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Unsupervised Human Behavior and the Collapse of Civilization: Conformity and Moral Instability in *Lord of the Flies*

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Abstract
In this study, *Lord of the Flies* is studied to reveal the fragile structure of human civilization. It also asserts that human moral structure is dependent upon external authority and social order. The lack of institutional authority results in psychological and moral degradation. This study applies the theories of social psychology, particularly deindividuation, group behavior, and the dynamics of authority vacuum, to investigate human behavior in Golding's text. Using a qualitative textual analysis, it demonstrates how the boys lose their restraint, responsibility, rational judgment through the process of anonymity, contagion of emotion, synchrony, fear of the beast, chanting, and the desire to reject legitimate authority. The study ends with Golding's doubts about the autonomy of moral behavior, as he states that true moral powers must have a controlling power. Instead, moral conduct is to be fostered continuously by the consistent leadership of one's own, by a common moral code, and by social institutions. However, when these supports fail to exist, even normal children can turn to aggression, conformism, and moral decay and demonstrate how these can draw on the darker side of human nature.

Keywords
human nature; deindividuation; authority vacuum; environmental instability

Introduction
This novel explores key aspects of human nature, civilization, morality, and social disorder. The novel follows a group of schoolboys stranded on a deserted island as they try to build a civilized society with rules, a leader, co-operation, and shared responsibility. Ralph's leadership, the conch, and the signal fire are the first steps, which help them get back in order and save their lives. But the absence of adults' supervision weakens the social order, which creates a space for the boys. The social structures slowly fall apart due to the growing competition and power practices among the boys. In the transition from schoolboys to a violent tribe, there is, thus, an important question: do the boys have morals within their own? The social-psychological theories of unsupervised behavior of the boys' transformation are basically studied in this research. This is not about the inherent nature; rather, the environments where they grow up shape their intellectual development and affect their transformation.

The island is reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes' political theory. In his view, in the absence of an authority, men are inclined to move into a state of conflict, in which personal interest and self-preservation will prevail over social cooperation. In his observation, life without social order turns to solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, as the boys confront (Hobbes, 1996). Away from the adult world, the boys have trouble keeping rules and little by little become more interested in power, security, and survival. Ralph is a symbol of democratic order and collective responsibility,

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whereas Jack symbolizes authoritarianism, violence, and domination. The battle of them is an example of how social order can fall apart in a matter of moments when the legitimate power is taken away.

The conch is an integral part of this process. It first establishes a democratic system where everyone gets a chance to say their words and be involved in the decision-making process. The conch, however, has fewer powers as the boys are increasingly swayed by Jack. The conch shell is destroyed: "the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist" (Golding, 1954, p. 181), indicating the ultimate failure of the social order that is embodied in Ralph. No longer are shared rules the basis for authority—it is now power and fear. Likewise, the fire signals' meaning is shifting, showing boys' waning sense of responsibility. Fire is a symbol of hope and salvation, but ultimately it is a symbol of destruction. The process of these developments indicates that for the social institutions to be effective, they must be continually supported by a collective effort.

The predominant reading of *Lord of the Flies* has been as a study of "the evilness of man" and the fragility of civilization. In Cox's (1963) eyes, "the thin veneer of civilization that covers the human race," and in Baker's (1965), the island is a laboratory for the exhibition of human instincts, where social restraints are eliminated. Kermode (1990) also reads the novel as a contemporary tale of the march of man from order to chaos, and focuses on the 'inner darkness' contained within the civilization that is only a temporary phenomenon. This gloomy reading is reinforced by Golding's own reflections in his essay 'Fable'; he believes that humans have a basic fault. He was haunted by violence and man's imperfection as a result of his experiences during war.

Other critics have concentrated on the issue of morality, political stability, leadership, and the breakdown of social institutions. Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967) explore how the island is a metaphor for human society: fear, political rivalry, and group identity lead to the collapse of moral and political stability. The conch is a symbol of weak moral control (Timmerman, 1972); and Rosenfield (1961) talks about the psychological struggle between reason and instinct. These methods set out the novel of Golding to be more than just about the misconduct of individuals; they show that the novel is about the circumstances that make moral restraint impossible.

