

# Mass Psychology

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 1, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Mass Psychology*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=32195>

# Mass Psychology

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Social Psychology, Sociology, Psychology

## 1. Core Definition

Mass psychology, often interchangeably referred to as mob psychology or crowd psychology, is a specialized branch of social psychology that systematically investigates the profound influence of large groups of people on individual behavior. This field seeks to understand the complex dynamics that emerge when individuals congregate, exploring how their thoughts, emotions, and actions can be significantly altered or guided by the collective presence. It delves into the processes through which personal identity, individual responsibility, and moral compass might shift or diminish when an individual becomes part of a larger, often anonymous, aggregate.

At its heart, mass psychology examines the mechanisms by which a collective mindset can form, potentially leading to behaviors that individuals might not exhibit in isolation. This includes analyzing phenomena ranging from spontaneous collective actions, such as flash mobs, to more structured social movements and historical events. The discipline is deeply concerned with the interplay between the individual psyche and the emergent properties of a group, aiming to delineate how conformity, suggestion, emotional contagion, and the perception of shared purpose can reshape human experience within a crowd context. It represents a critical area of study for understanding societal trends, public opinion formation, and the psychological underpinnings of collective action.

## 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The origins of mass psychology can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period marked by profound social and political changes, including industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of mass movements. Early theorists, grappling with the perceived irrationality and power of crowds, began to conceptualize the distinct psychological phenomena that seemed to characterize collective behavior. The term itself reflects this early focus on the "mass" as a powerful, sometimes overwhelming, entity capable of transforming individual consciousness.

The historical development of mass psychology is characterized by a progression from initial speculative and somewhat pejorative views of crowds as inherently irrational and volatile, towards more nuanced and empirically grounded understandings. Pioneers like Gustave Le Bon laid foundational groundwork, attempting to categorize and explain the distinct psychological states individuals entered within a crowd. Subsequently, psychoanalytic perspectives introduced by Sigmund Freud provided deeper insights into the unconscious processes at play. The mid-20th century saw the emergence of more rigorous social psychological theories, notably from Leon Festinger and Philip Zimbardo, which introduced concepts like deindividuation, offering empirical

frameworks for studying crowd phenomena. Concurrently, perspectives such as Floyd Allport's Convergence theory offered alternative explanations, suggesting that crowds are not always irrational but can be a logical expression of pre-existing shared interests. This evolution reflects a continuous effort to move beyond simplistic characterizations and to embrace the multifaceted nature of human behavior in collective settings.

### 3. Key Characteristics

The study of mass psychology is defined by several key theoretical frameworks, each offering distinct insights into how individuals behave within large groups. These frameworks, proposed by influential thinkers, highlight various psychological processes ranging from the loss of personal identity to the emergence of shared convictions. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for appreciating the breadth and complexity of collective human behavior.

**Gustave Le Bon's Stages of the Mass:** Gustave Le Bon, a prominent figure in early crowd psychology, posited that individuals within a mass undergo three distinct psychological stages: submergence, contagion, and suggestion. The initial stage, **submergence**, describes a phenomenon where individuals lose their sense of personal responsibility and individual identity upon joining a large group, particularly when members are strangers to one another. For example, during the initial days of a new academic term, a large assembly of students in a lecture hall might be perceived primarily as the "Psychology 503 class," rather than as a collection of distinct individuals. In this state, concerns for personal tidiness or the welfare of specific classmates might be significantly diminished, as individual accountability is diffused within the collective.

Following submergence, the mass progresses into the **contagion** phase. Here, the emotions, ideas, and general mood of the crowd become highly infectious, spreading rapidly among its members. The collective sentiment can overpower individual dispositions, causing people to adopt the prevailing emotional tone or intellectual perspective of the group. For instance, the overall atmosphere and dynamics within a classroom can profoundly influence the individual mood and engagement of each student, with excitement, boredom, or frustration spreading empathetically throughout the group.

The final stage identified by Le Bon is **suggestion**, where members of the group develop a shared unconscious, leading to a uniformity of thought, feeling, and decision-making. In this state, the crowd becomes highly susceptible to common ideas or directives, often without critical evaluation. Continuing the example, members of the Psychology 503 class might collectively develop a strong affinity for discussions on mental health awareness and actively participate in related advocacies, driven by a shared, almost unconscious, conviction that has been fostered by their collective experience and interaction.

**Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Perspective:** Sigmund Freud, through a psychoanalytic lens,

contributed significantly to mass psychology by suggesting that participation in a crowd often reveals the latent unconscious desires and impulses of individuals. He theorized that within a group setting, the superego--which represents the moral conscience, societal norms, and internalized parental authority--can be significantly displaced or weakened. This weakening occurs because the immense psychological power of the masses, or the dominating influence of a charismatic group leader, effectively supplants the individual's internal moral principle.

In such a scenario, individuals may regress to more primitive psychological states, acting upon impulses that their superego would normally suppress. The group, or its leader, then serves as a collective superego, dictating moral behavior and providing a sense of justification for actions that might otherwise be considered immoral or unacceptable. A stark historical illustration of this phenomenon is evident during the Holocaust, where many German citizens ostensibly followed Adolf Hitler's horrific and immoral orders, arguably due to the overwhelming influence of the Nazi regime and the displacement of their individual moral compasses by the powerful collective ideology and leadership.

