FACTORS INFLUENCING GOOD CROWD BEHAVIOUR
A CASE STUDY OF BRITISH HORSERACING

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At British racecourses, it is socially acceptable for complete strangers to strike up conversations with each other. Racegoers also make eye contact much more frequently than people in other public settings, and when they make eye contact their standard reflex response is to smile at each other.

This is not normal crowd behaviour – it is very unusual and very un-British. According to the normal laws of crowd behaviour in Britain, people avoid making eye contact with strangers, and when they do catch someone's eye they look away immediately. They certainly do not smile and they certainly do not talk to strangers unless they absolutely have to. But then racegoers are not a normal crowd: their behaviour is more like that of a small friendly tribe – hence the title of my new book *The Racing Tribe,* based on three years' research at British racecourses.

The other reason for the title is that the research methodology that we used on this project was exactly the same as the techniques used by more orthodox anthropologists conducting research on small 'tribal' societies. We used the same combination of observation, participant-observation and interviews – the only difference being that we got to do this in congenial surroundings and didn't have to eat sheep's eyes or wear snake-proof boots or get malaria.

What we found was that just as certain islands and valleys are said to create their own weather, with entirely different climatic conditions from those in the surrounding area, the racecourse creates its own social micro-climate. By this I mean that the behaviour and social dynamics of the racing crowd seem to be governed by a set of codes and customs which are quite different from those of mainstream British culture.

The social micro-climate of British racecourses is characterised by a unique combination of relaxed inhibitions and exceptional good manners. This is what makes *The Racing Tribe* so fascinating for social scientists, particularly because in every other respect they are not unique or unusual at all. Five million people go racing in Britain every year, and in terms of demographics rather than numbers, racing probably has more right to be called the National Sport than football, as it attracts a far more representative sample of the population.

The demographic statistics show that racing crowds are composed of roughly equal proportions of each of the main socio-economic groups, with a wide age range and a much higher proportion of women than almost any other spectator sport. The racing crowd is clearly not a perfectly balanced

sample of the British population, but it is close enough to make research on this group an interesting natural experiment.

The obvious question is 'what is it about horseracing that makes this perfectly ordinary, normal crowd of people engage in such abnormally sociable behaviour?' This is a particularly important question for us, as the Social Issues Research Centre was set up with a specific mission to study the causes of good behaviour.

Problematic, anti-social aspects of human behaviour such as violence, football hooliganism, drunkenness, disorder, racism, etc. have if anything been over-researched. Football violence, for example, has been researched to death. If horseracing crowds indulged in pitched battles on the stands and paddock-invasions every time they disagreed with the result of a stewards' enquiry, they too might have entire University departments and academic institutes devoted to the analysis and explanation of their conduct. As it is, they are far too well-mannered to merit this kind of attention, and have been largely ignored by social scientists.

This is a shame, because it seems to us that the question of what factors influence or promote good behaviour at sporting events is quite an important one – at least as important as identifying the causes of troublesome or anti-social behaviours.

In the case of racing, we were trying to find an explanation for the high degree of sociability among racegoers, and to determine what factors contributed to this unusual combination of relaxed inhibitions and good manners. This is clearly not the kind of question that has a one-word answer, and the findings indicated that a number of historical, situational, social and cultural factors were involved. These cannot be covered in any depth in this brief summary, but the following outline of the main factors may be of interest.

One of the key factors we identified was the established tradition of social racegoing and the high proportion of social racegoers. We estimated that about thirty per cent of the average racing crowd were 'Socials', that is people with no interest in or knowledge of the sport, who attend race-meetings for purely social reasons. At some meetings, including big events such as Royal Ascot and the Grand National, but also many ordinary Sunday meetings, the proportion of Socials can rise to over fifty per cent.

Perhaps the most important finding in this context was that both Social racegoers and Enthusiasts come from all socio-economic backgrounds – and we found just as many Socials in the cheaper enclosures as in the more expensive Members' enclosures. Nor is this category dominated by corporate hospitality. Corporate racegoers only constitute about ten per cent of the average racing crowd, and corporate guests blend in with the other social racegoers – the families having a day out, the lads engaged in male-bonding rituals, girls performing the female equivalent and so on.

None of these social racegoers would know one end of a horse from another unless it bit them, and yet they form over thirty per cent of the sport's regular spectators. Clearly, the social attractions of racing must be such that they require no other incentive to attend, but how can this be?

In this context, it is important to recognise that horseracing is qualitatively different from any other spectator sport, in that all of the actual sport takes place in just a few minutes of the afternoon, interspersed with half-hour periods in which there is no sporting 'action' at all. This promotes an unusually high degree of social interaction among spectators. At almost any other spectator event, socialising means missing the action: at the races, social contact is an integral part of the action. This factor is instrumental in transforming an amorphous crowd into a distinctive and complex society. Out of the half-hour gaps between races, an entire sub-culture has developed, with its own language, traditions, customs, rituals and etiquette.

