

# EXAMINING THE MOB MENTALITY

## What is the psychology behind mob mentality?

**TAMARA AVANT, Psychology Program Director at South University (Savannah, Georgia):** Social psychology does offer relevant explanations for group or mob mentality and violence. When people are part of a group, they often experience **deindividuation, or a loss of self-awareness**. When people deindividuate<sup>o</sup>, they are less likely to follow normal restraints and inhibitions<sup>o</sup> and more likely to lose their sense of individual identity. Groups can generate a sense of emotional excitement, which can lead to the provocation<sup>o</sup> of behaviors that a person would not typically engage in if alone. Think about the last sporting event or concert you attended. It's unlikely that you would have been yelling or singing the way you were if you were the only person doing it! The group seems to make some behaviors acceptable that would not be acceptable otherwise.

Deindividuation obviously does not occur every time people get together in a group, and there are some group characteristics that increase the likelihood of violence, such as group size and physical anonymity. First, many people believe they cannot be held responsible for violent behavior when part of a mob because they perceive the violent action as the group's (e.g., "everyone was doing it") rather than their own behavior. When in a large group, people tend to experience a diffusion<sup>o</sup> of responsibility. Typically, the bigger a mob, the more its members lose self-awareness and become willing to engage in dangerous behavior. Second, physical anonymity<sup>o</sup> also leads to a person experiencing fewer social inhibitions. When people feel that their behavior cannot be traced back to them, they are more likely to break social norms and engage in violence.

## Are certain people more susceptible?

**TA:** In general, we are all susceptible<sup>o</sup> to participating in some group behavior, but researchers have found that certain situations and personality characteristics play a role. For example, people are more likely to engage in looting in dire situations, such as when resources were scarce after Hurricane Katrina. Adolescents who share antisocial tendencies and lack close family bonds are more likely to search for social identity in gangs. The greater individuals feel like they identify with a group, the greater the pressures for them to conform and deindividuate become.

## What types of situations lend themselves to mobs?

**TA:** Group violence is most likely to occur when the group is large, people are able to remain anonymous, and people experience a diffusion of responsibility. Certain situations also play a role, such as when resources are scarce, we are surrounded by like-minded people, and/or when emotions are aroused.

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**deindividuate:** to lose self-awareness of individuality

**inhibitions:** self-consciousness that guides decisions

**provocation:** the provoking of; the causing of

**diffusion:** discarding of; decreasing of

**anonymity:** freedom from being identified

**susceptible:** able to be influenced by, easily affected

