

## SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF AGGRESSION (2): DEINDIVIDUATION THEORY

Deindividuation theory was proposed to explain aggressive behaviour that occurs in groups. **Zimbardo (1969)** distinguishes between **individuated** behaviour and **deindividuated** behaviour. Individuated behaviour is rational, and conforms to acceptable social standards. Deindividuated behaviour is 'a process whereby people lose their sense of socialised individual identity. This leads to a loosening of normal inhibitions with the result that they engage in unsocialised, often anti-social, behaviours that are inconsistent with their internal standards.'



Phil Zimbardo

Normally, we refrain from acting in an aggressive and anti-social way partly because we are *easily identifiable* and partly because we belong to a society which has strong *norms* against 'uncivilised' behaviour. Our behaviour is therefore highly individuated. However, in certain situations, such as in **crowds**, or when we wear a **uniform** or **mask**, we are less easily identifiable. As a result, restraints on aggressive behaviour may become relaxed, and we may engage in what **Mann (1981)** calls 'an orgy of aggressive, selfish, and anti-social behaviour'.

Although deindividuation theory is comparatively recent, this point was actually first made by **Le Bon (1895)**, who noted how a person in a crowd 'descends several rungs of the ladder of civilisation'. A good example of this is the 'baiting' crowd. **Mann (1981)** analysed 21 incidents of suicides reported in American newspapers in the 1960s and 1970s, in which the suicide victim was a 'jumper'. He found that in 10 of the 21 incidents where a crowd had gathered to watch, 'baiting' had occurred. These incidents typically occurred at night, and when the crowd was some distance from the person being baited.

Mann argued that these features produced a deindividuated state in people, and caused their baiting behaviour. Similarly, **Mullen (1986)** analysed newspaper reports of 60 lynchings that took place in America between 1899 and 1946. Mullen found that the more people there were in the mob, the greater was the savagery with which the victim was killed.



It is easy to lose our sense of morality when in a crowd

Being in a crowd can diminish awareness of our individuality because we are faceless and **anonymous**. With anonymity comes a *lower fear of retribution* and a *diluted sense of guilt*. Conditions that increase anonymity serve to decrease concerns about evaluation by others and thus weaken the normal controls on behaviour that are based on guilt, shame, and fear. The larger the group, the greater the anonymity, and the more difficulty there is in identifying a single individual.



Whilst Zimbardo sees anonymity as being an important factor in producing a deindividuated state, he does not see it as the only one. Other factors include **reduced responsibility**, **increased arousal**, **sensory overload**, and **altered consciousness** due to *drugs* or *alcohol*.

## TWO TYPES OF SELF-AWARENESS

The concept of deindividuation has been refined to distinguish between the effects of **reduced public self-awareness** and **reduced private self-awareness**:

- **Public self-awareness:** This is the concern we have about how our behaviour will affect the impression people will get of us and how they will evaluate us. This kind of self-awareness can be reduced by being in a crowd, because in a crowd we become *anonymous*. If other members were behaving aggressively, a *diffusion of responsibility* would also occur because one person alone could not be blamed for the group's actions.
- **Private self-awareness:** This refers to the attention we pay our own thoughts and feelings. This can also be reduced by being in a crowd. For example, at a rock concert our attention would be directed outwards and we might become so engrossed in what was going on (singing, dancing, drinking alcohol, etc) that we might 'forget' who we are.

Aggression can occur through a reduction in either of these forms of self-awareness.

Deindividuation theory is supported by the results of several studies. For example, **Zimbardo (1969)** conducted a laboratory experiment in which female undergraduates were required to deliver 'electric shocks' to another student as 'an aid to learning'. The four women in the experimental group wore bulky laboratory coats and white hoods, were not introduced to each other, could not see each other, and were given their instructions as a group. The control group wore their own clothes and had name tags prominently displayed, were introduced to each other by name, could see each other, and were given their instructions individually. Zimbardo found that the experimental group gave more 'painful' shocks to the learner, presumably because they felt more anonymous than the control group.

**Diener et al (1976)** conducted a field experiment involving over 700 Halloween trick-or-treaters visiting local houses in their Halloween costumes. Twenty-seven friends of the researchers put out bowls of sweets or coins, each bowl being labelled 'Take One'. Some children arrived alone, others in groups. In the *non-anonymous condition*, the homeowner asked the child(ren) for their name and address to reveal their identity. In the *anonymous condition*, the homeowner made it clear that she couldn't tell who the children were.