One of the key factors promoting sociability is the highly ritualised nature of this sub-culture. Almost all activities, conversations and interactions at race-meetings are conducted in accordance with traditional customs. Within the favourable conditions created by the social micro-climate of the racecourse, these traditional rituals of racing provide specific mechanisms or tools for the facilitation of social bonding. The rituals of racing provide a structure, a formula to follow, ready-made opening lines, 'scripts' for almost every conversation, 'stage-directions' for almost every interaction and an endless supply of 'fillers' and displacement activities.

These ritual activities include customs such as the Circuit Ritual, in which racegoers follow a regular circuit which takes them from the parade ring, to the bookies, to the stands, to the winner's enclosure, to the bars and then back to the parade ring again. Conversations at the races are also highly ritualised. Before each race, people will be engaged in the Chances and Choices debate, discussing the relative merits and abilities of the runners in the next race and predicting what's going to win. The words may vary somewhat, although certain standard phrases and expressions will almost invariably be employed, but the consistent tone and structure of this debate suggests a 'choreographed', ritual exchange. After the race, some racegoers will be indulging in celebration rituals – and racecourse custom actively requires as much celebration as possible. If one has lost a bet, one celebrates someone else's win: there is almost a taboo on being glum for more than a few minutes.

Those who cannot find an excuse to celebrate will be engaged in the next best thing to celebration, which is the Post-Mortem Ritual. It is universally understood among racegoers that a horse very rarely loses a race because it isn't fast enough. (If you listen to a few post-mortem conversations, you will find out why horses lose races. They lose because they get a bad draw, get upset in the stalls, miss the break, get bumped, get boxed in, can't act on the going, fail to settle, lose their action on the bend, run wide, the pace was too fast, the pace was too slow, needed the race, had too much racing, lacked experience, should have gone for the gap, should have taken the outside, saw daylight too soon, didn't get a run until too late and might try him in blinkers and might try him over a mile and sure to improve next time and got bags of stamina and ran a great race really, considering.)

Other ritual conversations include Whining Rituals – complaints and laments about the various evils affecting racing, from why the Derby should not have been switched to a Saturday, to whinges about miserly prize-money or lousy odds on the Tote. There is usually some token disagreement on the whys and wherefores and what the authorities in Portman Square should do about it, but a lot of nodding and consensus on the main issues, The consensus is clearly the real object of the exercise: all of these conversational rituals are designed to reinforce group solidarity and social bonding among racegoers. Such rituals seem to perform much the same function as 'social grooming' among chimpanzees and gorillas, where they sit around grooming each other's fur even when they already perfectly clean, the real purpose being the establishment and maintenance of social bonds.

Most of these rituals involve extensive use of the racecard as an aid to communication. The racecard is much more than just a programme of the day's races: it is a vital social tool. One of the racecard's main social functions is as a passport to conversation with strangers. It is used in the standard Introduction Ritual in which anyone can go up to anyone, point at the appropriate page in their racecard and ask 'what do you fancy in the next, then?' or 'what are you on the 2.30?' or some variation on the theme. The racecard is also in constant use as a prop in conversation between friends – and as a sort of displacement activity: whenever racegoers feel a bit awkward or tense in a social situation, they start busily consulting their racecards.

In more general terms, we found that the laws and values governing social behaviour at the races combine 'cultural remission' with strict regulation of certain aspects of conduct. 'Cultural remission' is defined as a conventionalised, temporary relaxation of normal social inhibitions and controls – also known as 'legitimate deviance' or 'time-out behaviour'.

'Cultural remission' does not of course mean abandoning all inhibitions, letting rip and behaving exactly as one pleases. There are rules of behaviour at even the wildest carnival, although they may involve a complete reversal of normal, everyday social etiquette. At many carnivals and festivals, for example, behaviour which is normally forbidden – jumping in fountains, drunkenness, etc. – may be actively required. This festive inversion of normal rules is typical of 'liminal' events or environments, that is times or places that are set apart from everyday life, which have a marginal, ambiguous, borderline status. Carnivals, fertility festivals and initiation rites are the classic examples of liminality, but the morally ambiguous status of racing in British culture puts race-meetings in the same category. Race-meetings are governed by the same sort of 'Carnival Law' as many tribal rituals and festivals, in that disinhibited behaviours which are normally frowned upon in puritanical British culture – such as exhibitionist dressing, boozing, gambling and talking to strangers – are permitted or even encouraged.

