

The University of Hong Kong
Department of Psychology

Departmental Seminar

Feeling Crowded: Crowd Threat, Trust and Moral Judgment

Date: June 22, 2015 (Monday)
Time: 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
Venue: Room 813, 8/F, The Jockey Club Tower, Centennial Campus, HKU
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Feeling crowded is part and parcel of life in today's increasingly urban and populated environments. The question, then, of how being crowded can affect our attitudes and behaviors, is one of growing relevance. This is especially so on issues of morality, trust and cooperation without which we simply could not function successfully as a community. Earlier studies portrayed a negative image of how individuals behave in crowds (Diener, 1980; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989; Zimbardo, 1969), suggesting that crowds can encourage disinhibited and anti-normative behaviors. While later studies offered a less pessimistic view of crowd dynamics (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam & McGarty, 1994), there have been relatively few studies that have specifically examined the effect of subjective feelings of crowdedness on an individual's moral judgments and behaviors.

Across our four studies, we hypothesized that feeling crowded would give rise to feelings of threat which would result in harsher moral judgments of social norms violations and affect individuals' perceived trust and trusting behavior towards others. Consistent with our predictions, Study 1 showed that when participants felt crowded they gave harsher moral judgments of hypothetical social norm violations, except in the case

when the act was framed as retaliation (akin to punishment) against an earlier offender. In each case, this effect was mediated by perceived threat. In Study 2, we replicated these findings and also showed that feeling crowded resulted in participants evaluating photos of neutral male and female faces as less honest and less trustworthy. In Study 3, we showed that participants who felt crowded subsequently behaved with less trust and reciprocity towards others in an economic game. Finally, in Study 4 we replicated the findings of Study 3 and also found that crowded individuals contributed more towards the common good in a public goods game.

Across our four studies, we showed that subjective feelings of crowdedness resulted in associated feelings of perceived threat which led to harsher moral judgments of social norm violations, decreased perceived honesty and trustworthiness in others, less willingness to act on trust and reciprocity to others, but a greater willingness to contribute towards the common good.