

The Role of Anonymity in Deindividuated Behavior: A Comparison of Deindividuation Theory and the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE)

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Abstract

This literature review discusses the role of anonymity in deindividuation, the state of inner restraint on usual behavior that is experienced by individuals in a group. It will analyze two different models, deindividuation theory and Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), with regard to the role of anonymity within group contexts. After reviewing the current research from these two perspectives, the article demonstrates how the two models together present the most complete picture of anonymity and its relationship with deindividuation.

Introduction

Researchers in the field of social psychology have identified a number of variables that cause deindividuation (Guerin, 2003). Specifically, numerous studies have identified anonymity as a key factor that produces the effects of deindividuation (Silke, 2003). Although deindividuation literature often implicates anonymity, there is debate as to what the role and the effects of anonymity are in group behavior and identity (Lea, Spears, and de Groot, 2001). According to Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, and de Groot (2001), this conflict is evident in the emphasis placed on anonymity by two opposing frameworks: deindividuation theory and the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE). This literature review will attempt to: (1) describe the role of anonymity in both deindividuation theory and SIDE model; and (2) evaluate deindividuation theory and SIDE with regard to how anonymity is measured within social contexts.

Deindividuation Theory

Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb (1952) used the term deindividuation to describe the effect of a crowd or group on the behavior of an individual. Festinger et al. claimed that, as a result of this restraint on an individual's usual behavior, the individual becomes "able to indulge in forms of behavior in which, when alone, they would not indulge" (p. 382). Deindividuation theory also asserts that the immersion of the individual within a crowd or group results in a loss of self identity (Diener, 1980; Festinger et al.; Zimbardo, 1969). Consequently, this loss of one's sense of personal identity is more likely to encourage people to act aggressively or deviate from acceptable social behaviors when they are in group settings than when they are alone (Diener, 1980; Zimbardo, 1969).

The Role of Anonymity in Deindividuation Theory

In relation to deindividuation theory, Diener (1980) argued that anonymous conditions within a group setting cause people to lack awareness of who they are as individuals, which facilitates deindividuation. Zimbardo (1969) placed strong emphasis on anonymity as the cause of diminished concern for self evaluation, which enables individuals to act with disregard for following societal norms of behavior. Deindividuation theory also asserts that the effect anonymity has on producing uninhibited behavior is directly related to group size. Kugihara (2001) found that the larger the size of the group, the higher the degree of anonymity experienced by the group's members, hence stronger antisocial behavior, actions that oppose a society's approved standards of conduct. Furthermore, Mann, Newton and Innes (1982) claimed that deindividuation theory implies that anonymity provides an individual with protection from "the social disapproval or rejection likely to follow from non-adherence to the norm" (p. 261).

Research Based on Anonymity in Deindividuation Theory

Research based on deindividuation theory primarily focuses on how anonymity influences negative social behavior. In a classic study conducted in 1976, Diener and his colleagues observed groups of children as they went trick-or-treating. Based on their observations, Diener and his colleagues found that children who either wore costumes

concealing their identities or went trick-or-treating in a group stole extra candy when they were alone with the candy bowl. In another early study conducted on deindividuation, female participants who wore hoods covering their faces, which created a sense of anonymity, were more likely to press a button that they believed would administer electric shocks to their “victims” who were in another room (Zimbardo, 1969).

In similar fashion, recent studies have also focused on anonymity and its effect on other uninhibited behaviors outside of the laboratory, such as violence, aggression, or engaging in sexual self-disclosure over the Internet. For instance, Silke (2003) found that 206 out of 500 violent attacks that occurred in Northern Ireland between July 1994 and December 1996 were committed by individuals who wore disguises. In their research, Douglas and McGarty (2001) used computer mediated communication (CMC) to study how people communicated with each other via the Internet when their identities were anonymous. Douglas and McGarty found that people whose identities were unknown showed a greater tendency to exchange “flaming behavior,” which includes sending hostile and threatening messages to others online in chat rooms or through instant messaging. A more recent study that also involves the effects of anonymity on deindividuated behavior online examined the tendency for adolescents to disclose sexual information to others over the Internet (Chiou, 2006). Based on the survey responses provided by 1,347 participants ranging from 16-23 years old, the study found that participants, especially males, were much more likely to engage in sharing and responding to sexual topics over the Internet when they knew their identities were concealed. Furthermore, this study found that the greater the anonymity people perceived, the greater the intent for sexual disclosure, which supports the deindividuation theory idea that anonymity leads to less inhibited, and often socially unacceptable, behaviors (Chiou, 2006).

