

Lesson 32

DEINDIVIDUATION

Deindividuation: Losing Our Sense of Self

The Tottenham Riots, 2011

“I seen kids here today younger than me, little girls younger than me runnin’ in shops and that, and obviously that’s wrong cause little kids shouldn’t be doing it like . . . I mean, it’s not right for anyone to be doin’ it . . . I’m just doin’ it cause everyone else is doin’ it.”

Quote from a rioter in London, August 2011.

Definition: deindividuation is a process in which we lose our sense of self and become part of a larger identity – the group.

Jot down honest answers to the following two questions.

- 1. Do you find yourself constantly judging your own behaviour? Perhaps not “out loud” but in your own mind. For example, do you find yourself thinking things like “Was I rude just then”?*
- 2. Do you find yourself worrying about what others think of you? Do you even feel that you are perhaps in some way not matching up to what others expect of you?*

Some psychologists (like Edward Diener) suggest that we are constantly monitoring our own behaviour by asking questions like the first one, above. We adjust our behaviour according to how people react to us. However, this process stops when deindividuation takes place. Instead of concentrating on ourselves, the focus of our attention becomes the outside world. Usually, we are also monitoring the reactions of others to our behaviour, but this stops too; events that we find interesting draw our attention and we become more involved in these events so we care less about what others think of us.

Deindividuation is the idea that we lose our sense of “self” or our personal identity in some circumstances – usually when we are part of a group of people. Because we lose our sense of self we may do things that we would not normally do: we are not the same person. The idea of deindividuation was originally suggested by Leon Festinger and is often used as one way of explaining the behaviour of crowds when they become rowdy or even violent.

How Can Deindividuation Explain Conformity and Obedience?

Jot down an answer. If you have completed the lessons on obedience and conformity, try thinking through how deindividuation might explain them. Jot down your ideas then compare them to the following suggestions.

Deindividuation and Conformity

If we conform, we do so in groups. Deindividuation would suggest that we lose our sense of self and become part of the group so we are far more likely to do the things that we see as what the group would do. Group members wear similar clothes because they “become” what the clothes symbolise – Goths, accountants, Punks etc.

- **Criticism:** the participants in Asch’s study of conformity (judging the length of lines) were interviewed after the group sessions and some of them expressed the view that they had been aware of making a wrong judgment. Others said they didn’t want to seem the odd one out. To some extent, then, they *were* monitoring their own behaviour and they *were* conscious of what others thought of them.

Deindividuation and Obedience

Again, we lose our sense of self and stop monitoring our own behaviour. We no longer worry about what people will think so if we are asked to do something that we would not normally do we go ahead. We may do things that we would normally see as outrageous because we are not taking into account how others will criticise us for it. Also, we are not judging our behaviour against our normal rules for living so there is nothing to stop us from carrying out an act we would previously have seen as unacceptable.

- **Criticism:** some of Milgram’s participants refused to administer some of the punishments; this must mean that they *were* monitoring their own behaviour and that they did not lose their

sense of self. However, participants who went up to the full voltage were later able to tell Milgram that they felt they were handing over responsibility for their own behaviour to those in authority (Milgram himself) – the idea of deindividuation does involve this merging of the self with a “larger”, more important identity.

What is the evidence for the existence of deindividuation? Try asking some friends if they believe that people will be more likely to steal if they think they can get away with it anonymously. Common sense seems to tell us that they will but there are many examples of people handing in to police stations purses full of money they have found in the street, so perhaps common sense is wrong. Below are some studies that support the idea of deindividuation. See what you think.

Studies of Deindividuation 1

Key Study: Zimbardo, 1969, Study of Deindividuation

Reason why the study was conducted: to see if people would administer more punishment if their identities were concealed

Method used: Zimbardo set up similar “learning” studies to the ones conducted by Milgram (see Lesson 30 on obedience for more details). The participants were all female. One group wore their own clothes, had name badges and administered the electric shocks (supposedly) to the “learners” in a well-lit laboratory. The other group wore hoods and laboratory coats, had no identifying features and administered the electric shocks (supposedly) in a dimly-lit laboratory. This was the group with concealed identities.

