

# Groups Aren't So Shocking

*A Critique of Deindividuation,  
An Argument for Grouping*

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## A De-Individuation De-Bate

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The book *Selfhood* by Hoyle, Kernis, Leary & Baldwin gives an explicit definition of **deindividuation**, one similar to that found in tons of social psychology textbooks (Sabini 1995; Feldman 1995; Deaux & Wrightsman 1995; Baron & Byrne 1994; Lippa 1994; Aronson 1992; etc. )(Postmes 1998). It refers to a state individuals enter when they're in a group:

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**Deindividuation** is the technical term that is used to connote a multi-faceted construct that involves

- (a) the specific environmental conditions (e.g., group involvement, arousing activities) that
- (b) promote a particular psychological state (e.g., lack of self-awareness, time distortion), which in turn
- (c) **facilitate certain types of behaviors (e.g., uninhibited, impulsive, antinormative) (Diener 1979; Dipboye 1977; Prentice-Dunn and Rogers 1982; Scheier and Carver 1982; Zimbardo 1969).**

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I have issues with the third premise of this definition: that individuals in groups behave in an uninhibited, impulsive, antinormative fashion. There is a significant body of research which counters this claim, literally counters it.

**Social Identity Theory** says that individuals in groups behave in a very normative fashion. **Individual in groups follow group norms.** I will call the process of group formation *grouping*. This is just a word I use to refer to Social Identity Deindividuation (SIDE). In this section I will unpack the *Selfhood* definition of deindividuation, criticize all of its supporting citations, and then present Social Identity Deindividuation (grouping) as an alternative.

## The Dominant Definition of Deindividuation

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Deindividuation has its roots in the book *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind* by Gustave Le Bon (1895/1995). His perspective very much resembles the dominant Social Psych view today:

“When a certain number of individuals are gathered together in a crowd for purposes of action, observation proves that, from the mere fact of their being assembled, there result certain new psychological characteristics.”  
(**Le Bon**, 1895/1995)

Le Bon's crucial idea was that “In the crowd the collective mind takes possession of the individual. As a consequence, a crowd member is reduced to an inferior form of evolution: irrational, fickle, and suggestible. The individual submerged in the crowd loses self-control and becomes a mindless puppet, possibly controlled by the crowd's leader, and capable of performing any act, however atrocious or heroic.” (Postmes, [2003](#)). You get de-individuated - the individual is submerged in the crowd. Sounds like the *Selfhood* definition, eh? Group involvement promotes a psychological state, an irrational antinormative state. A *dangerous* state.

Most Social Psychological studies have thus focused on aggression and other types of 'mob' behavior. The psychological theory of deindividuation can be traced through the citations in the *Selfhood* definition. The earliest reference (1969) is to **Philip Zimbardo**. In one of his most famous experiments he had participants dress in hoods and overalls to make them anonymous and measured the amount of shocks they would deliver to a person. He found that the anonymous group delivered more shocks than the control. In his original paper

he also mentioned that a replication of this experiment had the *exact opposite results*, but we'll get back to that. This research flowed out of **Leon Festinger's** 1952 work which said deindividuation occurred when individuals were not "seen or paid attention to as individuals." (Festinger 1952). **Ed Diener** refined this theory, saying that reduced self-awareness caused deindividuation (Diener 1980). **Steven Prentice-Dunn** and **Ronald Rogers** refined the theory even further, saying that reduced *private* self-awareness causes deindividuation. One thread that runs through all this research is that deindividuation is negative. It causes antinormative behavior. This is the thread I wish to pull.

