

'Beatlemania' and Mass Hysteria – Still a Much Neglected Research Phenomenon

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Abstract

The 1964 study of crowd behavior and audience arousal was re-visited in 2014, following an inquiry from a journalist in London about the interviews the author had conducted 50 years earlier with John Lennon during the Beatles' visit to New Zealand. The earlier project is touched upon by request, in the hope, still, of inspiring psychologists to follow suit by studying audience reactions to the music of similar vibrant musical groups.

Apart from tape-recorded interviews with Lennon, the original study involved direct observation of crowd behavior and psychometric testing of target groups. It led to the elimination of clinical hysteria and delinquent proclivities as key elements causing the extraordinary social rumpus that ensued. Instead, adolescents at the immature stage of personality development were found primarily to be those who behaved fanatically and broke conventions.

The study attracted widespread attention at the time, with the editors of two leading journals declaring solemnly that more studies of the kind should be conducted. However, no other researcher seems to have heeded their call. Hence regrettably the one mentioned here remains the first and only data-based study of mass-audience arousal on record.

Keywords: Mass-hysteria; Group hyper-arousal; Rite de passage; Commercialisation; Social reaction; Beat frequency

Introduction

The ability to create and respond to music is a well-known human attribute. It comes to the fore frequently to meet a variety of individual, social, cultural and national needs. In Europe during the 'dark, short and brutish' days of the Middle Ages it took the form of 'dancing mania' that induced dancing to death [1-3]. In the early 1960's a group of four talented young men from Liverpool produced a particular genre of music that caused intergenerational consternation.

In that period the population, particularly in the West, was still recovering from the horrors of World War 2. Military interventions in Korea and Vietnam were unsettling, and politically the so-called 'domino theory' held sway to justify the involvement in wars overseas. Atomic bomb-testing was evident, and the prospect of either a global winter from nuclear fall-out or even a nuclear war loomed. The cultural and social scene was also fermenting, with the concatenation of colonial, economic, racial, sexual, theological and youth revolutions threatening to destabilize society [4].

Such was the climate when the Beatles burst on the scene, having shed their image of working-class defiance under Brian Epstein's tutelage, and replaced their drummer with Ringo Starr to provide a distinctive beat. Their music, performances, behaviour and attitudes had immediate audience appeal, first in Hamburg, then back in Britain, and finally in the USA where their appearance on the Ed Sullivan television show reached an audience of 73 million.

Television clips and news-media reports indicated that the fans did indeed behave fanatically at the sight of members of the group in public - to the dismay of their parents and the authorities. At concerts many in the audience screamed or shouted aloud, depending on the gender of the respondents, and several broke ranks to try to climb onto the stage. Critics cast aspersions on the mental stability and the upbringing in particular of the young women in the self-styled 'Apple-scruffs' group of devotees in London [5].

Understandably New Zealand awaited the Beatles' nine-day three-city tour with trepidation.

The 1964 Study

Accordingly a project was designed as a practical exercise for an honors class in clinical psychology. The aim was to identify the major components of the much-publicized crowd and audience reaction to the sight of the Beatles and the sound of their type of music.

The plan was to seek participants exhibiting symptoms of either excessive exuberance or nonchalance from crowds expected at the airport to greet the Beatles on arrival or blocking the streets outside the hotel in which they were to stay. Standard symptoms of clinical hysteria in the then current DSM manual were to be noted from direct observations. A recorded interview was to be arranged with John Lennon to elicit his insights into the production of extreme audience reactions. Then a concert was to be attended to observe the scene first-hand, although the prospect of recruiting fans from the audience there was considered unlikely.

Finally the two distinct behavioral groups were to be invited to attend the university on separate days to respond to a small clutch of measures and questionnaires designed to tap into relevant clinical, personality and social variables.

The outcome

The crowds massed at all venues, and their behavior was much as previous observers had described. However, because the students were too hemmed in to move about and hand out a sufficient number of invitations for bystanders to attend the next phase of the study, an

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alternative plan was adopted that involved students from a teacher's college and younger pupils from nine secondary colleges in different socio-economic areas.

The interview with John Lennon went as planned: in fact it was better, because a suspected malfunction of the equipment led to a second interview that not only confirmed responses to the first, but occurring after attending a concert, enabled some questions to be more focused [6].

The actual concert performance lasted just under two and a half hours. The programme involved two bands playing in succession, with the Beatles appearing for the last 30 minutes. Each band changed the tempo and volume of their music, at the peak of which they encouraged the audience to stomp, clap and shout. The front-men on stage wore colorful clothing that reflected beams of light as they cavorted about to arouse the audience to fever pitch.

When finally the Beatles appeared, their music could not be heard over the din. Pandemonium broke out. Girls screamed and a few males tried to break through the cordon of police to climb onto the stage. The Beatles carried on regardless completing their stint. Order was quickly restored when the house lights were turned on and convention obliged the audience to stand to the sonorous beat of the National Anthem. Uniformed police and security staff made their presence felt as the exhausted fans made their way out of the Town Hall.

Not surprisingly the combination of expectation, hype, beat-variation and increasing sound levels seemed to affect one's heart-rate, pulse and discernment. Jenny McLeod of the Music Department at Victoria University found that the beat frequencies of the same tunes on records as in the concerts were extreme: they varied from 57 to 200 per minute. As for the volume, journalist Karl du Fresne reported recently that a technician had recorded the height as being 109 decibels (*DominionPost Weekend Magazine*, 12 June 2014).

The psychometrics

The results showed that younger adolescent college girls were the most smitten by the Beatles and their music, but not to the point of displaying or recording pathological symptoms. Neither was there evidence of them being so unruly and beyond control and disruptive as the authorities had feared.

Reflections

The study was well-received in Britain and the United States of America, and it was reprinted later by special request [7-9]. But enquiries on the 50th anniversary of the visit showed that no other researchers had followed suit to gather data of the phenomenon with any similar group that has since appeared. Moreover, despite the current editors of the *British Journal of Social Psychology* and the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* lamenting the same lack of interest in the topic as had their forebears, neither was interested in taking up the matter – nor was the editor of the *Psychologist* (personal communications with AJWT). But the editor of *Psychology* thought otherwise [10].

Conclusion

It is no longer acceptable for psychologists to allow perjorative comments about music fans to pass without challenge. Subjects are there in abundance as potential respondents to appropriate measures for discovering and testing hypotheses about a variety of cultural/psycho/social and physiological issues manifested by the total experience that music can bring to a head. May the next generation of psychologists be less hesitant to enter the fray.

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