

Drunk, powerful, and in the dark: The paradox of the disinhibited

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Power can lead to great acts of altruism, but also corruptive, unethical behavior. Being intoxicated can lead to a first date, or a bar brawl. And the mask of anonymity can encourage one individual to let a stranger know they have toilet paper stuck to their shoe, while another may post salacious photos online. What is the common thread between these three disparate states?

A new article by researchers at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto and the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University presents a new model that explains how the diverse domains of power, intoxication, and anonymity produce similarly paradoxical social behaviors – for better or worse.

According to the researchers, all three states work to break down inhibitions in a person, thus triggering the most prominent response in any given situation regardless of the consequences. As a result, alcohol, power, and anonymity can all inspire heroism and hedonism in the same person depending on the context.

The paper, by Rotman Profs. Jacob Hirsh and Chen-Bo Zhong and the Kellogg School's Adam Galinsky appears in the current issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

"Disinhibition occurs when the forces that normally constrain behaviour are temporarily removed, allowing a person's initial impulses to be expressed without hesitation, regardless of the consequence," says Prof.

Hirsh.

The authors argue that disinhibition can lead behavior to be more consistent with one's true underlying motives or dispositions. However, if strong external cues are present, disinhibition can also result in greater situational influences on behavior. Whether the resulting behavioral outcomes are pro-social or anti-social depends upon the nature of the dispositional or situational cue.

"This is why intoxicated individuals can be aggressive in one instant and altruistic in another, for example, or why anonymity can at once increase selfishness and cheating while also promoting helping behavior," said Prof. Hirsh.

The new paper presents a general model of and three pathways to disinhibition:

- **Social Power:** Powerful people are used to relative abundance and have an increased inclination to pursue potential rewards. Because the experience of power increases a "goal and reward focus," individuals feel less restrained in expressing their current motives – regardless of the social implications.
- **Intoxication:** Consuming too much alcohol decreases cognitive resources, and only the most prominent cues will guide behavior in this state. Thus, pre-existing attitudes and personality traits may be expressed more freely, such as aggressive tendencies or risky sexual decision-making. At the same time, however, inebriated individuals tend to be more helpful than sober counterparts when the situation calls for heroism.
- **Anonymity:** A cloaked identity serves to reduce social desirability concerns and external constraints on action. As such, an individual may be less inclined to maintain usual levels of

social acceptance. This could result in higher levels of honesty and self-disclosure – or heightened aggression and verbal abuse – in an anonymous chatroom.

Each of these processes - a reward focus, cognitive exhaustion, and lack of social concerns - block the same neurological system - the Behavioral Inhibition System - that regulates behavior. The combination of these forces (e.g., a powerful person who has been imbibing all night and then goes into an anonymous chat room) is likely to produce the most disinhibition.

"Although these pathways appear to be unrelated on the surface, they all lead to disinhibited states through a common psychological mechanism," said Prof. Hirsh.

In conclusion, Prof. Hirsh said a joint understanding of an individual's motivations and the situational context in which they find themselves allows for a better understanding of how to manage the impact of disinhibition.

"Disinhibition can bring out the best or worst in people, depending on the most salient cues for action. Bars and boardrooms alike should be designed to encourage the desired responses from their disinhibited occupants," said Prof. Hirsh.

Provided by University of Toronto

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