

Describe and evaluate two explanations of the behaviour of crowds.

Crowds are large groups of people. They lack organisation and communication between members, and often gather together on a meeting basis. Group life is the term we use to describe the overall emotional development of a group. The portrayal of the life of a group reflects a combination of the feelings, hidden agenda's and unconscious needs of individuals and how these interact to influence the development and feel of a group.

There are many explanations why people act as they do in crowds. This includes deindividuation, bystander apathy, social contagion, and density-intensity hypothesis.

Deindividuation, can be broken down into three components:

1. Inputs,
2. Internal changes,
3. Behavioural outcomes.

Inputs (or causes of deindividuation) include feelings of anonymity, diffusion of responsibility, membership in large groups, and a heightened state of physiological arousal. The deindividuated state itself appears to involve two basic components: reduced self-awareness and altered experiencing. Although, Zimbardo emphasises the negative consequences of deindividuation, violent actions do not always follow losses of identity and self-awareness. In fact, evidence indicates that, given certain prosocial cues, deindividuated group members may behave altruistically and that some of the atypical behaviours that had previously been interpreted as disinhibited, impulsive actions were actually attempts to re-establish a sense of individuality

According to Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb, (who first proposed the idea in 1952) deindividuation, is "a feeling in the individual members of a group that they have lost their personal identities, merged into the group or crowd and become, to all intents and purposes, anonymous". This is said to lead to a weakening of the normally felt constraints against impulsive behaviour and an inability to monitor or regulate ones own behaviour."

Another account of crowd behaviour came from Le Bon (1895). He believed that individuals in a "mob" are fickle, incredulous, intolerable, show violence and show irrationality. He believed these primitive beings were mainly women, children, the lower class and savages. Those in a crowd become spontaneous and violent. It is thought that their collective mind takes over. Zimbardo (1969) tested this theory with an experiment. College women were asked to deliver electric shocks to participants. Some were dressed in bulky coats and their faces were hidden. Others dressed normally. It was found that those who wore the bulky coat gave twice as many shocks as normal and those that wore normal clothes gave less. This study doesn't take into account that the women in bulky coats looked like the Klu Klux Klan, which suggested aggression. It was thought that perhaps those women were responding to the role suggested by the uniform and not the process of deindividuation.

A further study that is worthy of consideration is Diener's experiment in 1976 because he supported the deindividuation theory. He observed 1000 children who were trick or treating on Halloween. He asked a selection of children their name. They were then left alone, those that were left anonymous were found to be more likely to steal.

Deindividuation can also be liberating and produce anti-social behaviour. This was illustrated by the black room experiment (Gergen et al 1973). It involved participants spending an hour in a dark room or a fully lit room. In the dark room, the participants chatted at first in a lively manner but then talked about serious matters. Then this was replaced by physical contact. Ninety % deliberately touched the other participants; fifty % hugged and eighty % admitted to be sexually aroused. In comparison those in the fully lit room talked politely for the whole hour. This shows we can become uninhibited in the dark where intimacy no longer prevails

Another example of crowd behaviour is bystander apathy. This is when there are many people around and fewer people help. Research into bystander intervention started during the mid-sixties in response to the assault and eventual murder of Kitty Genovese. At 3:00 in the morning, over a period of 30 minutes, Kitty Genovese was attacked three times in the courtyard of her apartment building. The man first mugged her, left, then returned to rape her, left again, and finally returned to kill her. This entire tragedy was witnessed, and her screams for help heard, by 38 of her neighbours, none of who came to her rescue or even phoned to police. It wasn't until her attacker returned to rape her again and kill her that anyone bothered to call police.

Darley and Latané (1968) responded to the Kitty Genovese case by testing their bystander hypothesis. They arranged for a group of students (all confederate bar one) to discuss their personal problems through an intercom system. During the conversation one of the confederates admitted that they sometimes have seizures. Later on this confederate told the group he felt unwell and needed help. As the participants thought they were the only listener, 85% of those who did the experiment went for help (before the confederate went silent). When there was one other bystander 62% helped and when there were four bystanders 31% helped. Showing the more people there are around, people are less likely to help.

As a result of bystander apathy, cab driver Moustapha Narouf died in the trunk of his taxi while police searched the neighbourhood and conducted a door-to-door investigation looking for witnesses. Psychologists call such behaviour "bystander indifference." It's not that these people didn't care what was happening to the cab driver (or Kitty Genovese). They simply took their cues from the crowd around them.

This kind of public indifference permeates today's society. We are guilty of it every time we pass a driver pulled over on the side of the road and assume someone else will stop to offer help.

In one of the first bystander experiments, participants were shown into a room to complete a questionnaire. In one condition they were alone, in another there were two others present. After a while, steam came through an air vent in the wall. Latané and Darley wanted to see how quickly they would react. If no one responded to the smoke in six minutes the experiment was abolished, by which time the steam was so thick the participant could not see the questionnaire. The results for this experiment found that 75 % of those working alone reported the smoke (half within two minutes) and 62% of those in the group of three carried on working for the full six minutes.

Views like these have given crowds a bad name. Those in authority treat all crowds as mobs e.g. police. This mentally contributed to the Hillsborough disaster (Banyard 1989). Many deaths could have been prevented. The disaster occurred at the ground of Sheffield Wednesday Football Club on the 15 April 1989 during the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool FC and Nottingham Forest. Mismanagement by police and officials allowed thousands of Liverpool supporters into already overcrowded pens, a fatal mistake that "directly followed from a [false] interpretation by South Yorkshire Police that they were dealing with a violent crowd pitch invasion, rather than a problem of safety and overcrowding." (Redhead, 1997: 11-12). As a result the pens became terribly overcrowded, with no means of escape due to perimeter fencing set up to prevent pitch invasions. The resulting crush cost the lives of 96 people and resulted in 730 injured.

The disaster at Hillsborough had been an accident, brought on by hooliganism, carelessness and incompetence.

Is group behaviour always as unreasonable as Zimbardo made out? For example the St. Paul's black police civil disturbances in Bristol in 1984 were violent but were also controlled. This is because the violence was only aimed at certain specific targets and avoided others. (E.g. local shops and houses). The riot was confined to an area in the heart of a community too (Brown 1988).