## A Critique of Deindividuation

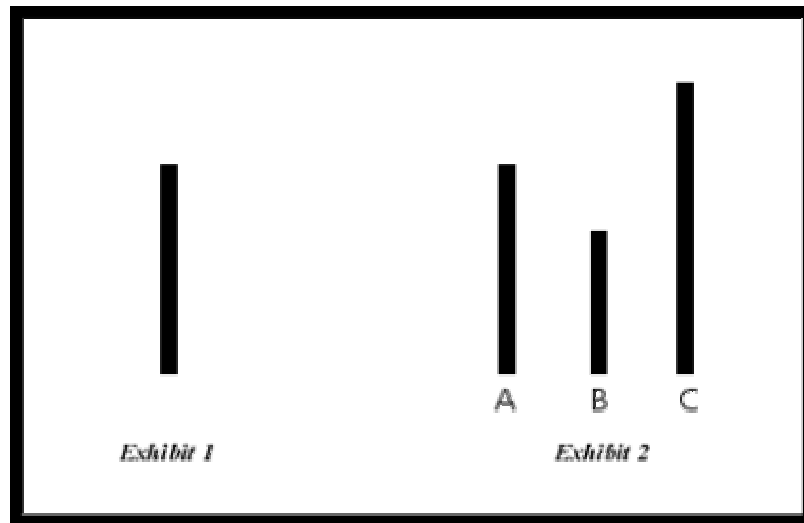
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Research on negative, antinormative deindividuation is old and established, but it runs counter to an equally old and established vein of research on group processes. The tradition cited in *Selfhood* sees deindividuation as the loss of norms, but it ignores Le Bon's assertion that a Collective Mind emerges out of a crowd.

"Crowds, doubtless, are always unconscious, but this very unconsciousness is perhaps one of the secrets of their strength. . . The unconscious acts like a force still unknown."

(**Le Bon**, 1895/1995)

Social Psychology has made great strides towards knowing this force, the structure of the Collective Mind. The first contenders from what I'll call the Social Identity side are **Muzafer Sherif** and **Solomon Asch**, names up there with **Zimbardo** in their prominence. In 1936 Sherif conducted a simple and elegant experiment to test group processes. "Using the perceptual illusion of the autokinetic effect (perceived motion of a stationary light in a darkened room), Sherif had participants in small groups publicly judge how far the light had moved. With a fairly small number of trials, Sherif found a fairly large degree of convergence among the judgments within the group. Thus, in the absence of any 'real' physical cues, group members used the judgment of others to modify their own judgments." (Tindale 2001). Asch thought that this result was ambiguous, so he put group processes to a more extreme test (1952). He had one subject sit in a group of 8-10 confederates (whose behavior was pre-determined). The group was presented with the two exhibits, which I show below. The point was to match the line in exhibit 1 with the matching line in exhibit 2.



ooooh, a picture. From Asch's experiment

In the experimental condition the confederates would all give the wrong answer, that C was the matching line. The answer was obviously wrong, yet 70% of subjects in the experimental condition conformed to a wrong answer at least once, significantly more than the 5% reported in the control. This finding is also fairly robust, though the mean percentage error is not usually as high as in this case. "Conformity experiments of this kind have now produced 133 total sets of results from seventeen countries, including Zaire, Germany, France, Japan, Lebanon and Kuwait ... A meta-analysis of these studies uncovers a variety of refinements on Asch's basic findings, but his basic conclusion has held up. For all results, the mean percentage error is 29%." (Bond 1996). Seems like all over the world, **people in groups conform to group norms**, even when those norms don't make sense.

Let's bring Zimbardo back in here and see what's he's got to say. Aside from the fact that he reported opposite results to his study when it was published, there are general methodological criticisms of his study. A general problem with causal attributions is that it is difficult to say that X causes Y because a **hidden variable Z** might be causing Y. Zimbardo asserts that being in an anonymous group leads to deindividuated, antinormative behavior. X

(anonymous group) causes Y (deindividuation). A brief glance at his experimental paradigm shows a glaring Z. Zimbardo used basically the same experimental paradigm as Milgram's famous conformity experiments. Those experiments showed a conformity affect, which could be a **hidden variable**. "In his classical studies of obedience to authority, Milgram (1974) demonstrated conformity to the experimenter's demand to administer electric shocks to a confederate. Although there are clearly differences with deindividuation experiments, the use of a modified Buss aggression procedure in both paradigms is remarkably similar. It is therefore notable that whereas Milgram's studies focused on the power of the experimenter to elicit "shocking" behavior, the role of context and experimenter is usually not considered in the deindividuation paradigm." (Postmes, 1998). Another possible **hidden variable** was tested by **Johnson & Downing** (1979). Would making people dress like executioners make them act aggressive? Johnson & Downing made one group of participants anonymous by dressing them Ku Klux Klan like uniforms (much like the Zimbardo paradigm), another made anonymous by being dressed in Nurse's uniforms. The Klan shocked more, and the anonymous Nurses *shocked less*. Zimbardo himself performed a variation on his experiment where he had subjects dress as soldiers and found that they shocked more than the pure anonymous condition. The argument here is that participants conform to the norms of their clothing rather than engaging in straight-up antinormative behavior. Because of all these possible **hidden variables**, Zimbardo's results are well confounded. Even so, they are explainable within a Social Identity framework. That's why I think this citation is weak support for the Dominant Definition of Deindividuation.