Results obtained: participants with concealed identities gave more shocks and higher voltage shocks than those in the well-lit/own clothes condition.

Conclusions drawn: the concealed identity condition had created deindividuation so these participants felt fewer constraints on their behaviour.

Evaluation of Zimbardo’s Study of Deindividuation

Strengths

- Zimbardo’s use of lab coats and hoods and his use of ordinary clothes and name badges seem, on the face of it, to be good ways to put people into deindividuated and non-deindividuated conditions.

- The study revealed clear differences between the two conditions (deindividuated group and identifiable group).

Weaknesses

- This was a laboratory study; the behaviour displayed took place in an artificial environment so people may not necessarily behave so out of character (administering punishments) in real life.
- There are ethical problems with this method. The researchers used deception and showed little respect for the participants by encouraging them to behave in this apparently cruel way. The concealed identity condition added even more encouragement to behave in this way.

The hoods and gowns worn by the participants were similar to the garments worn by members of the Ku Klux Klan, a group of white supremacists active in parts of the USA at the time of the study. This group carried out cruel acts of aggression against minority ethnic groups in real life.

In a later variation of the punishment study, Zimbardo had the “concealed identity” group dress in surgeon’s gowns and masks instead of white laboratory coats and hoods. These covered the participant as much as the lab coats and hoods so their identities were concealed to the same extent but he found that the participants administered shocks to lower levels than they did when they wore the hoods and laboratory coats. Zimbardo felt this was because the surgeons’ outfits demanded higher levels of compassion than the Ku Klux Klan-like outfits. A further weakness of the study may then be that wearing the hoods and gowns acted as a prompt to behave cruelly, like the Ku Klux Klan, rather than acting as a factor in deindividuation.

Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Study. Zimbardo also carried out a famous study in which he created a simulation of a prison in the basement of his university, Stanford University in California. He randomly divided 24 paid college student volunteers into two groups – “prisoners” and “guards”. The study was planned to last for two weeks but had to be abandoned after only 6 days because the guards were treating the prisoners so badly and the prisoners were suffering psychologically and physically. An important feature of the study was deindividuation. For example, “prisoners” were stripped naked, sprayed with a delousing liquid, made to wear a nylon cap (preventing them from expressing individuality through hairstyle) and had their names replaced with a prison number, which they had to use at all times. Similarly, “guards” wore mirrored sunglasses at all times, which concealed their emotions and hid their eyes. Both prisoners and guards wore uniforms. Zimbardo believed that this deindividuation was key to the appalling way in which guards treated prisoners.

Recently there have been criticisms of this study and because of these it would not be right to present this as a key study in this book, despite it being so well known. In fact, some psychologists suggest that it should be presented in textbooks as an example of a flawed research method. Zimbardo himself said that he was drawn into the role of prison superintendent to such an extent that he forgot he was carrying out a study. Also, there are so many other variables involved in this study that it is difficult to present it as just a study of deindividuation. Zimbardo may have encouraged his “guards” to behave like tyrants. Only one third of the “guards” acted sadistically and the people who volunteered for the study were the types of personality who would be more likely to act sadistically in the first place. You can read Zimbardo’s own account online at www.prisonexp.org but do take these criticisms into account. Instead, below is a study about Internet deindividuation.

Studies of Deindividuation 2

Supplementary Study: Chiou, 2006, Study of Anonymity and Sexual Self-Disclosure on the Internet

Reason why the study was conducted: to see if adolescents were more willing to disclose details of their sexual information on the Internet if they were anonymous.

Method used: Wen-Bin Chiou carried out a survey of 1,347 adolescents in Taiwan. He asked them to rate how likely they were to disclose information in chat rooms and other Internet forums about aspects of their sex lives including such things as sexual fantasies to sexual problems. The adolescents were asked about their willingness under different levels of anonymity: (i) with their image displayed live on a webcam (low anonymity); (ii) with a photograph of themselves displayed and (iii) with no images of themselves but just a nickname (high anonymity).