Psychological Theory offers another insight into the boys' development. A concept that is relevant is deindividuation, which is the loss of self-awareness and personal responsibility when absorbed into a group. This process is represented in the boys' masks, hunting rituals, chanting and group elation. Individuals can let their unique identity fade into the identity of the group, and so will actions that are normally not acceptable. This is best illustrated by Simon's death; a mix of fear, chanting, and group excitement blurs individual responsibility. The changes are also important to Roger. Morally constrained at first by the expectations of civilization, he subsequently grows more violent as supervision and accountability falter.

Zimbardo's (2007) studies of situational behavior and "deindividuation" provide a helpful psychological perspective. His work indicates that ordinary people can act in very aggressive ways when external factors, group identity, and lack of accountability are present. This mental disorder manifests itself as a preordained evil. Group behavior theory also describes the process through which conformity and collective identity result in the acceptance of dominant leadership, even if it is not necessarily agreed upon within the group. Boys' moral degeneration is also due to fear. The "beast" is a symbol of their uncertainty and anxiety. Rather than identify their fear in themselves, the boys attribute it to something outside of themselves. Jack uses this fear to assert his power as a protector. The more frightened they are, the less rational they are, and the more ready they are to give up their independence to the group. Simon realizes

that the beast could be present in people, rather than just in the jungle. This fact goes against the boys' view of evil and adds to the novel's major theme of the ability of human beings to commit violence.

Since the time of Zimbardo's research on deindividuation and collective behavior, other recent research has taken a more direct social-psychological approach to *Lord of the Flies*. A study entitled "Descent into Savagery: A Group Psychological Analysis of *Lord of the Flies"* (2026) explores the boys' descent in the context of their evolution of group formation, social identity, deindividuation, polarization, fear, and collective behavior and offers an organized explanation of the psychological processes that underlie the boys' change. Likewise, the study "Institutional Erosion and Instinctual Regression: Mechanisms of Normative Order Dissolution in *Lord of the Flies"* (2026) explores how deindividuation, violence, and the loss of institutional order contribute to the erosion of normative order. These studies demonstrate both the increasing use of social-psychological methodologies in Golding's novel and the need for a deeper investigation into the interaction of unsupervised conditions, conformity, and moral instability over time as the civilized order collapses.

Although there have been a lot of criticisms on *Lord of the Flies*, there is still a research gap. In contrast to the attention given to biblical, political, philosophical, and symbolic interpretations, less systematic attention has been given to psychological mechanisms that occur within a group that is not supervised. Existing scholarship on Lord of the Flies has focused on the concept of savagery, the degradation of humanity, deindividuation, and the opposition between civilization and instinct. But these dimensions have not been so much explored as an integrated social-psychological process. Especially, the transition from loss of social restraint and conformism to the breakdown of civilized order has not been fully explored. This study fills this gap by examining these processes as an integral sequence of human actions in the novel.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in social psychology to examine how *Lord of the Flies* represents unsupervised human behavior and the emergence of moral instability. Three theoretical frameworks are used: deindividuation theory, group behavior theory, and authority-vacuum dynamics. These models serve as a systematic way of investigating the role of anonymity, collective pressure, and the lack of legitimate authority for the increase of violence and moral decay of the boys.

The study uses psychological criticism as the main literary approach and uses deindividuation theory by Zimbardo as a social-psychological lens to analyze the behavioral transformation of the characters in *Lord of the Flies*. According to Zimbardo (2007), the theory of deindividuation is one part of the theory that suggests that anonymity and feeling like part of a group can make people more likely to act irresponsibly and without regard for right or wrong. The concepts of this framework are used in the novel's masks, chants, dances, and hunting rituals, where individual identity becomes more and more collective.

