## The Psychology of the Mob Mentality

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## With the recent riots in London, Manchester, Birmingham, and other locations, it is an apt time to examine crowd behaviour and the ‘mob mentality.’

## ****So, what causes mob mentality?****

## There are a number of explanations for mob mentality within social psychology. These include:

## ****Deindividuation**** – when people are part of a group, they experience a loss of self-awareness.

## ****Identity**** – when people are part of a group, they can lose their sense of individual identity.

## ****Emotions**** – being part of a group can lead to heightened emotional states, be that excitement, anger, hostility, etc.

## ****Acceptability**** – behaviours that are usually seen as unacceptable suddenly become acceptable when others within a group are seen to be carrying them out.

## ****Anonymity**** – people feel anonymous within a large group, which reduces their sense of responsibility and accountability.

## ****Diffusion of Responsibility**** – being part of a group creates the perception that violent or unacceptable behaviour is not a a personal responsibility but a group responsibility.

## The larger the group or crowd, the more likely that there will be deindividuation and diffusion of responsibility.

## It is generally believed that everyone is capable of this mob mentality.  However, research does suggest that some personalities or circumstances make it more likely.  For example:

## Adolescents who lack a stable family can gain a sense of identity when part of a group.

## People are more likely to take part in looting during times of hardship.

## Particularly emotional events such as football matches.

About Mob Mentality

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There have been times in our lives when we’ve heard the expression ‘*if your friends jumped off a cliff, would you do the same?*’ from our parents or our teachers. We answered with ‘no’ most of the times. The sad fact is that, every now and then, without realizing why, we would jump with our friends. People follow people. It’s been like this for ages. The reason we blindly follow people is because we lose our sense of individuality and become part of a group’s mechanism. Most of the times, there are negative outcomes when this happens. Football fights, military units, witch trials, all of these are examples of why acting without individual thinking is wrong. You can do something about mob mentality.

Let’s analyze the London riots, for example. At the beginning of August 2011 some London districts suffered rioting, looting and arson when thousands took the streets, during a protest that turned violent. A piece of an article found in The Guardian stated:

*“Many who participated in the riots were confronted with scenes that challenged their conscience. A 17-year-old from Islington who, on the second night of the riots, looted a branch of Currys in Enfield, described how her feelings changed as the night progressed. When people she knew smashed their way into a hairdresser’s, stealing shampoo and ripping out the basins, she thought: ‘It’s so dumb. I don’t agree with it.’”*

Does disagreeing actually matter? Yes, it does. If you see mobs as an irrational phenomenon, the first response is to repress (why reason with those who have no reason?) and second is to look for problems within the communities from which rioters are drawn. There are ways in which you can say “*No, I won’t jump*”.  Understanding how belonging to a group can influence our thoughts helps us make sense of the behavior that otherwise will appear irrational and has fundamental implications in how we respond to crowd actions.

We should start asking ourselves why is it so easy for humans to act violently when belonging to a group. The idea of mob mentality was first coined by social psychologist Gustave Le Bon [1], when referring to the belief that a group can act as a single individual. This leads most of the time to destructive behavior. The London riots were only the start in a chain of riots that happened in the next three nights all across England. Significant disturbances, involving rioting and looting, were reported in Birmingham, Salford, Liverpool, and Manchester. The capability to control behavior disappears, therefore exposing individuals to contagion. All acts of love, hatred, anger are immediately approved, spread and repeated.

Have you ever been in a group and acted in a way contrary to your ordinary behavior? A man, as part of a group, is a very different individual. When studying the effects of behavior of individuals in a revolution, Le Bon [2] thought that the collective mentalities are very different than personal mentalities. In a mob mentality the individual’s identity disappears, causing anonymity. Simply by being part of a crowd, folks lose all sense of self and all sense of responsibility, and manage to gain power due to the group’s size.

Behavior in a crowd is mostly influenced by anonymity. Nobody knows who you are when you stand next to a large number of people. Diener [3] conducted a study on how anonymity influences ones behavior in a group by observing children that went trick-or-treating on Halloween. The results of the study indicated that children who wore costumes that concealed their identity, or children who went trick-or-treating in a group stole extra candy than when they were alone with the candy bowl. So, anonymity enhances the loss of self-awareness within a group that eases the path to anti-social behavior and encourages individuals to identify with the group. If people don’t know you, there will be fewer consequences for your actions.

Anonymity and loss of individuality eases up the process of behaving anti-social. Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb’s [4] used the term “deindividuation” to describe the effect of groups on the behavior of an individual. They stated that when belonging to a crowd, a person will be ‘*able to indulge in forms of behavior in which, when alone, they would not indulge*’. Think about how easy it must have been for the participants at the London riots to loot stores in groups rather than when they are be alone. Including one person in a crowd or a group results in the feeling of anonymity and loss of personal identity, which motivates people to act aggressively or deviate from their usual social behavior.

Humans tend to exhibit certain behavior when they become members of a group. For example, Jeremy Dean stated in his blog [ten rules that govern group behavior](http://www.spring.org.uk/2009/07/10-rules-that-govern-groups.php). Some of them mentioned that a group can shape our conformity, and influence our decision making, or even threaten us with ostracism if we do not agree with the overall decisions made by the group.

Understanding mob mentality can be the first step in stopping the negative outcomes.  The solution lies in preventing deindividuation, rather than punishing the results. For instance, what did the authorities do after the London riots? They started repressing rioters. This was wrong. A different approach should have been taken such as helping individuals become more self-aware. There are experiments with mirrors [5] which have proven that people become more self-aware of their actions. By forcing an individual to see himself, you force him to think about his actions, and that increases self-awareness and decreases deindividuation. This was applicable for preventing riots at football matches, where mirrors and cameras have been placed on the walls stadiums. Additionally, it is important to stop unruly behavior from its early stages. One way to do this is by reinforcing their individual identity. Simply by calling people by their name, pulling them out of a mob and encouraging personal differences in a group can reduce the harmful effects of deindividuation.

If you manage to create non-threatening, non-stressful, and unambiguous situations people may think more clearly about their actions instead of being drawn in by negative group norms.

References

[1]   Le Bon, G., (1896) General Characteristics of crowds – Psychological Law of Their Mental Unity. *The Crowd: A study of the Popular Mind.*Book I, Chapter I.

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[3]    Diener, E., Fraser, S., Beaman, A., & Kelem, R. (1976). Effects of deindividuation variables on stealing among Halloween trick-ortreaters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 33, 178- 183.

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