response strategies. But the availability  
9 of the term 'panic' (and unavailability of more neutral terms) can also constrain the language  
10 used by survivors themselves to explain their experiences, meaning that they may still  
11 unwittingly perpetuate dominant discourses through their own accounts even while rejecting  
12 any irrationalist implications.  
13

#### 14 *The Hillsborough football disaster*<sup>2</sup>

15 Hillsborough is an apposite example of how survivors may contest the way they are  
16 pathologized in the representation of a disaster. On April 15<sup>th</sup> 1989, 96 people died<sup>3</sup> at the  
17 Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield, UK during a Football Association (FA) cup semi-final match  
18 between the teams, Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. It was common practice at the time for  
19 such matches to be played at a neutral venue, and so Hillsborough was chosen. Liverpool  
20 had more fans attending, but there was a mismatch in the allocation of tickets, and Liverpool  
21 fans were given the smaller Leppings Lane end of the stadium<sup>4</sup>. A crush soon developed  
22 outside the ground of fans trying to enter by an inadequate number of turnstiles that could not  
23 allow their ingress in time. Fearing this crush, the police unlocked an external exit gate, which  
24 caused a crowd surge through a tunnel into two central spectator enclosures (known as pens)  
25 that were already dangerously overcrowded. Attempts by fans to escape onto the pitch were  
26 initially prevented by the police (who believed mistakenly that fans were attempting a pitch  
27 invasion), thus compounding the problem. Ninety-six Liverpool fans died in the ensuing crush  
28 (mostly from asphyxia). Coverage of the disaster was particularly controversial, as some  
29 media reports blamed drunken and/or disorderly behaviour by the fans, despite there being  
30 no independent evidence to support this assertion<sup>5</sup>. This controversy persisted until the  
31 release of the Hillsborough Independent Panel report in September 2012<sup>6</sup>, that exonerated  
32 fans of responsibility for the disaster, and concluded that crowd mismanagement caused the  
33 tragedy (largely because the policing of football matches at the time was considered as a  
34 public order, rather than public safety issue<sup>7</sup>). Furthermore, the report exposed the shocking  
35 extents that the local police force (South Yorkshire Police) went to in order to hide their own  
36 culpability (such as initially claiming that fans had forced the external gate open), and their  
37 attempts to obstruct the survivors' and bereaved families' quest for justice (such as altering  
38 individual officers' statements about the tragedy).  
39  
40  
41

#### 42 *The present study*

43 The present analysis will explore the language used by survivors of Hillsborough to describe  
44 their experiences. More specifically, their usage of the term 'panic' will be explored in detail.  
45 Coverage of emergencies is often controversial because describing individuals' or groups'  
46 actions as 'panic', can convey irrationality in those displaying such 'panic'. Furthermore, use  
47 of the term 'panic' has a number of associations and implications. If the tragedy at  
48

49  
50 <sup>2</sup> 'Football' refers to the sport known as 'soccer' in the USA.

51 <sup>3</sup> Ninety-five died on the day and one was left in a persistent vegetative state, dying nearly  
52 four years later.

53 <sup>4</sup> Fans from different teams at UK football matches are often segregated into separate areas  
54 to prevent possible 'disorder'

55 <sup>5</sup> <http://www.contrast.org/hillsborough/history/media.shtml>

56 <sup>6</sup> [http://hillsborough.independent.gov.uk/repository/report/HIP\\_report.pdf](http://hillsborough.independent.gov.uk/repository/report/HIP_report.pdf)

57 <sup>7</sup> Fruin (2002) argues that crowd 'management' rather than crowd 'control' approaches can  
58 help prevent disasters, as the former involves facilitating the safe movement of crowds, while  
59 the latter involves restricting group behaviour.  
60

Hillsborough is explicable in terms of mismanagement rather than crowd behaviour, and if there is no evidence that mass panic is either typical or took place at Hillsborough, will interviewees still use it uncritically in their accounts? Moreover, will they use it to describe their and others' experiences during the incident, and will such use be consistent with dominant discourses of 'panic'?