What about the other supports of the Dominant Definition of Deindividuation? Those are Dipboye 1977; Diener 1979; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers 1982; Scheier & Carver 1982. A lot of Ds. To kind of sum it all up, Dr. Tom [Postmes](#) (senior lecturer at the University of Exeter and Associate Editor of [The](#)

[British Journal of Social Psychology](#)) and [Russell Spears](#) of the University of Amsterdam published a meta-analysis of **60 independent studies of Deindividuation and Antinormative behavior**. This meta-analysis included all of the studies cited in the Dominant Definition of Deindividuation, except for that by Scheier & Carver. It does include a 1981 study by Scheier & Carver, and 4 solo studies. **Is his meta-analysis valid?** Well, his methodology was to have the 60 publications rated by 3 independent coders (advanced psychology students). The coders were 'unaware of the study results and hypotheses and of the purpose of their work.' They used the methods and results sections to parse the data down into numbers, which Postmes & Spears could perform statistical tests on. They found the following associations:

Between manipulations and antinormative behavior:

$$(\beta = \mathbf{0.13} : K = 7 : Z = 2.81 : p < 0.01)$$

Between the mediator and antinormative behavior

$$(\beta = \mathbf{-0.08} : Z = 1.58 : ns)$$

These numbers are significant, but by the skin of their teeth. There is no strong link between being in an anonymous group and antinormative behavior. No strong deindividuation effect was found in Postmes & Spears' meta-analysis of 60 studies.

The Dominant Definition of Deindividuation is a strong definition, yet unpacking its citations reveals very weak support. Zimbardo's results are confounded by numerous hidden variables and a meta-analysis of 60 consequent

studies reveals a very weak correlation between being in an anonymous group and antinormative behavior. Anonymous groups aren't especially antinormative. On one level this is obvious in day to day life. I ride the metro with anonymous groups, I go to the Grand Prix with anonymous groups. We're not mobs or crazy crowds. We're just groups of people. If you put a hood on me I might start to feel a little sinister, but, wait, aren't you telling me to shock that guy? Is that the group's fault or yours, for giving the order?

For these reasons I do not accept the third premise of the Dominant Definition of Deindividuation. The other two premises are okay. There is some psychological effect going on. It's just not likely that it's deindividuation as defined. It's more likely to be the formation of a Social Identity.

## An Argument for Grouping

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What is an alternative to deindividuation? What other theory can explain what goes on when we form a group? How does this alternative theory work? Consulting the Social Cognition literature reveals one obvious option. Follow the work of **Sherif** and **Asch**, through **Turner & Killian**, through **Tajfel & Turner** and **Reicher**. You'll get to Social Identity Deindividuation. I have taken this theory and simplified it to a process I call grouping. As for the mechanism, the Availability Heuristic of **Kahneman & Tversky** is a robust effect that can explain grouping. I accept the first two premises of the theory of deindividuation. I will replace the third to fit it into the grouping perspective.

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**Deindividuation** is the technical term that is used to connote a multi-faceted construct that involves

- (d) the specific environmental conditions (e.g., group involvement, arousing activities) that
- (e) promote a particular psychological state (e.g., lack of self-awareness, time distortion), which in turn
- (f) **'shifts a person from an individual identity to a collective identity as a member of the group or crowd.'** (Postmes [2003](#)) ; (Reicher 1987; Tajfel & Turner 1986, Turner & Killian 1972; Asch 1952)

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Social Identity Theory, as described by [Stephen Reicher](#) (joint [Editor of The British Journal of Social Psychology](#)) basically provides a theoretical framework for understanding the formation of group identity or ... social identity. The full theory is robust and very interesting, and is well described by Postmes 1997. For the purposes of this paper I simplify this theory to basically mean that 'a person shifts from an individual identity to a collective identity as a member of a group or crowd.' I argue that the mechanism of this grouping is the Availability Heuristic.

