

De-individuation

Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb coined the term “de-individuation” in 1952. De-individuation refers to how, when we find ourselves in a group, we become less self-aware and also less concerned with how others will evaluate us. Think of all the people you’ve heard yell obscenities at sporting events. Do you think they would do that if they were in a small, intimate group watching that same event? Basically, de-individuation means that when in a group, we feel more anonymous and therefore less individually responsible for our actions, often causing us to say or do things that we would not normally feel comfortable with.

Diener, Fraser, Beamnan, and Kelemn conducted a study that showed how de-individuation can lead to antisocial behavior. On Halloween, researchers evaluated 1,352 trick-or-treaters – either alone or in groups– who had the chance to steal candy from 27 Seattle homes. The researchers figured that Halloween would be the perfect occasion to conduct such a study because the children would be in costume, making them more anonymous. When the children came to doors where they were greeted by experimenters, they were told they could choose only one piece of candy. In some cases, the experimenter asked the children their names, while in other cases the children were allowed to remain anonymous. The experimenter would then leave the room, as though they had to go get something. Unseen observers took careful note of how the children responded: When alone, 7.5% took more than one piece of candy; when in groups, 20.8% took more than one piece! It was also interesting to observe that the children who remained anonymous stole more candy than did the children who gave out their names. De-individuation prompted many of the trick-or-treaters to go against what was socially acceptable and steal more candy.

Social Validation and Conformity or Groupthink

Anytime we find ourselves part of a group, we feel some susceptibility to peer pressure and/or the opinions of others in the group. The more esteem we feel for the group, the more their opinions matter to us, and therefore the more we feel pressured to align our own opinions with those of the group. Even if we don’t really agree with the group, we will often go along with them so we are rewarded instead of punished, or liked instead of scorned.

In a way, this is an obvious observation. Anyone who has ever been to the movies knows that the size of the crowd in the theater has a big effect on how good the movie seems: The larger the crowd, the funnier the comedies are. The larger the crowd, the scarier the horror flick is. Consider the following other examples:

- Conforming because you believe everyone else is correct.
- Conforming because you fear the social rejection of not going along.
- Conforming simply because it’s the norm.
- Conforming because of cultural influences.