SIDE Approach

The Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) is described as an approach that seeks to explain crowd behavior by an individual’s “conformity to salient local [group] norms” (Kugihara, 2001; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). Unlike deindividuation theory, SIDE asserts that crowd behavior is more regulated according to the good of

the whole (Reicher et al., 1995). SIDE focuses more on the positive, rather than negative, nature of deindividuation. SIDE also proposes two possible types of deindividuation effects related to group behavior: (1) cognitive or self-categorical effects, which relate deindividuated effects to situations where others are anonymous or identifiable to the self, and (2) strategic effects, which relate to situations where the self is identifiable to others (Douglas and McGarty, 2001; Reicher et al., 1995). Based on this approach, if the individual regards the group as important and the individual can identify with that group, he or she is more likely to behave according to the particular norms set by the specific group (Kugihara, 2001). In this way, the salience of the group encourages an individual to identify with the group and to conform his or her behavior to group norms.

The Role of Anonymity in SIDE

Lea et al. (2001) argued that in the SIDE approach, visual anonymity increases an individual’s attraction to the group, and therefore, the likelihood that an individual will self-stereotype to align more closely with the group. According to this model, anonymity within a group decreases awareness of other, distinct individuals and shifts this awareness to the group identity, a process they call social-identity based depersonalization. Furthermore, visual anonymity facilitates the effect of group salience on depersonalized perception and behavior.

Research Based on Anonymity in SIDE

Unlike research based on deindividuation theory, studies founded on the SIDE approach focus more on how anonymity may increase social influence (Postmes et al., 2001). Instead of explaining the relationship between anonymity and deindividuation by exploring aggressive or antisocial behavior, SIDE research seeks to determine that relationship by focusing on the identification of the individual both within and outside of the group. For instance, Lea et al. (2001) tested the SIDE approach to determine whether anonymity within groups would enhance social identity among members. For this study, researchers assigned 56 female participants into either visually anonymous or video-identifiable groups and had them communicate with their group members via the computer. In support of the SIDE approach, the study found that participants who were in the visually anonymous groups (who did not see a picture or

video of their group members) categorized themselves in terms of their group when answering post-experiment questionnaires and that this group-based categorization was directly related to participants' increase in feelings of group attraction. In another study that used computer-mediated communication, Postmes et al. (2001) examined the SIDE approach by testing the hypothesis that anonymity can increase social influence if group identity is highly salient. Postmes and his colleagues conducted two studies in which they randomly assigned male and female participants to identifiable groups (where participants saw digital pictures of their group-mates on their computer screens) or anonymous groups in order to complete computerized group tasks by communicating with one another over the computer. As predicted by their hypothesis, the results from the first study revealed that anonymous groups, but not any of the identifiable groups that researchers primed with a particular social behavior, displayed behavior consistent with the primed norm while performing group tasks.

Evaluation of Deindividuation Theory and SIDE

Both deindividuation theory and SIDE implicate anonymity as an important factor in explaining deindividuated behavior. However, the social focus of the two approaches in how to measure anonymity presents two opposing views on the effects of the individual's sense of identity and behavior in groups. Deindividuation theory emphasizes that the transgression of general societal norms results from the anonymity of the person within a group or a crowd (Diener, 1980). Postmes et al. (2001) articulates this point by stating that "deindividuation theories would therefore seem to predict that anonymity either fosters unresponsiveness to social identities and their associated norms, or behavior that is generally anti-normative or both" (p. 1254). Based on the research focus of deindividuation theory, researchers have addressed only the negative effects of anonymity on social behavior when explaining the processes of group behavior.

Conversely, researchers developed the SIDE approach as an attempt to provide an alternative to deindividuation theory (Postmes et al., 2001). Rather than focusing on the negative effects of associating with a group, the SIDE model focuses on positive experiences of depersonalization, which has the ability to affect social influence. SIDE

contends that group behavior depends on not only anonymity within the group, but also the salience of the group as a whole (Douglas and McGarty, 2001). Although SIDE claims to challenge "the orthodoxy that anonymity [solely] has negative behavioral consequences" (Douglas and McGarty, 2001, p. 400), the approach still lacks research in exploring deviant social behavior (Kugihara, 2001; Silke, 2003). Overall, research findings in both deindividuation theory and SIDE provide insight into describing both the negative and the positive aspects of anonymity's effect on social behavior. Taken together, these two viewpoints present a more complete view of the relationship between anonymity and deindividuation. Both approaches can still learn from each other in order to develop more research to further the understanding of these phenomena.

Conclusion

Deindividuation research implicates anonymity as one of the main factors that influences deindividuation. This literature review addresses two major approaches within the topic of deindividuated behavior—deindividuation theory and SIDE—and the role anonymity plays in each approach. According to deindividuation theory, anonymity contributes to an individual's loss of self-awareness and loss of concern for self-evaluation within a group setting, enabling the individual to participate in anti-normative or aggressive behavior (Newcomb et al. 1952; Diener, 1980; Zimbardo, 1969). The second approach, SIDE, contends that anonymity within a salient group will encourage individuals to identify and act with the group (Douglas and McGarth, 2001). Research studies conducted on both approaches to deindividuation provide insight into the effects of group identity and the reduction of self-awareness. However, more research on both the positive and negative social effects of anonymity in group behavior is essential for expanding understanding of these phenomena in both deindividuation theory and SIDE in order to better understand the relationship between anonymity and deindividuation.

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