

MAN AND HIS PANIC PRONE ENVIRONMENT: THEORETICAL AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

SOLOMON U. EZENIBE

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ABSTRACT

The events of recent past, especially the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks of the United States' Trade centre in New York and the pentagon in Washington and the bomb blast of the Ikeja Military cantonment on Sunday January 27, 2002 where about a thousand people lost their lives as a result of panic is a sure reminder that panic behaviour is still with us. Panic is a type of collective behaviour which is the spontaneous, unstructured, transitory behaviour of a group of people reacting to a specific event. that is, a panic occurs when people react in fear and try to escape from a situation perceived as threatening. Recently, a panic and mass hysteria occurred when the accident took place at the Ikeja Military Cantonments in Lagos. About a thousand people lost their lives and property worth millions of naira were damaged. This paper argues that the problem of panic behaviour has long been of practical and theoretical significance. It distinguishes between panic in unorganized group and panic in organized groups. The paper recommends that the federal, state, and local governments in Nigeria should set up more efficient panic – oriented agencies. The agencies like the National Emergency Relief Agency and the Nigerian Red Cross are already there. It is recommended that the Federal government should adequately fund them to make them more efficient and efficacious.

Keywords: Terrorist attacks, Panic Behaviour, Governments, Agency

INTRODUCTION

The study of panic behaviour has long been of practical and theoretical significance. For example, panic has contributed needlessly huge loss of lives and property not only in both natural and man –made disaster situations, but also in the military, where troops engaged in panic flight in the face of the enemy have, at times, opened the way to tactical, and in some cases, strategic defeats (Schultz, 1964).

From a theoretical standpoint, knowledge of the conditions and causes of panic behaviour is necessary in order to provide a thorough and systematic framework within which to more fully understand and predict crowd or group behaviour.

The aim of this paper therefore, is to examine panic behaviour in unorganized and organized groups against the background of the

recent bomb explosions at the Ikeja Ammunition Transit Depot. It is suggested that where many lost their lives due to panic the topic of panic behaviour be given a renewed attention, in view of the fact that research in this area has been given less attention in the recent past by sociologists. The loss of about a thousand lives in the Lagos military Barrack's explosion is a case in point. This was as a result of panic. There are many and varied definitions of panic. As a result, literature on this topic is characterized by lots of ambiguities. For example, Schultz [1964] maintains that in newspaper accounts of fires, ships collisions, and the like, the word panic is constantly used to what may in actuality be simple flight behaviour which, in many cases, is the only rational way to respond to such disasters.

Ordinarily, people do not prefer to stay in a collapsing or burning building any more than they prefer to remain in the path of speeding

automobile – the going being that flight, per se, is not an automatic indicator of panic behaviour.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF PANIC

Foreman (1953) suggests that there are two conceptions of panic prevalent in the sociological and psychological literature. One

conception, as represented by Cantril (1943), and Janis (1951) emphasizes the covert emotional state of a terrorized individual; a person who is distraught and demoralized and in an intense state of fear. Panic, according to this view, is primarily an internal state which may or may not lead to overt flight behaviour. The second conception of panic as represented by Enrico Quarantelli (1954), considers flight behaviour as a necessary condition. Quarantelli defined panic behaviour as, "an acute fear reaction marked by a loss of self-control which is followed by nonsocial and nonrational flight behaviour" Schultz (1964) however, maintains that in the first case a group can be labeled as "panicking"; if its members are intensely fearful without engaging in flight behaviour, whereas in the second case, this label can only be properly applied if the group does engage in flight behaviour. He is of the opinion that for the purpose of providing a unifying framework within which to discuss panic behaviour. One has to consider overt flight behaviour as necessary to a definition of panic, adding the following two considerations:

(1) That flight behaviour must lead to the destruction of the group, as a psychological group.

(2) That flight behaviour must be non adaptive for the physical survival of the group member. Schultz, contends that the second condition follows from the first and both imply a loss of consideration for one's fellow. Several reasons, he says, are operative in deciding on this particular definition of panic, one of which being that the first definition stresses intense fear which is not necessarily manifested overtly. According to him, there are many instances where the individual members of a group experiences an intense degree of fear and yet are still able to respond rationally in a manner adaptive to the situation. For example, there have been theatre or

auditorium fires, in which people have filed out through exits in an orderly manner incurring no injury or loss of life. Those concerned may have experienced varying degrees of fear, but this type of behaviour could not be considered as panic. The fact that a group engages in flight behaviour is not, in and out of itself, sufficient to describe that group as being in a state of panic.

