



Social psychology in the mosh pit

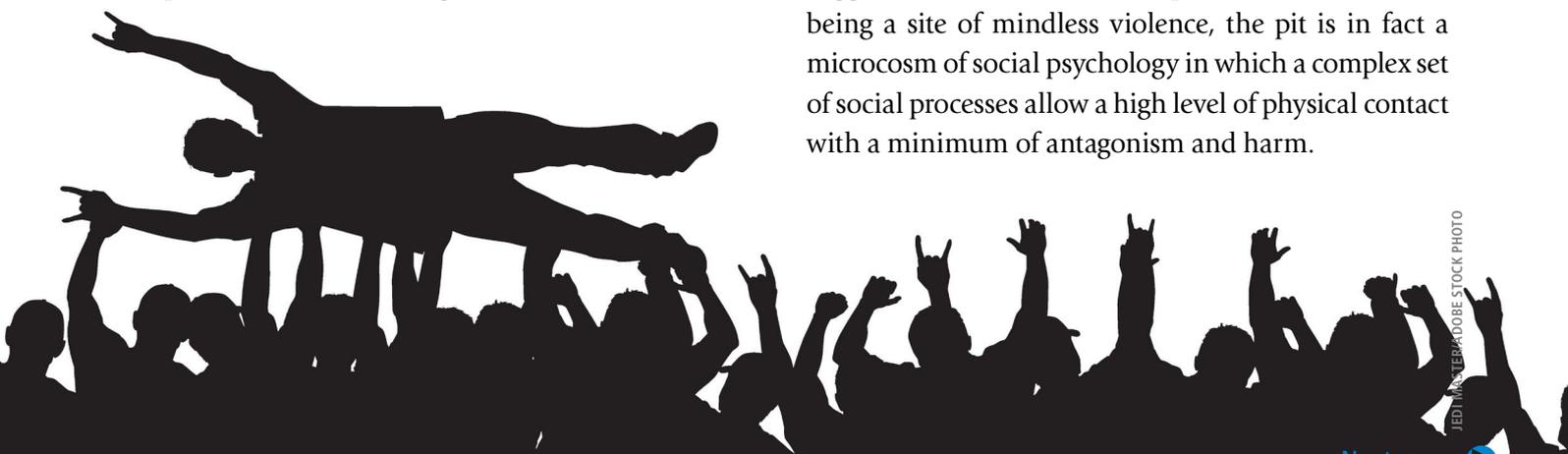
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Matt Jarvis discusses psychological perspectives on rock concerts

When I'm not immersed in psychology my leisure revolves largely around music, particularly live music, and for the last 30 or so years I have enjoyed moshing. In fact I've been privileged to witness some of the great developments in the phenomenon, including *Bad Brains'* first use of the

term 'mash,' which later became 'mosh,' and the Seattle grunge bands' popularisation of the related activity of stage-diving, later to evolve into crowd surfing.

After a few high-profile deaths mosh pits have received a bad press recently, and there are currently suggestions afoot to ban the pit. However, far from being a site of mindless violence, the pit is in fact a microcosm of social psychology in which a complex set of social processes allow a high level of physical contact with a minimum of antagonism and harm.



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Defining moshing

Moshing has been described as 'a form of dancing involving intense and violent physical activity; slamming into other audience members and throwing mock punches and kicks.' (Kahn-Harris, 2006) Moshing emerged in the 1980s from the comparatively tame pogoing practised by punks in the 1970s, and is now associated with a range of musical genres including punk, goth, nu metal and alt rock.

Ritual aggression

To the uninitiated moshing looks chaotic and aggressive. Actually, the 'chaotic' part is validated by science. Physicists Silverberg et al (2013) analysed video from heavy-metal concerts and concluded that moshers move randomly and dissipate energy through collision — exactly like the movement of molecules in a gaseous stage.

However, moshing cannot be described as aggressive because aggression is by definition activity aiming to cause harm. By contrast, moshing is organised around not harming others — although the degree of forceful physical contact means that around 1% of moshers require medical treatment (Milsten, Tennyson and Weisberg, 2017). One respondent in an interview study described the pit as 'like a huge group fight, except no one's fighting.' (Arnett, 1996) On this basis moshing

is therefore best seen as 'ritual violence,' more akin to contact sports like rugby than to real violence (Jarvis and Okami, in press).

The importance of conformity and obedience

Interaction in the mosh pit depends on conformity to the behavioural norms displayed by the majority in the form of 'mosh pit rules.' These include making contact with elbows and palms rather than fists, leaving non-moshers untouched and helping up anyone who is knocked to the ground. Often a pit lieutenant (an experienced fan known and trusted by the band) takes on the role of legitimate authority, ordering newbies to obey these rules (Ambrose, 2013).

Activity

- 1 Video of moshing provides a good chance to develop your skills of observational research. Design and carry out a small study that allows you to count the frequency of different behaviours during a mosh.
- 2 Moshing is also an opportunity to practise content analysis. Try searching for news articles and analyse them for positive and negative coverage.

Weblinks

You can get a sense of the experience of moshing from this 'mosh-cam' footage:

www.tinyurl.com/ybu2cp7k

You can read about Silverberg et al's mosh pit physics study here: www.tinyurl.com/ybv69vf4

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