In this context it is important to recognise the role of alcohol as a social lubricant. The chemical effects of alcohol mirror what one might call the 'cultural chemistry' of the race-meeting. Just as alcohol induces altered states of consciousness, the festive world of the race-meeting provides an

alternative reality, a state of cultural remission, or what some psychologists call an ‘unserious behaviour setting’. The behaviour of racegoers clearly indicates a relaxation of the rules which normally prevent the British from engaging in positive social interaction with strangers, and the consumption of alcohol is clearly an essential element in this process.

At the same time, however, British racegoers are subject to a whole new set of restrictions and regulations, some of which may impose greater constraints than those to which they are accustomed in their everyday social interactions. The Racing Tribe’s unwritten laws of etiquette, which are obeyed instinctively by all racegoers, actually demand higher standards of courtesy and good conduct than those required in mainstream British culture. This balance of remission and regulation in the social norms governing behaviour results in the unique ‘social micro-climate’ of the racecourse – that distinctive mix of relaxed inhibitions and exceptional good manners.

On the good manners side, one of the most striking rules of British racecourse etiquette is a rather old-fashioned Code of Chivalry. Racegoers seem to act in accordance with an unwritten law which states that at the races, all women are ‘ladies’, and must be treated with courtesy and respect. We found during the research that this code operates in all parts of the racecourse, not just the more up-market enclosures, and that even a woman on her own is completely safe.

In fact, all of the rules of etiquette that govern behaviour at the racecourse seem to be designed to reduce any potential for friction or tension or conflict. For example, there is another unwritten law that we call the Collective Amnesia Rule, which requires that after each race, everyone conveniently forgets all erroneous predictions, prophecies and comments made before the race regarding the relative abilities and chances of the horses involved. After a race, no-one ever remembers the disparaging comments they made about the eventual winner as it walked around the parade ring, or their pre-race enthusiasm for the horse that trailed in last. There is a tacit understanding among racegoers that apart from one or two fairly good-humoured jibes, your misguided predictions will not be held against you.

This Collective Amnesia Rule is clearly absolutely essential to the maintenance of good relations between racegoers, as is another element of the unofficial code which we have called The Modesty Rule. Even if one is highly skilled at picking winners, it is not considered good manners to say so. Bragging of any kind is frowned upon, while self-deprecating comments and jokes are rewarded with universal social approval.

What is perhaps most remarkable is that the traditions of courtesy and good manners at the races are observed by all racegoers, including the sort of groups of young males who in other contexts are renowned for their bad behaviour. We spent a lot of time during the racing fieldwork observing and talking to groups of lads of a type familiar to us from previous research on football hooligans, pub violence and ‘lager louts’.

The conclusion we reached was that horseracing provides proof that it is entirely possible for hordes of young males to congregate and drink and gamble in an exciting sporting context without getting into violent fights or causing any serious trouble. In fact, they tend to apologise when they bump into you and even open doors for women. And this is not because racing somehow manages to attract a different or better sort of lager lout. Many of the groups of young males we interviewed were also football fans and typical Saturday-night troublemakers, and they freely admitted that their conduct at the races was quite different from their behaviour at football matches or in town centres. When we asked why, they tended to respond with dogmatic statements such as 'There's no aggro at the races, everyone knows that' or 'You don't cause trouble at the races' as though this were some basic tenet of tribal law, a truth universally acknowledged which did not require any further explanation.

It seems to me, and this is hardly a novel observation, that expectations must play some part in this – that where lads are treated as responsible, well-mannered adults, they will usually be inclined to behave as such, and where they are treated like children, criminals or wild beasts, they will also behave accordingly. In other words, the organisers of sporting events generally get exactly the type of crowd behaviour they expect to get.

Another factor could be the effect of 'behavioural contagion', that is the process by which emotions and behaviour patterns spread rapidly through a crowd, resulting in increased similarity in mood and conduct. The term behavioural contagion is normally – in fact almost exclusively – used in discussions of riots and disorder, but it is equally relevant in explaining good behaviour. It is possible that the potential troublemakers at the races could be 'infected' by the pleasant and courteous conduct of those around them, and instinctively adopt the same behaviour patterns.

Finally, our findings indicate that gambling may be an important factor in promoting positive social interaction among racegoers – that the solidarity and mutual goodwill we observed may at least in part be due to the bonding effect of shared participation in risk-taking and the shared objective of outsmarting the bookmakers.

In suggesting that drinking and gambling can help to promote good crowd behaviour at sporting events, our findings are perhaps somewhat at odds with the conventional wisdom on these subjects. We would humbly submit that in this case the conventional wisdom may be at fault, and recommend British racecourses as a 'benchmark for both organisers of sporting events and students of crowd behaviour.