## Method

### *Participants*

We interviewed individually four survivors (three male, and one female) of the Hillsborough disaster. All were Liverpool fans, and were either caught up in the crush outside the stadium, or inside the spectator pens. The interviews were drawn from a larger data-set of 21 survivors of twelve different mass emergencies, which are reported elsewhere (Cocking, Drury & Reicher, 2009; Drury et al., 2009a). All were in their early to mid 30s at time of interview (spring-summer 2004), and were recruited via advertisements in the UK mass media.

### *Interview procedure*

Participants were asked to describe their experiences. The interview was organized around the following issues: (i) Behaviour: for example, 'What did you and others do during the disaster? Did people help each other out, or behave selfishly?'; and (ii) Thoughts/feelings: for example, 'What were you thinking/feeling? Do you think that anyone 'panicked'? Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### *Analytic procedure*

A preliminary data analysis was conducted, based upon the frequency in speakers' use of the term 'panic', and then a more detailed analysis was undertaken to explore the contexts in which 'panic' was used. This was guided by Fairclough's (2001) four stage analytical framework using a Critical Discourse Analytic approach. This framework initially focuses upon a social problem that has a semiotic aspect (in this case irrationalist discourses that pathologize crowds by their use of the term 'panic'), and then identifies obstacles to this problem being tackled (e.g. irrationalist discourses are so ingrained that they may be used, even by those who have reason to resist them). Next, one considers whether the current social order 'needs' the problem. For instance, assumptions of 'mass panic' could serve to legitimize disaster management strategies which reproduce relations whereby bottom-up resilience is inhibited and top-down control is maintained (Dynes, 2003; Furedi, 2008). Finally, possible ways of overcoming the obstacles should be identified. Therefore, in order to counter dominant discourses of the irrationality of crowd behaviour, the notion of bottom-up, collective resilience needs to be legitimized, and developing new forms of discourse to describe mass behaviour (that have less emotive connotations than the term 'panic') could be part of this process. In the present case, we analysed the use of the word 'panic' in the transcripts by considering which other words could have been used instead and then inferring the functions of the use of the word 'panic' within the interaction (Potter, 2004).

## Analysis

Table 1 illustrates the most common contexts in which the term 'panic' was used. The frequency of all utterances of the term was also recorded, thus creating a total for each participant, and illustrating how common use of 'panic' was within their accounts.

-----  
Insert Table 1 here  
-----

'Panic' was mentioned 62 times in total, with usage ranging from seven to 31 times across participants. However, two also explicitly denied that there was panic. The term was used in a

variety of contexts. For instance, 'panic' was used thirteen times as a form of defence of their behaviour; in that participants were justifying their own and other fans' actions in the extreme situation they found themselves. However, it was also used five times to signify culpability of the police, because they were considered unable to manage the situation safely. These variations in participants' use of the term 'panic' suggest complexity in their accounts which therefore needs to be examined in further depth. Each interview account will now be addressed in turn to examine usage of 'panic', and the extent to which participants appear to be constrained by the term. Finally, we will investigate if participants attempt to resist such constraints within their accounts.

*Mike*<sup>8</sup>

Mike was caught in the crush outside the ground, but avoided being swept into the fatal crush in the pens. When asked to describe the feelings of those involved, he spontaneously mentioned 'panic', which he puts alongside 'fear', as if the two are separate entities:

**1. Int:** *I'd like to look now at your perceptions of other people's feelings and emotions...<sup>9</sup>how did people around you appear to be...reacting to events?*

**Mike:**...*There was a definite sense of growing fear and panic*

When later asked directly if he thought that people 'panicked', Mike concurred, but also questioned the appropriateness of the term. When pressed for examples, he described an individual's expression of fear, rather than any overt manifestations of 'panicked' behaviour in the crowd as a whole, thus showing more complexity than his original use of the term and perhaps also resisting its implications:

**2. Int:** *Do you think that anybody around you panicked?*

**Mike:** *yeah, I mean...I suppose there's degrees isn't there of panic...you know there's a continuum but I would say certainly there was...it was not like being in a normal football...I've been at the Kop<sup>10</sup> and it's swaying to and fro and there's nobody who's ever really panicked in there...although it could be very dangerous...you know people kind of knew what the environment was and didn't feel the same way but in this sense there wasn't...yeah you could say that the crowd was fearful...I'm not sure that I'd call it panic because I don't know why you'd start saying panic...but yeah I s'pose to a certain extent there probably was some panic around...but a lot of fear*

**Int:** *Can you think of any particular examples that to you said 'oh that person's panicking' because they're doing this or that?*

**Mike:** *I can remember really one guy that was stood against the gates as they closed behind us um...looking in pain and panic...I suppose but generally it was more about of you know...registering a mood...you know...I mean being in panic...it's got a mood*

Mike invokes shared knowledge ('you know') when constructing 'panic' as something that exists on a 'continuum'; this, he says, is something we all know, so there can be no definitive answer to the question of whether there was 'panic'. Thus, while 'panic' was used to refer to behaviour, when probed for examples of such behaviour, Mike instead questioned the appropriateness of the term and drew upon what Edwards (1997) termed a 'discursive resource' (p. 194) derived from emotion concepts to differentiate between internal states ('mood') and external behaviour. Further, when asked for specific examples of 'panic', he then referred to an individual and not the crowd; the term 'one guy' suggests an exception rather than an exemplar.

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity

<sup>9</sup> ... denotes pause in speech

<sup>10</sup> The home supporters' end at Liverpool's home ground

Chris

Chris was caught in the crush outside, but also avoided the surge into the pens. He initially used the term 'panic' to describe a police officer's reaction to being alerted to the emerging danger. This usage implies culpability on the part of the police, as it indicated that at least some of them were too inexperienced to be competent, and they were not in control of a situation that was becoming increasingly dangerous:

*3. I remonstrated...very politely with a police officer to tell them to open the far gate and generally try and organise the crowd because it was already apparent to me...that there was an increasing problem already outside the ground...he told me to fuck off...he was only a young lad and he was very panicky...he gave overall the very clear...display that...A) no-one was exercising official control...B) that there didn't seem to be any organisation*

What is notable here is that 'panic' is being applied to someone outside the crowd rather than within it. Moreover while here again the speaker refers to an individual, not to the crowd, in this case the individual is positioned as an exemplar – of the police category; note the way the 'police officer' (singular) is positioned as representing 'them'.

Chris's usage of the term 'panic' became more nuanced when describing other fans' actions. For instance, while he initially described the crowd's behaviour as 'panicked and incoherent', he later qualified this description, suggesting that his use of the term 'incoherent' did not stand up to scrutiny; nor did the behaviour he reported fit with descriptions of stereotypical 'panicked' behaviour;

*4. I saw no occurrence of anyone...not trying to help...I saw a lot of people trying in a...very panicked and incoherent way in some respects to make the situation better.*  
**Int:** *Is it possible to explain in more detail what you mean - was it uncoordinated?*  
**Chris:** *Yeah incoherent is probably the wrong word - uncoordinated would probably be better...in terms of individuals were acting and doing what they felt was best for themselves and for the people around them. There was no controlled movement of what was increasingly a large number of...hot and bothered people*

The word 'incoherent', like the word 'panic', perhaps conveys irrationality and was rejected for that reason. When later asked if he thought people 'panicked', he replied that those caught in the crush did not 'panic' because they were physically unable to do so, suggesting that here 'panic' was being used to refer to overt physical behaviour, and even 'physical' (physiological) responses; again, when pressed, there was a reluctance to embrace the ascription of 'panic':

**5. Int:** *Do you think anybody panicked?*  
**Chris:** *One didn't have the capacity physically to panic. You couldn't move, so panic became things like breathlessness...people losing consciousness because they were getting concerned and I witnessed that, but that's really a physical degree*

Again, therefore, 'panic' as an account of the response of the crowd of which Chris was a part was rejected, even after he had himself used the word initially. Its implications of psychological weakness jarred with the attempt of the speaker to present the disaster as a function not of psychological factors but of situational and physical factors beyond their control.