During the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, flight behaviour was widespread as people fled the city in a high state of fear. Yet Janis (1951) considers this flight behaviour to have been an adaptive response; those who did not flee were killed by the rapid spread of fire. In the same way

Quarantelli (1960) notes, in the study of localized disasters in America, flight behaviour which was adaptive to the situation at hand and could not, therefore, be called panic behaviour. A crucial question arises, according to Schultz (1974): "How can we distinguish between flight behaviour in one situation as being an adaptive response while in another, as, for example, a theatre fire, it is viewed as an example of panic and entirely nonadaptive". Schultz provided an answer to this question by saying that panic is, in part, situationally determined by the number of escape routes that the situation provides. Given the necessary conditions of fear and flight, that which determines the adaptive or non adaptive character of the flight is the degree to which escape can be successfully effected.

PANIC-AS TYPE OF COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOUR

Collective behaviour is the spontaneous, unstructured, transitory behaviour of a group of people reacting to a specific event. Collective behaviour can be contrasted with institutionalized behaviour, which is recurrent and follows an orderly pattern with a relatively stable set of goals, expectations, and values. According to Eshleman and Cashion (1985:146): "A panic occurs when people react in fear and try to escape from a situation perceived as threatening." Recent examples abound – clashing with planes by terrorists on the New York Trade centre on September 11, 2001 is a typical example, a panic and mass hysteria occurred when the accident

took place at **Three Mile Island nuclear plant in the United States**. Recently, the bomb blast at the **Ikeja military cantonment on Sunday, January 27, 2002**, thousands lost their lives due to panic. The reason was that the explosions were coming from the **Ammunition Transit Depot (A.T.D.)**, which is located within the expansive military complex. According to (Tell magazine of February 11, 2002 vol.6 p.25): "officers, other ranks and civilian squatters within the barracks ran in different directions, like a river gathering tributaries. They were moving as fast as their feet could permit them. Women, children, men, even soldiers – some wielding impotent guns – were running, screaming, shouting and shrieking." They all as it were added wings to their legs. Many of the casualties resulting from the mayhem were more from panic than from the actual bomb explosions. As Tempo (2002 vol. 18 No.5 P.4) puts it: "Hundreds perish, a thousand missing and countless others displaced when a munition explosion draped Lagos city in horror."

PANIC ENVIRONMENT

Smelser (1962) observed that there are certain conditions under which panic can occur. The first condition is structural conduciveness, which refers to the degree to which danger, communication of danger, and restricted egress can arise at all. The next necessary condition is strain, or the presence of some danger of unknown and uncontrollable proportions. The next condition is the growth of anxiety, which is converted into hysteria by the appearance of a significant event (Precipitating factor). This fixes the threat on some specific destructive agent, from which it is possible to flee in certain directions. Finally, on the basis of this hysterical belief, action is mobilized, usually under a primitive form of leadership – the "flight model" – and collective flight occurs. A typical example is what occurred on September 11 – the clashing of the World Trade Centre in New York by terrorists and the bomb explosions in Lagos on January 27, 2002.

TYPES OF PANIC;

1. Panic in Unorganized Groups

The first theorist to discuss the problem of

panic in unorganized groups was **William McDougall** in his book: "The group Mind" (1920). For McDougall (1920 : 36) panic is the crudest and simplest manifestation of collective mental life, the "collective intensification of the excitement, with its emotion of fear and its impulse to flight". This collective intensification is induced, by emotional contagion or "primitive sympathy". The instinctive excitement and fear is brought on by the perception of danger and spread from one or a few members of a group to the entire group by emotional contagion. McDougall maintains, that as each individual perceives the overt symptoms of fear of his fellows, "his own impulse and his own emotion rise to a higher pitch of intensity, and their expressions become correspondingly accentuated, so that the expressions of each member of the crowd work upon all other members within sight and hearing of him to intensify their excitement". Thus, ensues a vicious cycle of intense emotion begetting more intense emotion, until all members of the crowd are in the highest possible emotional state. In this sense, a large group of people may engage in panic behaviour in reaction to a threat which may be

perceptible to only a small portion of the group's membership. This is what exactly happened at the Ikeja bomb of January 27, 2002. LaPiere (1938) views the problem of panic behaviour as a collective solution to the sudden adjustment problem which is created by the perception and definition of crisis definition of situation. Two conditions or circumstances are necessary for the occurrence of panic: the definition of the crisis situation, and the lack of regimental behaviour and/ or leadership to cope with the crisis. LaPiere notes that the individual members of the crowd, then, must be aware of actual present danger or believe that danger is present. To him, the immediate antecedents of panic are individual, not collective. When a crisis situation has occurred and has been defined, he says, social interaction is interrupted and the situation is, at least momentarily, reduced to an aggregate of shocked individuals. At such time, he says, all action is suspended, and the members of the situation behave as isolated individuals, each trying to find an adequate response to the crisis. A group of reacting individuals for example, in a theatre, or auditorium, or on a ship, cannot long

refrain from interacting since their individual reactions are likely to bring them into physical contact with one another. Therefore, it is inevitable that this period of individual behaviour will be very brief and will be followed by some form of collective behaviour. Unless some form of leadership or regimental behaviour intervenes, this collective behaviour will take the form of a panic (LaPiere 1938). The Ikeja bomb explosions of January 27, 2002 is a typical example.