While chatting to the child(ren), the homeowner received a telephone call, and left the child(ren) at the front door. The amount of stealing was as follows: Anonymous group 57%, Anonymous and alone 21%, Non-Anonymous group 21%, and Non-anonymous and alone 8%. Clearly, not being identifiable *and* being in a group combined to produce the highest rate of antisocial behaviour.



An anonymous trick-or-treater

**Watson (1973)** used the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) to investigate warriors in 23 different cultures. It was found that those cultures in which warriors wore masks or used face paint were significantly more likely to kill, torture or mutilate captured enemies than those with exposed faces.

		WARRIORS' APPEARANCE		
		NO CHANGE	CHANGED	
KILL	LOW	7	3	10
	HIGH	1	12	13
MUTILATE				
TORTURE		8	15	23

N=23 CULTURES  
[ ] Watson, 1971

More familiar studies that *could* also be used to illustrate the effects of deindividuation include **Milgram (1973)** and **Zimbardo et al (1973)**. Milgram's famous obedience to authority study showed that 'teachers' were more likely to give larger 'electric shocks' when they could not see (or be seen) by the 'learner'. However, when the 'learner' was in the same room, 'teachers' were much more reluctant to deliver 'electric shocks'. In Zimbardo et al's 'prison simulation study', the dehumanisation of the

'prisoners' by the 'guards' was claimed to be partly a result of the relative anonymity of each group.

Although the studies described above are used to support deindividuation theory, each of them can be criticised. For example, it has been suggested that in Zimbardo's (1969) study the wearing of white hoods and their association with the Ku Klux Klan might have affected the intensity of the shocks given, rather than the participants' anonymity.

To test this suggestion, **Johnson & Downing (1979)** carried out a variation of Zimbardo's experiment in which participants wore either masks and overalls similar to those worn by the Ku Klux Klan, nurse's uniforms, or their own clothes. Whilst most shocks were given by the masks and overalls group, fewer shocks were given by participants in nurses uniforms than by those in their own clothes. Although this was a laboratory study, it suggests that it is not anonymity as such that leads to aggression, but the *norms* associated with particular social contexts (nurses are not 'normally' people who harm others).



Some people we expect to be nasty

Although Diener et al's study has *high ecological validity*, it actually examined anti-social behaviour (stealing) rather than aggression. The study also raises serious *ethical issues* and questions about *generalising* results (only children were studied). Watson's study has been criticised on the grounds that although the HRAF is an important document, it is produced by researchers with cultural practices and expectations differ from those being studied. As a result, the HRAF can fail to accurately represent a culture, producing misleading data.

One major problem for deindividuation theory is that deindividuation can produce increases in *pro-social behaviour* rather than aggressive

behaviour. A good example of this would be the expressions of collective good will that occur at religious rallies and natural disasters. Another example is a study conducted by **Gergen, et al (1973)**. In that study, men and women were placed in either a normally lit room (control group) or a completely dark room (experimental group). The participants, who had never met each other, were told that 'there are no rules as to what you should do together'. They were also told that after the study they would not interact with each other.

Participants in the lit room found the experiment a boring experience. During the first 15 minutes, participants in the dark room chatted idly. In the next 30 minutes, their conversations turned to more serious matters. In the final 15 minutes, they began to get physical (half of them hugged one another). Some of them became quite intimate, 80% reported feeling sexually aroused, and most of them volunteered to take part again. Thus, deindividuation can lead to a freeing of inhibitions rather than aggression.

A final problem for deindividuation theory is that it has also been *wrongly* applied to aggression. A good example here is the crowd violence in British football. Stereotypical images suggest a faceless crowd engaged in an 'an orgy of aggressive, selfish, and anti-social behaviour'. However, **Marsh et al (1978)** found that what might appear to be an undisciplined mob actually consists of several different groups, each with their own place in a status hierarchy. They also found that much of the aggression displayed is highly *ritualised* rather than physically violent.



Football crowds are actually highly structured rather than unstructured

Currently, the status of deindividuation theory is unclear as a social psychological explanation of aggression. **Postmes & Spears (1998)** argue that 'there is insufficient support for the theory'. **Zimbardo (2007)**, however, takes the opposite view, and believes that there is very strong

evidence for the role of deindividuation in aggression. As he puts it:  
*'When we want usually peaceful young men to harm and kill other young men, it is easier for them to do so if they first change their appearance to alter their usual external façade by putting on military uniforms or masks or painting their faces.'*