Andy

1  
2  
3 Andy was caught in the fatal crush in the pens and had to stand on dead bodies in order to  
4 escape and reach the safety of the pitch. His account contains the most frequent references  
5 to 'panic' (half of all references we found). The following extracts illustrate his spontaneous  
6 use of the term to describe how people were only concerned for themselves, and also that  
7 'panic' was widespread;  
8

9  
10 *6. The only way I can describe it was blind panic and everyone just looking out for*  
11 *themselves...you know when panic sets in... it's hard to describe, everyone's had a*  
12 *panicky moment you know when panic sets in all you're bothered about is...you'd do*  
13 *anything possible to get out*

14  
15 Andy explicitly says that he has little choice of words ('the only way I can describe it'), thus  
16 illustrating the linguistic constraints under which he is operating. Again he invokes shared  
17 knowledge ('you know') and uses a script formulation (Edwards, 1995), to present these  
18 selfish reactions to 'panic' as normal and something 'we' have all had experience of. Indeed,  
19 the way panic is being described operates as a warrant for extreme behaviour for the generic  
20 person ('you'd do anything').  
21

22  
23 *7. It was terrifying but as I said once blind panic has set in I would think that was that*  
24 *was the main part...sheer panic. The police panicked, the crowd panicked, everyone*  
25 *panicked*

26  
27 Here, the universality of 'panic' is conveyed with a three-part list (Jefferson, 1991) and  
28 extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). The crowd's 'panic' is not particular to this  
29 specific crowd; it is a 'human' response that the police and indeed 'everyone' are susceptible  
30 to. When asked if he could describe in more detail what he meant when he used the term  
31 'panic', Andy reported the following example of how he felt he had panicked through his  
32 actions to escape, suggesting that here he was using the term as a form of defence, to justify  
33 actions that might otherwise be considered immoral outside of such extreme circumstances;  
34 the response begins with some biographical work, as he reassures the interviewer that he  
35 would never have even considered such extreme behaviour before. In arguing that it is not in  
36 his nature, the only possible explanation is the understandable and very human 'panic' that  
37 assailed him and 'everyone else' within the event;  
38

39  
40 *8. One thing I've just told you know when you say about panic...never ever would I*  
41 *consider stepping on a dead body...I did that to save myself because I panicked...and*  
42 *a lot of other people did exactly what I done as well...I thought to myself 'look I'm*  
43 *either going to step on he or she...to get out of this and live or die'...the choice was*  
44 *that simple...and I hope that would be an example of panic*

45  
46 Here then 'panic' is not used to refer to irrationality (as in self-defeating behaviour) but the  
47 opposite; the story is conveyed by reporting an internal conversation in which the speaker  
48 reasons with himself, and is therefore extremely 'rational'. While this extract describes a  
49 horrific situation, it also highlights the way that the term 'panic' was used as a gloss for a  
50 range of experiences. In this case, stepping on corpses to escape is presented as an extreme  
51 behaviour, bracketed with selfishness, despite the realisation that if he had not done so, he  
52 would very likely have perished himself. Therefore, this behaviour is 'normalized' by  
53 reference to 'a lot of other people' doing the same.  
54

55 *Kirsty*

56 Kirsty was initially in the crush in the pens, but was pulled to safety in the stand above from  
57 where she witnessed the disaster develop. She initially used the term 'panic' to describe her  
58  
59  
60

sense of frustration and loss of control, rather than any overt expressions of behaviour. She also attempted to downplay her reaction by suggesting that being female it may not have been typical, as attendance at football matches in the 1980s was a largely male preserve (only seven of the 96 fatalities were female);

