

Crowds essay sample

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Explain the place of anonymity in theories of crowd behaviour . Is it always associated with a ‘ loss of self ‘

It's claimed feelings of anonymity from the security of being in the crowd encourages individuals to behave outside of their normal constraints , producing unpredictable and violent outcomes . This notion was put forward by Le Bon , one of the founders of crowd psychology research , and has been carried forward in subsequent de -individuation theories of crowd behaviour . This assignment , however , will argue power relations are present in the use of these explanations . Also it will show , De - individuation theory research and its focus on establishing a relationship between anonymity and aggression , fails to address peoples own perceptions of being in a group or the wider context , due to its outside perspective . Here , it's argued the inside perspective from a social identity approach shows there is no anonymity within the crowd , and behaviour is very much constrained by group expectations , relevant to the context .

Le Bon's work , cited in Dixon & Mahendran (2012) , and his idea of a ‘ group mind , where people succumb to a ‘ hypnotic influence’ through a process termed ‘ contagion ‘ , has influenced subsequent research in crowd psychology . Arguing individuals behave in ways they would not normally do when in large numbers , he considered crowds to be dangerous , unpredictable and needing to be controlled , going on to note how when in groups individuals become easily manipulated . However , to Dixon & Mahendran (2012) his research was based on distant observation of crowds of the lower classes , of which he was not a member .

Taking forward the idea of a group mind , Festinger et al , cited in Dixon & Mahendran (2012) propose instead a concept of de-individuation . Arguing , when members of a crowd feel anonymous from being one amongst many they can also feel less accountable as an ‘ individual identity’ . In addition to this , Dennier 1980 & Prentice -Dunn & Roger’s , as cited in Dixon & Mahendran , 2012 conjectured to highlight the contribution of some contextual features of being in a crowd , such as : a state of emotional arousal ; the awareness of being part of a group ; and a joint group fixation which they claim can contribute to deflecting attention away from feeling like an individual identity.

When anonymity leads to de – individuation people are more conscious of the group than themselves , and to Zimbardo , cited in Dixon & Mahendran (2012) this leads to a ‘ diffusion of responsibility’, which increases aggression and anti -normative behaviour . Moreover it is argued by Dennier& Prentice -Dunn & Roger’s , as cited in Dixon & Mahendran , (2012) as behavioural and moral boundaries become more fluid they are transgressed more easily ; in this irrational state people respond to cues in the immediate environment , the process that Le Bon called ‘ contagion ’ . There has been much research into the effect’s of de-individuation on behaviour , which a review of 60 studies by Postmes & Spears , cited in Dixon & Mahendran (2012) criticised for being mainly experiments involving the measurement of aggression or deviance , yet the role of context in the anonymous conditions seems quite apparent . Most notably , Zimbardo 1969 , cited in Dixon & Mahendran (2012) , researched de -individuation affects on aggressive behaviour using conditions of anonymity and identified subjects

who administered electric shocks as punishment in a learning experiment , in which the anonymous group wore hoods and gowns .

The quantifiable data showed the anonymous group delivered significantly higher shocks , so the conclusion reached was anonymity lead to an increase in aggression . However , Johnson & Downing cited in Dixon & Mahendran (2012) extended zimbado's experiment , subjects were made anonymous or identifiable , wearing Ku-Klux -Klan or nurses uniforms with or without name badges . They found a higher intensity of aggression in the anonymous khlan condition , but found a significantly higher level of compassion in the anonymous nurses condition , suggesting anonymity increased the desire to comply with the perceived norms for the social identity being adopted , relevant to the particular social context .

Research into the relationship between individuals' social identities and crowd behaviour has developed into an approach which explains crowd behaviour based on the Social Identity theory developed by Tajfel & Turner , 1979 . When Reiceher & Stott cited in Dixon & Mahendran (2012) observedn commentators and the media , from their outside perspective , focusing on de-individation explanations for the London riots in 2011 , they sought to challenge these accounts using a social identity framework . By conducting interviews with people involved in the rioting , and a qualitative analysis of the processes leading to the main events , they sought to gain an insider perspective and understand the meaning of the crowds actions in relation to social identity and the wider social context . They found a genuine grievance which people wished to address with the police was met with hostility outside a local police station , causing a group perception of them

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against us , in perceiving their community and social identity to be under attack others from the community foregrounded their social identity and acted in the way they seen their social group acting , and which they believed to be a valid response in that context .

A noticeable difference between the above explanations is the value given to crowd behaviour . Le Bon and De -individuation take away any validity for crowd actions . A group mind or loss of self allows peoples actions to be explained as criminal or irrational . Foregrounding a social identity represents the feelings and motivations of a collective , which can be viewed from those on the outside of the group as a danger or challenge to their social order

To Dixon & Mahendran , 2012 , a social Identity explanation challenges the processes of contagion and claims of irrational behaviour within crowds , forwarded by de -individuation theorists and Le Bon . Instead arguing crowd behaviour is shaped by a process of ' inductive categorisation ' . Where , a desire for their own social identity to be accepted by the crowd causes people to join in with behaviour they see as appropriate in that social context . As a result crowd behaviour is regulated from within , because any behaviour by an individual which is not perceived as typical of the group's social identity in that context would place the individual outside of the group , the rest of the group not finding it acceptable .

Finally , whilst this approach also recognises that individual psychology can be altered when people become immersed in the crowd , according to Dixon & Mahendran , 2012 , it is not viewed as a total loss of self , and in contrast

to a de-individuation account , neither does it recognise members of the crowd as feeling anonymous or losing their own sense of themselves as morally accountable and responsible . Instead , Dixon & Mahendran , 2012, argue , seeking recognition from others in the crowd makes people feel very much accountable for their behaviour based on a different part of their identity - their social identity . This is foregrounded when part of a persons' own social self identifies with others in the group , through sharing the same social category and their values and beliefs about certain social issues such as those that started the London riots . Understood this way , anonymity from being in a crowd only extends to the loss of the self as an individual identity , and people in a crowd are only anonymous to those outside the group .

To conclude , it has been shown under certain social conditions being in a crowd does alter individual psychology . The work of Le Bon , from its outsider perspective, influenced later crowd psychology research , so later de - individuation theorists' maintained the view of crowds as producing anti normative and aggressive behaviour , occurring due to a feeling of anonymity and a loss of self awareness . However , social identity theory presents a potent challenge to what had become an established way for collective actions to be invalidated by those who felt threatened by crowd actions . It maintains , only peoples individual identities are lost in crowds , and this is not taken from people . Instead , they foreground their social identity while identifying with the group , its behaviours and social norms . These are enacted in a way relevant to the social context in order to maintain acceptance by the group . As was found by Reicher & Stott , crowd

behaviour is both constrained and rational when considered in relation to peoples social identity and the context .

J , Dixon & Mahendran , K (2012) ‘ Crowds’ , in Hollway , W. , Lucey , H . , A , Phoenix . , & Lewis , G . (eds) ‘ Social Psychology Matters ’ , Cullompton , Willan Publishing/ Milton Keynes , The Open University .

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