Results obtained: the greater the anonymity, the greater was the willingness to disclose information. Willingness to self-disclose sexual information was measured on an 11-point scale from 1 (least likely) to 11 (most likely). It showed that young people were far more willing to self-disclose in the high anonymity condition. There was a mean score of 8.45 for males in the high anonymity condition compared to a mean score of 2.02 in the low anonymity condition. For females, the score in the high anonymity condition was 6.95 compared to 1.13 in the low anonymity condition.

Conclusions drawn: the anonymity condition had created deindividuation so these participants felt fewer constraints on their self-disclosure.

Evaluation of Chiou's Study of Self-Disclosure on the Internet

Strengths

- The study revealed a clear pattern in which the more anonymity the young people had, the more they would disclose about their sexual thoughts.
- Being anonymous on the Internet seems, at face value, to be a good way to put someone in a state of deindividuation. Similarly, a live webcam image seems to be a good way of putting someone into an opposite state.

Weaknesses: Wen-Bin Chiou himself lists some drawbacks to his study:

- The survey was limited to adolescents from Taiwan. Taiwanese culture discourages giving the impression of strong sexual desire compared to Western culture so it is possible that the results cannot be generalised to other cultures like North America or Europe.
- The data were collected in 2005 but later studies may find different results as attitudes, values and behaviours in Taiwan may change significantly in 5 or 10 years.

Finally, in terms of studies of deindividuation, Asch's study of line length (reported in the earlier lesson on conformity) gives some evidence of deindividuation. For example, some of the participants said they were not even aware of making a mistake in their estimate of line length. This suggests that they had taken on board (or "internalised") the group's estimates.

Factors Affecting Deindividuation

- **Individual Differences:** not everybody will riot just because others around them are doing so. Not all of the participants in Zimbardo's hooded/masked groups administered more shocks. One quarter of Milgram's participants did not administer shocks to a high level. Different personalities will react differently to situations that may create individuation. Not all will become deindividuated.
- **Level of Anonymity:** the more anonymous a person becomes, the more likely they are to become deindividuated. For example, in Zimbardo's study, people administered more shocks when their individuality was concealed beneath masks and hoods. In general, it seems that wearing a uniform promotes more deindividuation. Similarly, if a crowd is large, then any individual is more anonymous and more likely to experience deindividuation.

- **Other Social Factors:** We can see from Zimbardo's study that when participants were concealed behind costumes that resembled the uniform worn by the Ku Klux Klan they administered higher levels of shocks than those given when they were concealed (to the same extent) by uniforms resembling those worn by surgeons. The level of shocks differed but the extent of identity concealment was the same. The only other variable was the social meaning attached to the uniforms, so this social factor seems to have affected the level of deindividuation.

Contemporary Practical Implications of Studies of Research into Social Influence, Benefits and Drawbacks 4: Studies of Deindividuation

These studies of deindividuation imply that people are more likely to exhibit behaviour we consider antisocial when they are anonymous and they are more likely to be anonymous when they are in larger crowds and/or wearing uniforms.

Although the studies are all laboratory studies, there is evidence to support this implication from real life. For example, massacres of civilians committed by soldiers and looting committed by rioters share the features of deindividuation.

Check Your Understanding. Write down your answers. Check them against the suggested answers in the **FEEDBACK** section. Record your marks in your **Assessment Record**.

1. Fill in the blank word: "Deindividuation is a situation in which we lose our sense of ____". [1mark]
2. Identify one advantage of Zimbardo's 1969 study of deindividuation. [1 mark]
3. Identify and outline one disadvantage of Chiou's study of Anonymity on the Internet. [2 marks]
4. Identify one factor that may affect deindividuation. [1 mark]

FEEDBACK

Answers to *Check Your Understanding*

1. Self. [1 mark]
2. (e.g.) The use of hoods and lab coats was a good way to put people into a deindividuated state. [1 mark]
3. (e.g.) Chiou's study collected data from Taiwanese young people [1 mark]. Their responses might not be the same as those that would be given by people from other cultures so we cannot generalise the findings from Taiwan to other societies. [1 further mark] [Total 2 marks]
4. (e.g.) Deindividuation may be affected by social factors like the expectations we have of different groups. [1 mark]

SAMPLE