The research of Asch (1951) on conformity has provided a foundation for the examination of the influence of pressure, group norms, and collective emotion on individual judgment peers. Assemblies, hunts, and rituals are then examined as textual versions of conformity, group polarization, and increasing levels of violence in the collective group.

The third one is authority-vacuum dynamics, which looks at the unstable character of power structures without legitimate authority (Hobbes, 1996). Ralph and Jack's relationship with each other is examined within the context of

different types of leadership, specifically, as Jack moves away from the rule-based power of Ralph to the fear-based, charismatic, and dominance-based power of Jack.

Thus, the study is not an empirical psychological study of the fictional events; instead, it is a comparison of the ways in which Golding depicts the behavior of people and the known concepts of psychology. The study explores the dangers of their latent tendencies towards violence, domination, and moral instability through this multi-disciplinary research approach.

Results

The study concludes that from the psychological and social point of view, the fall of civilizations is a gradual process, as seen in *Lord of the Flies*. Initially, the boys try to break the rules and obligations of the adult world, although they are only superficially involved with them. Slowly, their sense of responsibility wanes, and destructive behaviors creep in more and more.

There, one of the most important findings is that the breakdown of order starts when the boys begin to neglect others and then escalates to violence. The conch is a tool for the establishment of first authority and then cooperation; the signal fire is the symbol of collective hope and collective responsibility. But shelters, meetings, and the signal fire are soon forgotten by the boys. They have been unable to sustain these common duties, which show that in the absence of tacit acceptance of the rules, social order is not sustainable.

The research also shows fear to be a powerful driver to accelerate the degradation. As time passes, the beast gradually becomes a symbol of the boys' fear and unease. The more frightened the boys get, the less rational they are, and the more likely they are to be swayed by emotional expressions of leadership and collective action. Their hunting shrieks and rites are some proof of the power of group emotion to make the individual less inhibited and more aggressive.

The other is the change of leadership from rationality to emotional and coercive. Jack gives more protection and excitement, belonging, and freedom from responsibility, and Ralph has the qualities of cooperation, rules, and responsibility in the future. The growing influence he has demonstrates the dangers of irrational fear and emotional requirements to rational organization. This is why Jack's tribe is an alternative to rules and an alternative to authority, based on collective identity and instinct.

The study goes on to point out that Roger's change and Piggy's corruption are also important hints that moral and rational restraints are being lost. Initially, Roger is "kept in check" by the "barrier of civilization," which is eliminated as society loosens up. Piggy clings to his principles, which are always grounded in reason, rules, and conversation, until he dies and the conch, which stands for rational authority, is destroyed.

The findings also reveal that the collective identity helps in the reduction of individual responsibility. Keeping boys together, they are permitted to practice face painting, hunt rituals, chant, and align with a tribe, becoming more and more part of a group, rather than responsible individuals. In the case of Simon, the process is extreme; in his personal vision, collective fear and excitement take over and cause lethal violence.

The prominent symbols of the novel and the novel's meaning support these findings. The conch is a symbol of helplessness, the fire a weapon of destruction, and the beast a symbol of fear. One of the following changes shows that social symbols can work as long as a community recognizes their values. Otherwise, the institutions that belong to those symbols lose their power.

The interaction of the weakening of external authority, the failure to take responsibility, the rising fear, collective emotions, the loss of individuality, and leadership changes in form has led to the evolution of the boys' savagery. The

death of Simon and Piggy, the destruction of the conch, and the change of the fire mark are all a part of this process, not separate events. Golding demonstrates and proves that authority control was so necessary to keep social stability, which is further reinforced by the arrival of the naval officer at the end, which ends the violence and stops it.

The main finding is that Golding does not explain the boys' turn to brutality as being due to their innate savagery. Rather, the novel illustrates the escalating force of destructive tendencies as a result of the eroding social restraints, shared responsibilities, rational authority, and individual accountability. Civilization, in *Lord of the Flies*, is thus fragile and must be constantly maintained and repeated. The island is a microcosm, a mini society, where even the notion of institutional order is not simply the lack of rules but a different psychological setup of fear, authority, identity, and responsibility between the boys.