2. Panic in Organized Groups

Attempts to focus attention to panic in organized groups were made by Sigmund Freud (1922), Schultz (1964). Both concerned themselves in studying panic in the military. Freud (1922) in his work, "Group psychology and the Analysis of the Ego", maintains that panic behaviour can best be studied in military groups. Freud considers an army, like a church, to be a highly artificial grouping in that some external force is required to keep it intact and to maintain its rigid structural integrity. As the group owes its continuing existence to the illusory existence of a leader who loves all group members with an equal love, libidinal ties thus develop between the leader, as well as among the members themselves. Panic arises, says Freud, when this group disintegrates to the point where; the orders of the superior are no longer attended to, and each individual becomes concerned with his own welfare only..... What causes the group to disintegrate, he says, is not the perception of a crisis or danger, per se, because military units may hitherto have faced equal or even greater danger and still remained intact and performed successfully. Panic results, rather, from a relaxation or breakdown of the libidinal structure of the group.

In Schultz work (1969): "panic in organized collectivities", is again considered to result from a breakdown in group structure. However, the psychoanalytic concept of libidinal ties is not mentioned. Rather, the group is seen in more operational terms as group cohesion. According to him, panic flight follows from a breakdown of group cohesiveness. Again, Quaranteli (1954), similarly noted that panic is

possible only when there is breakdown of normal military group solidarity. In his analysis of the breakdown conditions are not causal factors of panic, deliberate attempts to induce or reinforce terror or panic should succeed more readily where conditions known to be present in prior instances are clearly present and compounded". These predispositional variables would seem to operate to weaken men both physically and psychologically and so cause them to be more easily influenced by rumour and suggestion and render them less capable of rationally interpreting ambiguous situations.

The literature also suggests the operation of certain variables which are capable of precipitating panic flight, either in combination with the predispositional variables or independently of sufficient intensity. For example, Brown [1954] noted in his work that practically every writer on panic invokes at least on principle of contagion.

Again, in an investigation of seven panic incidents in world war 11, Marshall [1947] found that each incident had the same origin; the sight of a few members of the group in full and unexplained flight to the rear. One or few men made a sudden run to the rear which others in the vicinity did not understand. "In every case, the testimony of all the witnesses clearly developed the fact those who started to run, and thereby spread the fear which started the panic, had a legitimate, or at least a reasonable excuse, for the action. It was not the sudden motion which of itself did the damage but the fact that others present were not kept informed" [Marshall, 1947].

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS.

Nearly most of the theories dealing with panic in unorganized and organized groups involve one or more of the following five variables: perception of a crisis situation, intense fear, antecedent or background factors, mutual emotional facilitation or behavioural contagion, and breakdown in mutual operation. Of all these variables only two (perception of crisis situation and fear) are discussed by every theorist. Schultz (1964) for example, argues that evidence indicates that the

existence of a crisis and its accompanying emotion of fear will not always lead to nonadaptive flight behaviour. According to him, perception and definition of crisis, as well as fear, are necessary conditions for panic to develop. He does not however, deny the possibility of other factors. The perception of crisis situation and fear are pertinent to what happened at Ikeja. From the literature reviewed for this paper, it appears that not much work has been done in the area of panic in the past many years. One wonders if this is due to the less importance attached to this area of collective behaviour by social scientists. One possible explanation may be due to the fact that this area has been taken over by researchers in social psychology.

Or it could be according to Quarantelli (1954; 267):

The lack of concrete, sufficient, and adequate empirical data has prevented the setting out of a set of propositions about panic that have any implications for social theory, that are particularly useful for guiding research. It could also be due to the lack of consensus in operationalizing the concept "panic" in such a way as to attract interest from researchers. It is recommended that interest be reactivated in this area of collective behaviour in sociology, even if social psychologists seem to have developed interest in it too. The topic of panic behaviour will continue to be of interest in the area of collective behaviour despite the ambiguities in its definition and operationalization. For panic to be sociologically studied, certain sociological conditions must be present. There must be a total breakdown of the social organization. That is, it must involve some kind of social norms and expectations. Again, there ought to be a social definition of the situation by the groups involved.

Events of recent past, especially the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack of the U.S. Trade Centre in New York, and the Pentagon and the bomb blast of the Ikeja Cantonment on Sunday January 27, 2002 where about a thousand people died as a result of panic is a sure reminder that panic behaviour is still with us. The Federal, State and Local governments in Nigeria should fund adequately panic-related agencies like [1] The National Emergency Relief Agency and [2] The Nigerian Red Cross to deal

with panic situations when and wherever they occur. Again, the same should be extended to our major social institutions like schools, hospitals, football, stadia (especially during major soccer games and other sports events).

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