

Deviance in the Dark

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Wanted:
subjects for a psychology experiment.

THE STUDENT SEES THE NOTICE on a bulletin board and on a whim decides to volunteer. He or she learns nothing about the experiment beforehand except that it is about "environmental psychology." He arrives at the appointed hour at an address given over the phone. A man ushers him into an empty room, and leaves him with a series of written tasks to complete. Twenty minutes later, the man reappears and says he is taking the student to a chamber that is absolutely dark. The only light in the chamber will be a pinpoint of red over the door, he says, so the student can find his way out should that be necessary. "You will be left in the chamber for no more than an hour with some other people," the man says. "There are no rules... as to what you should do together. At the end of the time period you will each be escorted from the room alone, and will subsequently depart from the experimental site alone. There will be no opportunity to meet the other participants."

The man asks the student to slip off his or her shoes, empty all pockets and leave whatever he or she is carrying behind. Then he takes the student through a set of double doors into the chamber and leaves him on his own in the pitch black.

Spatial disorientation sets in. Visual contact with the other people is impossible. Perhaps a childhood fear of the dark looms up. The student has no name or face. Conversely, he is free to project on to others in the chamber the characteristics he chooses. The purpose of this experiment is to find out what the student will do in this environment and what sort of relationships will evolve in this setting. What do people do under conditions of extreme anonymity?

Almost 50 persons participated in our initial exploration. They were between the ages of 18 and 25, and primarily students from colleges and universities in a 10-mile radius of Swarthmore College. They were divided into groups of approx-

imately eight persons, half males and half females. The chamber itself was 10 feet wide and 12 feet long. The floor and walls were padded. The ceiling was above arm's reach.

We tape-recorded all voice communication during each hour's session and used infrared cameras to record how our subjects dispersed themselves around the room. After each hour was over, we asked our subjects to write down their impressions of the experience. We then ran the experiment three more times, but this time we left the lights on. By comparing the behavior of the groups in the darkened chamber with the behavior of groups in the lighted chamber, we hoped to find out what people will do to and with each other when cut away from the normal sanctions governing their lives. Will they try to reestablish life as usual? Or will they willingly forsake the sanctions for another way of interacting?

The logic of our experiment was simple. If it is true, as sociologist Erving Goffman argues, that society channels most of an individual's energy into set patterns as a result of rewards or punishments, then it follows that the behavior of most individuals is routinized. We all come to act in more or less expected ways. During an hour with six or seven strangers in a padded room in the dark, we thought, our subjects would be free from the expectations of friends, family and so on not to act as usual. Even if someone tried to introduce society's norms into the chamber, the dark would make it difficult to reward or punish our subjects appropriately for their behavior. The fact that participants knew they would never meet face to face provided a final guarantee that they could interact the way they wanted to.

The Deafening Silence. The differences in behavior between students in the dark-room and light-room groups proved enlightening. Subjects in the lighted room kept a continuous, focused stream of conversation going from start to finish of the session. In the dark room, talk slackened off dramatically after the first 30 minutes. At one point in a dark-room session that in-

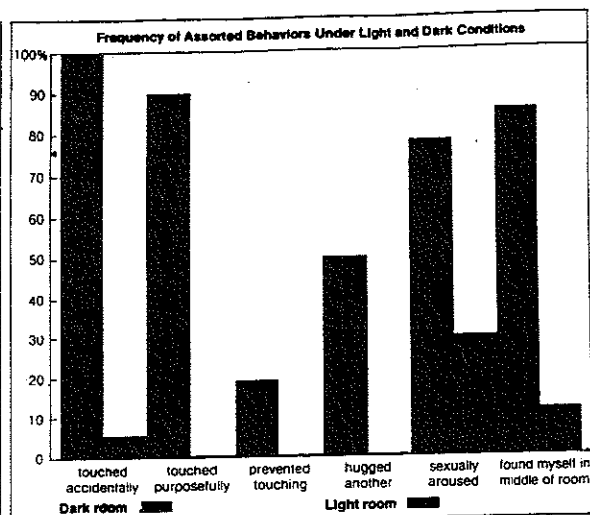
cluded a very talkative boy, the conversation had become muted, disjointed, and faltering. Finally, the boy said in a loud voice, "Why isn't anybody talking?" A voice returned the answer softly, "Why don't you shut up?"

Verbal inactivity in the dark chamber, however, was not matched by inactivity at other levels of interaction. Subjects entering the lighted room quickly found a place to sit (seldom closer than three feet to any other subject), and remained seated in the same positions throughout the session. Using photographs, we could predict with better than 90 percent accuracy the individual placement of each subject during the last five minutes of a session from his position during the first five minutes. But in the dark room subjects moved about fluidly. It was difficult to predict with greater than 50 percent accuracy where subjects would be from one five-minute period to the next.