*9. I started to get a bit panicky because...my hair was being pulled back...I realized in retrospect that I couldn't see the players on the pitch...so a combination of getting a bit panicky before the game started, plus frustrated...because it was hot I was wearing a leather jacket. People...had no control of where you were being moved and I remember thinking it was just me...I was being a bit girlie*

Here, then, being 'panicky' is something that is experienced before the tragedy began to unfold, for relatively trivial reasons, and linked to personal attributes, not features of the crowd. Later in the interview, she used the term 'panic' in her description of her attempts to facilitate collective efforts to pull others from the crush, meaning while their behaviour may have been frantic, it was also purposive and social:

*10. As soon as I got pulled out I remember panicking to scramble back so that it wouldn't stop other people from getting out because they were pulling so many people out*

Thus, Kirsty's usage reverses that of Andy, where 'panic' was used to justify 'selfish' behaviour, since here it is being used to refer to concern for others. She later rejected the term, by distinguishing between 'shaking' (and fear) and 'irrational' behaviour, and explicitly denied that there was panic, despite the obvious distress in others. She also showed some critical awareness of how the term is used in popular discourse:

*11. There was this man standing next to me, I remember asking him if he was alright and he was just shaking...I don't know if that's panicking...he was just shaking...but not panicking as in fleeing, headlong irrational behaviour*

**Int:** *Did you see any instances of what you would describe of as panic?*

**Kirsty:** *I can't think of any examples, no...I can see people wandering dazed, but I can't see in my images anyone doing irrational, you know people can say 'well I panicked and I had to get out', but that's rational behaviour-that's not panic behaviour...not in the classical mythical sense*

Kirsty is explicit about the link between 'panic' and ascriptions of irrationality and uses the criteria of rationality to judge whether the behaviours she observed should be referred to as 'panic'. Similar to Chris's account, she also used the term 'panic' to attribute a sense of culpability towards the behaviour of the police, although she differentiated between the rank and file who were following the directions of their superiors, and the senior officers who were in charge (the 'two people at the top'), against whom she still maintained a sense of anger and blame over their responsibility for the tragedy:

*12. I've now met some police officers and I work with police officers. I've massively changed how I think about them because they were individuals responding but the two people at the top I allow myself to still feel angry with...because I have to be angry somewhere...I went to the trial<sup>11</sup> and everything ten years ago...it was very hard because I see them as human beings who panicked...but I don't want to let go of that anger and that blame*

<sup>11</sup> An unsuccessful private prosecution was brought by families against the two most senior officers in charge of policing the match; <http://www.contrast.org/hillsborough/trial.shtml>

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4 The differentiation of those at the top from the other officers allows her to manage a possible  
5 accusation of prejudice. Thus the extract begins with a stake inoculation (Potter, 1996); her  
6 anger now is not based on personal hostility to the police, since her views have changed over  
7 time and are nuanced. Moreover, the police's unreasonable behaviour – their 'panic' – was  
8 only 'human'; thus as well as being blamed, they are partially excused (or, at least, there is  
9 mitigation).

### 11 Discussion

12 Reference to 'panic' was common in our Hillsborough survivors' interviews despite the  
13 problems of using such a term in scientific accounts (Sime, 1990). While participants'  
14 accounts varied, they also displayed similar patterns. First, they frequently used the term  
15 'panic' to describe the behaviour and emotions of those affected. Second, when asked to  
16 elaborate, they tended to then nuance their narrative, providing examples of behaviours that  
17 seemed more normative within the context, and sometimes they went further, denying 'panic'  
18 outright. Their accounts were also sometimes contradictory in that they would use  
19 descriptions of 'panic' that did not correspond with classic notions of 'panicked' behaviour.  
20 They also used 'panic' to excuse 'extreme' behaviour, to blame people outside the crowd, and  
21 to explain their concern for others. The term was also used to describe the individual distress  
22 that can be experienced in disasters, rather than any crowd pathological behaviour. Indeed,  
23 'panic' was often used to contrast the 'panicked' behaviour of individuals with the calm  
24 behaviour of the crowd as a whole. Perhaps it is only when individual expressions of distress  
25 are considered anti-normative that definitions of 'panic' are invoked. For instance, screaming  
26 in the face of extreme danger could be considered a normal reaction to a very abnormal  
27 situation which is unlikely to evoke sanction from others (and more likely to result in attempts  
28 to comfort those affected), whereas pushing others over in an effort to escape would more  
29 likely attract disapproval. Participants also used the term 'panic' as a way of attributing blame  
30 towards those considered responsible for the tragedy. So the actions of the police which  
31 contributed to the disaster were defined as 'panic', but their accounts of fellow fans' behaviour  
32 were less accepting of the term. Such usage is consistent with fans' rejection of the notion  
33 that they were to blame for the tragedy and reflects the ongoing campaign for justice for the  
34 victims.<sup>12</sup>