The studies from Sherif and Asch cited early show a pretty robust grouping effect. People conform to form consensus, even in artificial conditions, even if that consensus opinion is obviously wrong. They form a collective identity in the sense that the group has a consensus opinion. The individual adapts their individual identity to compromise with the others in the group. In the Sherif experiment they formed a consensus as to the illusory motion of a dot of light. In the more extreme Asch experiment most subjects chose an obviously wrong answer in order to conform to the group. The person shifts their individual identity to the group identity.

I propose that the mechanism for this shift is the use of the Availability Heuristic. The Availability Heuristic was part of Kahneman & Tversky's Nobel Prize winning work on the heuristics (rules of thumb) underlying human decision-making. The Availability Heuristic refers to the fact that "We attempt to bring to mind examples of the events whose frequency we wish to determine, and we base our frequency judgments on the ease of imagining such examples, that is, on their availability. If we can readily bring to mind examples of middle-aged men who had heart attacks, or employed college students, or of our own shy behaviors, we will judge these occurrences to be quite common." (Kunda 2002). I propose that this is the mechanism behind grouping, because in a group, the behavior of other group members is extremely available. It's right in front of your nose. In a group/crowd we can see, hear, and feel the behavior of other members of the group. Their behavior is available. I propose that we use the Availability Heuristic not only for assessing abstract probabilities, but also for comparing and planning our behavior. This leads to grouping.

This addition to grouping should be tested. My conception of grouping offers two testable propositions:

1. Individuals in groups will shift to a collective identity

2. Individuals will use the Availability Heuristic to shift.

Proposition One can be tested in the following way. I will assume that collective identity is implied (though not proven) by a consensus group opinion. If individuals in groups form a consensus group opinion, it's implied that they've formed a collective identity. The body of work by Sherif, Asch, and the 133 replications documented by Bond provide a template for testing Proposition One. I would simply replicate the Asch experiment.

Proposition Two can be tested by manipulating the information available to an individual. I would modify the Asch experiment and combine it with an experiment by Shelley Taylor and Susan Fiske (1975) on the Availability Heuristic. They were testing how salience made some events more available. The experimental design was to have two confederates conversing. I've made up names so I can tell you about it. Group Can't-See-Alex was seated behind the confederate Alex, so they couldn't see his face. Group Can't-See-Becky was seated behind confederate Becky and Becky's face was obscured. The control Group We-See-Everybody could see both confederates. Shelley and Fiske found that people thought the person they could see, who was the most salient to them, had influenced the conversation the most. The Availability Heuristic explains these results, since one confederate was more available to the senses in the experimental conditions.

My final test of both propositions would be a combined Asch-Shelley-Fiske task. Groups of at least 8 members would be shown line stimuli like those illustrated on page 6. Only one member of the group would be a subject, the rest would be confederates. For each of the two conditions below there would be a control group group of all subjects.

There are two conditions in this experiment. In one subjects would be seated so that they could see all the confederates. In the second they would be seated where they could not see the confederates.

I predict that the Asch conformity (grouping) effect would be the strongest in the condition where the confederates were the most available to the senses. This would occur 1) because there is a groupings effect and 2) because this effect is governed by the Availability Heuristic.

## Conclusion

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In this essay I have defined deindividuation, criticized the third premise of deindividuation (that it is antinormative), and proposed grouping as an alternative explanation. I have defined grouping as a simplified version of Social Identity Theory which theorizes the formation of collective identity through the mechanism of the Availability Heuristic. I then set forth two testable propositions of grouping theory. I believe that the history of research into group processes and the empirical results support the idea of grouping. I also believe that a positive view of group formation, rather than one that simply focuses on the negative aspects – aggression and impulsive behavior – is better correlated with reality and the research record.

We are social creatures. Perhaps we do lose ourselves in groups, but we are not left in a void. We gain the group. Given the incredible amount of groups we are in every day (office, school, city) I think a view that anonymous groups lead to antinormative behavior is just too simplistic. The theory of grouping rests on more robust empirical findings – conformity experiments and the Availability Heuristic – and provides a better way of understanding and talking about anonymous group behavior.

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