All dark-room participants accidentally touched one another, while less than five percent of the light-room subjects did. More to the point, almost 90 percent of the dark-room participants touched each other on purpose, while almost none of the light-room subjects did. Almost 50 percent of the dark-room participants reported that they hugged another person. Almost 80 percent of the dark-room subjects said they felt sexual excitement, while only 30 percent of the light-room subjects said they did.

The impressions of the hour written by the dark-room subjects give a less cut and dried idea of what went on. "There was tension and nervousness at the beginning," wrote one girl. "A lot of movement. Gradually, a significant change took place. People sat down in smaller groups, a large portion were silent, the darkness no longer bothered me. The last group of us sat closely together, touching, feeling a sense of friendship and loss as a group member left. I left with a feeling that it had been fun and nice. I felt I had made some friends. In fact I missed them."

A boy wrote, "As I was sitting Beth came up and we started to play touchy face and



touchy body and started to neck. We expressed it as showing 'love' to each other. Shortly before I was taken out, we decided to pass our 'love' on, to share it with other people. So we split up and Laurie took her place. We had just started touchy face and touchy body and kissed a few times before I was tapped to leave."

Another boy wrote, "Felt joy over the possibility of not having to look at people in clichéd ways. Enjoyed feeling of a self-awareness surrounded by a rich environment. . . . Enjoyed the wantonness of just crawling around and over other people to get from one place to another." Others wrote they felt more "free" during the session yet more "serious" than normal. The dark-room subjects indicated they were less anxious to be known by others and less anxious to know the identity of others. With the simple subtraction of light, a group of perfect strangers moved within approximately 30 minutes to a stage of intimacy often not attained in years of normal acquaintanceship.

Intimacy Is Natural. The results of these experiments suggested to us that when freed from normative constraints, people at least people between the ages of 18 and 25, develop very immediate and close relations. To check this observation, we joined with Caroline Curtis to run a second set of experiments. We repeated the dark-room sessions with 22 more people, and extended the time in the chamber to an hour and a half. Given the emotional intensity reached in the chamber after 60

minutes, we wanted to see what would happen in 90 minutes.

Our second group of dark-room subjects emulated the behavior of the first group. In the extra 30 minutes, subjects became even more open with each other. Fifteen percent more subjects in the 90-minute sessions said they talked about "important" things. Reports of boredom from the 90-minute subjects dropped by the same percent. In effect, we got the same behavior in the longer sessions that we got in the shorter, but more of it.

We next contrasted the behavior of the three 90-minute groups with three additional 90-minute groups who were told they would meet after the session. The purpose was to see what would happen when we reduced the amount of anonymity our subjects could expect, thus increasing the chances that they would be punished or ridiculed for their behavior.

Compared with the subjects who were guaranteed anonymity, the subjects who were told they would be introduced after the session were less likely to explore the chamber, more likely to feel bored, less likely to introduce themselves, less likely to hug, less likely to "feel close to another person," and more likely to feel panicky. By pulling back the cloak of anonymity, we reduced the intensity of relations in the chamber.

The behavior of our subjects in the dark room suggests that we must think anew the question of anonymity. Supposedly, we live in the "Age of Anonymity."

Large-scale accounting systems replace our names with numbers. We use mechanical means to select people impersonally for college entrance, career placement and even marriage. Urban living is so complex that personal idiosyncrasy cannot be tolerated. We are in danger, say the critics, of becoming anonymous creatures with no individual significance.

Psychologists such as Leon Festinger, Albert Pepitone and Philip Zimbardo have added a significant dimension to these ideas. Both laboratory and field studies have demonstrated that when a person is without markers of personal identity, when he or she becomes *deindividuated* in the researchers' terms, the stage is set for increased aggression. Faceless people are more likely to harm each other, a finding with important implications for the high incidence of crime in the anonymous setting of the inner city.

Yet few of our subjects found anything displeasing about the experience of anonymity. Most gained deep enjoyment and volunteered to return without pay. Anonymity itself does not seem to be a social ill. Rather, the state of anonymity seems to encourage whatever potentials are most prominent at the moment—whether for good or for ill. When we are anonymous we are free to be aggressive or to give affection, whichever expresses most fully our feelings at the time. There is liberation in anonymity.

Why did our subjects choose to be so affectionate in the dark room? They were faced with an immense number of alternatives for action, and yet, almost all chose some form of closeness. Were these intimacies based on fear of the unknown threat—an attempt to hand together to ward off danger? None of our data support this explanation, and in fact, analysis revealed that those who were most unsettled by the circumstance were least likely to form close relationships. We are struck, instead, by what seemed an essential desire for intimate alliance among our subjects. Of course, our samples were young, and the numbers not large. But it does seem that if the social norms governing our relationships did not keep distance among us—as they did in the case of our light-room subjects—the sharing of intimacy such as in the dark room, would be widespread.

It appears that people share strong yearnings to be close to each other. However, our social norms make it too costly to express these feelings. Our traditions appear to keep us at a distance. Perhaps these traditions have outlived their usefulness.