### 38 Limitations

39 Before discussing this study's implications, we will examine the limitations of our analysis.  
40 First, it is worth considering the extent to which the material we have presented is a function  
41 of the data-gathering method. When collecting interview data, there are issues of self-  
42 presentation, how interviewees' discourse is positioned, and the genre of the interview itself  
43 (Potter & Hepburn 2005). While this study has explored how people can be constrained by  
44 the discourse available, we also need to be careful that we are not further constraining  
45 participants by imposing our research agenda upon them. However, in terms of our specific  
46 research aims we felt that the term 'panic' was already so prevalent in popular culture, that we  
47 were not influencing participants' discourse unduly by exploring such terms in our interviews.  
48 Indeed, all participants spontaneously mentioned the term before the interviewer, giving us  
49 confidence that it was already part of the discourse they would naturally use to describe their  
50 experiences.

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52 Another possible limitation is the small sub-set from which we collected data (four  
53 survivors of the same disaster). We do not seek to provide an accurate and/or comprehensive  
54 account of what happened at Hillsborough – other studies have done that (e.g. Challenger &  
55 Clegg, 2011). Our intention was to investigate participants' attempts to recount their  
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58 <sup>12</sup> <http://www.contrast.org/hillsborough/history/final.shtm>

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3 experiences and explore usage of the term 'panic' in their talk, rather than seek an 'objective'  
4 account. Therefore, the usual objection to a data-set like this – that accounts will be distorted  
5 by memory (in this case 15 years), is not a problem for the claims made. The interest lay in  
6 how participants spoke about a controversial topic, when the dominant explanatory frame is  
7 one which potentially worked against their presentation of themselves as rational and decent  
8 human beings. Nor was this study an attempt to specify all the ways that 'panic' is used when  
9 survivors talk about a tragedy. We have merely identified some of the possible ways of using  
10 the term 'panic' that are culturally available. In order to extend the claims made here, a much  
11 larger corpus of material would need to be collected.  
12

### 13 *Implications*

14 This study has shown how an irrationalist discourse of 'panic' can occur in survivors' accounts  
15 of disasters, and how they may reject the implications imposed by such discourse. However,  
16 while use of the term 'panic' by participants in this study was shown to have implications for  
17 their blameworthiness, the use of the term by those with responsibility and power can also  
18 have much wider implications, and so is not simply an academic matter. More generally,  
19 representations of disasters can in turn influence the response to such incidents. For  
20 instance, Furedi (2008) argues that while the term 'resilience' is often used in security  
21 planning discourse, it is nevertheless underpinned by assumptions of public vulnerability.  
22 Furthermore, a self-fulfilling prophesy could emerge, in that emergency response strategies  
23 often assume 'panicked' reactions, resulting in information and resources that could help  
24 facilitate resilient responses being withheld in the fear that they may not be used appropriately  
25 (Drury, 2012; Wessely, 2005). Clarke & Chess (2008) suggested that 'elite panic' may even  
26 occur during emergencies, whereby it is the authorities charged with disaster planning and  
27 response who are more likely to 'panic' rather than the communities affected;  
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31 *Elites sometimes fear panic, [ ] elites can cause panic, and [ ] elites can themselves*  
32 *panic (p.999)*  
33

