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Deindividuation can be a good thing? Say what?!

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By: Brian F. Redmond

As you are probably aware Penn State students rioted over the firing of Joe Paterno. This post is going to look into why that happened, in hopefully a unique way. I'm sure that many of you have already read about deindividuation with regards to the riots that occurred, as that explanation is the "go to" topic any time riots occur. I'll give a short definition as I'm sure that most readers are familiar with the idea: deindividuation is when a person no longer feels constrained by social mores because they can no longer be recognized as individuals (Schneider, Gruman, & Coutts, 2005). Deindividuation is often associated with crimes, such as rioting when people lose a sense of identity in a crowd, but also things like robbery and burglary where individuals don't think they can be recognized at night. But not all people behave poorly in crowds or at night. Why is that? So I'm going to delve a bit deeper into why deindividuation is part of human behavior and argue that under certain circumstance it actually is necessary. I'll finish up with some elaboration on the why (examining the [distal/ultimate cause, not just the proximal cause](#)) as well as some hope for the future.

There are some necessary conditions for deindividuation to occur and cause bad behavior. The first is that it tends to happen in large groups. But not all large groups riot? For example the Occupy Wall Street movement (with a few exceptions such as Oakland) has not erupted into riots. People at those locations disagree with another group and are protesting something just like the students disagreed and were protesting Paterno's firing. What is the difference? The main difference: emotional intensity. Not just different types of emotion, but intensity. The Occupy crowds are upset, but they are not in a rage such as the students were. To help understand this idea, euphoria can also cause riots. Look at the riots that happened in San Francisco in 2010 after the Giants baseball team won the World Series championship after a 55 year drought (they were still in New York City when last they won). So both positive and negative emotions can result in riots, the key is that emotions have to be running hot. Well that's the proximal cause. But there's got to be more to it than that right?

The answer is yes, there is a distal cause as well: our evolutionary history. To kick off that thought process, I'll ask this question: 10,000 years ago (which is roughly when our current DNA pattern solidified that lays the groundwork for all our modern behaviors), when were humans in large groups with emotions running high? The short answer: War. So deindividuation served us well in our past (and in a moment I'll make the case for current) lives. It allowed us to behave poorly to protect the group when threats to our safety and resources. People who were no longer bound by the family ties or tribal culture as they were a person is a large confusing battleground with many people they didn't know had to let out the fight aspect of their fight or flight response or risk becoming dead, along with their own group. This actually translates well into the modern world as well. We charge police and soldiers with protecting us, and as such release them from many of the social mores (i.e. carrying guns, shooting at people) that we in a civilized world no longer endorse so that they can "get the bad guys". But aren't cops and soldiers are still individuals? The answer is yes and no. If you look at police and soldier training, it really focuses on de-emphasizing the individual and focuses on everyone being there to do the job and look at a larger mission. "Never leave a man behind." "You gotta do what you gotta do." Each profession also puts uniforms on each person so that they are not easily distinguished from each other while also creating solidarity. All of this is a good thing; we need police and soldiers.

As somewhat of a related sidebar conversation I'll mention that Eagly's (1987) [social role theory](#) (the idea that we fill many different roles in our life that give us meaning to our lives, but also causes us to behave slightly differently in each role) shows us that successful police and soldiers take their uniform off right when they get home at the end of their day to adjust to their civilian role. This works in part because they become an individual again. For instance, police officers who leave their uniforms on after work are more likely to die shortly after retirement because their life no longer has meaning without the uniform.

Returning to our distal cause idea (evolution) as to why riots occur, I'm sure that you are asking yourself, "well how can riots occur? We aren't in war situations anymore." The answer is here is no and it returns us to the proximal cause; crowds and emotions running high. While they may not be war itself that seems to be enough for our DNA to interpret as a risk and to trigger the fight or flight response. But haven't we evolved past that? The answer here is not quite yet, but possibly soon. Steven Pinker (2011) has made the case that violence is actually on the decline, despite another evolutionary protection mechanism that tricks us into thinking it is on the rise: [negativity bias](#), paying attention to bad things to protect ourselves (Vaish, Grossman, & Woodward, 2008). It is quite possible that we are evolving past deindividuation. And the reason may be that in the modern world social mores are almost never lifted as we have social connections that were never available in our evolutionary past. For instance, multi-national corporations have fostered relationships around the world, television has exposed us to cultures around the world, and we can connect with people almost anytime anywhere with social media tools in devices that travel with us.

"But Brian, I have one last question left. So what you are saying is that those students had no choice but to riot? The social conditions were right to trigger their DNA programmed reaction, right?" Not at all. Darwin's (1859) evolutionary theory actually gives each individual vast amounts of free will to choose their own path in life. So while there are genetic propensities for us to behave one way or another, we can choose to prevent those behaviors. Darwin (1859) really gets at this with the notion of artificial selection/selective breeding in his theory. It basically means that humans can shape evolution themselves with their choices. He did argue that natural selection (the environment acting on species) was a more powerful force because it acted on a global level, which is why anti-

evolutionists object to the theory; they misinterpret the main force in his multi-level theory as the only causal factor. That is also the point of Burnham and Phelan's (2000) modern classic *Mean Genes* where they make the case humans are smart enough to beat their evolutionary past by recognizing potential problems and planning ahead. So with the right information (say knowledge of deindividuation) the students could have used their brainpower to see that going downtown at that time would be dangerous to themselves and others and instead chosen to stay home and maintain safety.

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