**Festinger, Zimbardo, and Deindividuation:** The concept of deindividuation was initially introduced by Leon Festinger and his colleagues in 1952. This theory posits that when individuals are immersed in a crowd, they tend to experience a reduction in self-awareness, personal identity, and a diminished sense of accountability. This psychological state can lead to a lessening of guilt, a decrease in self-evaluation, reduced empathy towards others, and a general decline in behaviors typically associated with individual morality. The anonymity and diffusion of responsibility inherent in large groups contribute to this psychological shift, making individuals more prone to act in ways they might not if they were individually identifiable.

The understanding of deindividuation was significantly refined and empirically supported by Philip Zimbardo, particularly through his notorious Stanford Prison Experiment. This groundbreaking, albeit controversial, study vividly demonstrated how research participants, assigned roles as prisoners or guards, rapidly adopted behaviors consistent with their group identities. The experiment showed that the guards' concern for the welfare of others, along with their individual moral constraints, drastically lessened under the influence of their assigned group roles and the powerful situational dynamics, leading to increasingly abusive behaviors. Similarly, the prisoners developed learned helplessness and a loss of personal identity. The findings underscored the profound impact that group contexts and situational factors can have on individual morality and behavior, providing compelling evidence for the theory of deindividuation.

**Floyd Allport's Convergence Theory:** In contrast to earlier perspectives that often viewed crowds as inherently irrational or prone to impulsive behavior, Floyd Allport introduced the Convergence theory. This theory posits that crowds are not simply random assemblages of individuals who lose their rationality, but rather are products of the gathering of people who already share similar

interests, attitudes, values, or predispositions. The adage "birds of a feather flock together" perfectly encapsulates this view, suggesting that people with pre-existing commonalities are drawn to each other, forming a collective that then acts in accordance with these shared traits.

Allport's perspective fundamentally emphasizes that crowd behavior, when viewed through this lens, is not necessarily irrational or spontaneous. Instead, it is often a logical and predictable output of a pervasive conviction or a collective pre-disposition that already exists among its members. The crowd's actions, therefore, reflect the aggregation and amplification of these existing individual tendencies, rather than the sudden emergence of a new, irrational group mind. For example, groups of people gathering during a peaceful rally to express their support for democratic governance are not acting irrationally; their collective action is a direct and logical manifestation of their shared conviction in and support for democratic principles, which drew them together in the first place.

#### 4. Significance and Impact

The study of mass psychology holds profound significance, offering critical insights into a wide array of social phenomena and providing a foundational understanding of how individual behavior is fundamentally shaped by collective dynamics. Its impact extends across various disciplines, contributing to our comprehension of everything from routine social interactions to large-scale historical events. By dissecting the psychological processes at play within groups, mass psychology helps explain why people conform, why emotional states can spread rapidly, and how collective decisions are made, often with far-reaching consequences.

Furthermore, the concepts within mass psychology have broad applications in fields such as political science, marketing, sociology, and even public health. For instance, understanding collective behavior is crucial for analyzing political rallies, predicting consumer trends, managing social unrest, and designing effective public information campaigns during crises. The insights derived from studying crowd dynamics are instrumental in developing strategies for crowd control, designing public spaces that mitigate negative group behaviors, and fostering positive collective actions, such as charitable giving or volunteerism. It illuminates the powerful interplay between individual agency and the compelling force of the group, underscoring that human behavior is rarely enacted in a social vacuum.

#### 5. Debates and Criticisms

While mass psychology has provided invaluable frameworks for understanding collective behavior, the field has not been without its debates and criticisms. Early theories, particularly those championed by Gustave Le Bon, have frequently been criticized for their inherent oversimplification and often pejorative portrayal of crowd behavior as uniformly irrational, primitive, and inherently

negative. Le Bon's notion of a "group mind" that subsumes individual intellect was seen by some as lacking empirical rigor and potentially serving to discredit popular movements by associating them with irrationality rather than legitimate grievances or motivations. This perspective, while foundational, has been challenged for failing to account for the diverse and often organized nature of collective actions.

Later theories, such as [Floyd Allport's Convergence theory](#), emerged partly as a corrective to these earlier, more simplistic views. Allport's emphasis on pre-existing shared interests and rational motivations offered a more nuanced and less condemning perspective on crowd behavior, suggesting that collective actions often stem from logical extensions of individual convictions rather than an inexplicable loss of reason. However, even this approach has faced scrutiny for potentially underestimating the emergent properties of groups--the idea that a crowd can develop characteristics and exert influences that are not merely the sum of its individual parts.

The concept of [deindividuation](#), while influential, has also been subject to extensive refinement and debate regarding its precise mechanisms and the extent of its effects. Critics have questioned whether deindividuation always leads to antisocial behavior, suggesting that it can also facilitate prosocial actions depending on the prevailing norms of the group. Research has moved towards understanding the conditions under which deindividuation is more likely to lead to negative or positive outcomes, emphasizing the role of group norms and context. Overall, these debates highlight the ongoing complexity of understanding how individual and collective psychologies interact, continually pushing the field towards more sophisticated and empirically robust models of mass behavior.

## Further Reading

[Crowd psychology - Wikipedia](#)

[Gustave Le Bon - Wikipedia](#)

[Sigmund Freud - Wikipedia](#)

[Leon Festinger - Wikipedia](#)

[Floyd Allport - Wikipedia](#)

[Deindividuation - Wikipedia](#)

[Stanford Prison Experiment - Wikipedia](#)

[Superego - Wikipedia](#)

[Flash mob - Wikipedia](#)

[Convergence theory \(sociology\) - Wikipedia](#)