34 Willig (2001) argues that discursive constructions can have 'real' effects, and so differing  
35 disaster narratives can influence emergency responses differently. For example, Drury (2011)  
36 highlights the different narratives used after the July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005 London bombings and the  
37 implications of each:  
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39 *Narratives of resilience...are, like the well-known media image of 'mass panic', not*  
40 *simply descriptions of events. They can operate as rationales for practice, justifications*  
41 *for decisions, and reasons for praising some and blaming others. They are highly*  
42 *consequential. If everyone is going to panic, there is no point installing communication*  
43 *systems. But if resilience is...more widespread...then there is every reason to*  
44 *acknowledge and facilitate public involvement in their own safety and security*  
45

46 This notion of crowd resilience in emergencies is supported by recent research (e.g. Cole,  
47 Walters & Lynch, 2011; Cocking, in Press) which found that survivors and bystanders on 7/7  
48 were able to help each other in the immediate aftermath of the explosions before the  
49 emergency services arrived (rather than being too 'panicked' or shocked to co-operate). It is  
50 argued that these de-facto 'zero-responders' could be considered as a potential resource to  
51 assist with future mass emergency response.  
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54 Nevertheless, accounts of emergencies can still reflect a discourse of vulnerability, even by  
55 those who have reason to reject the implications of such discourse (as survivors of  
56 Hillsborough certainly do). This is consistent with research into other mass emergencies, (e.g.  
57 Drury et al., 2009a,b) which found accounts of 'panic' amongst survivors and witnesses that  
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were contradicted by reports of more normative behaviour (although accounts of 'panic' were more frequent amongst those who did not directly experience the emergency). The term is perhaps so ingrained within popular discourse, that it has become a 'common-sense' assumption, which is difficult to challenge, despite such common sense discourse often being composed of contradictory explanations that may not provide a coherent system of beliefs, nor stand up to analytical scrutiny (Billig, 1988). Since 'mass panic' pathologizes crowds and is dangerous as a rationale for emergency management practices, we agree with Willig (2001)'s suggestion that the constraints of common sense discourse can, and should, be challenged:

*Dominant discourses privilege those versions of social reality which legitimate existing power relations and social structures. Some discourses are so entrenched that it is very difficult to see how we may challenge them. They have become 'common sense'. At the same time...alternative constructions are always possible and that counter-discourses...emerge eventually (p.107)*

### **Conclusion**

Inconsistencies exist in the language used by survivors of disasters; while their accounts may reflect 'common-sense' views, they may also be perpetuating unwittingly myths which are challenged by empirical evidence in this field. However, the fact that they also attempt to resist the constraints imposed by a pervasive discourse of crowd vulnerability to 'panic', shows that there is some rejection of such narratives. This resistance could be part of a process that creates a new counter-discourse suggesting the existence of more resilient approaches to crowd emergency behaviour, and is consistent with McPhail's (1991) assertion that the term itself is redundant;

*'panic' is neither a useful description or explanation; the concept should be expunged from the language of social and behavioral science (p.147)*

Therefore, while there is still work to do in challenging irrationalist discourses prevalent in descriptions of emergencies, creating counter-discourses that use more neutral (or even positive) descriptions of behaviour is a worthwhile task, and emergency management strategies would benefit from this process. Indeed, embracing a discourse of mass emergency resilience could contribute to improved crowd management, as approaches that trust people to deal with information about threats without 'panicking', and encourage survivors' ability to co-operate with other will contribute towards safer and more efficient disaster responses.

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**Table 1*****Contexts in which participants used 'panic'***

<b>Participant</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Total</b>
Reports of own 'panic'	2	0	3	6	11
Reports of 'panic' in others	5	5	4	1	15
'Mass panic'	0	0	10	0	10
'Panic' as defence	3	2	5	3	13
'Panic' as culpability	0	2	2	1	5
Denial of 'panic'	0	1	0	1	2
Total uses of term 'panic'	13	7	31	11	62

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For Peer Review