Discussion

Lord of the Flies depicts a group of schoolboys whose behavior changes when authority and social norms disappear. They transform from disciplined pupils to increasingly violent group members, creating a literary setting to explore the psychological factors leading to their acts of violence. Psychological criticism is therefore the primary literary approach that is useful because it investigates the motives, conflicts, emotional reactions, and the changes in the behavior of characters in the story (Dobie, 2012). The recent scholarship on fictional characters has also focused on their psychological aspects as moving variables influenced by actions, interactions, and narrative settings (Hartner, 2024; Tevdoradze, 2025).

Certainly, the behavior of the boys must be viewed not just as a failure of the individual but as a response to fear, group pressure, conformity, and a breakdown in social restraint. More recent studies on *Lord of the Flies* also illustrate the applicability of psychological theories to the process of group formation, group identity, deindividuation, and changes in collective behavior (Wang, 2026). In this literary-psychological context, Zimbardo's (2007) theory of deindividuation is used to understand how group immersion and loss of self-responsibility lead to higher conformity, moral erosion, and involvement in group violence among the boys.

Golding's text has both cooperative and destructive forces but demonstrates that the destructive forces are stronger in the absence of external control. The boys have brought their memories of rules and social norms with them to the island, but these memories are inadequate for maintaining order. Thus, Golding proposes that moral conduct is not a spontaneous inner guide but is a behavior that is subject to external reinforcement. This struggle between civilization and savagery is seen in the contrast between Ralph and the hunters. Embedded in these characters is the instinct of savagery, in the hunters, who desire to have control and authority, and the instinct of civilization, in Ralph, who tries to stick to the rules so as not to be on the island. The hunters eventually turn increasingly hostile due to their inability to recognize how rules and order are essential to a civil society. This systematic lack is evident in the boys' flawed organization during their early attempts at self-governance. The conch is a familiar tool of school assemblies, at first highlighting Ralph's authority, and thus the need for cooperation and order. But this compliance is mostly exterior – the boys obey rules because they follow rules that are similar to the rules they are expected to follow by adults, and not because they really understand and internalize their meaning. Others' duties are neglected, as Ralph puts more emphasis on shelters and meetings, and the signal fire. There is free movement among the littluns and the older boys even start to take their collective responsibilities lightly. This means that the first symptoms of the disorder are not violent but rather

through neglect. Ralph himself recognizes this deterioration when he says, *"*Things are breaking up. I don't understand why. We began well; we were happy*"* (Golding, 1954, p. 89).

Temperament falls and fear takes over because of this. According to Haldar (2006), *Lord of the Flies* might seem like a pessimistic narrative as *"*the innocent and good-natured boys are killed," and disciplined and sensible behavior is replaced by savagery. The symbol of the *"*beast*"* is used to convey Golding's pessimism. The beast is a symbol of the boys' uncertainty and anxiety as they struggle to survive. Without assistance from adults, the teenagers are unable to manage their anxiety and turn what they are scared of into a psychological reality (Alguzo, 2020). So fear is not only the consequence of the breakdown of authority but is the mechanism that facilitates it.

As the fear increases, collective behavior further limits individual judgment. Shared emotion can be a powerful force that overrides individual restraint, as the boys' hunting chants and rituals illustrate: *"*Kill the pig. Cut his throat. Spill his blood*"* (Golding, 1954, p. 66). The chanting and dancing that are part of the group and the common excitement create deindividuation, meaning less responsibility and more aggression. If there is no one to tamper with the group's frenzy or set repercussions, the group's decisions are more and more made based on emotions and less on reason. Likewise, Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (1967) point to the *"*persuasive*"* nature of *"*collective emotion*"* in the absence of external authority. The development of the boys' transformation can thus be seen as a process: fear increases group pressure, group pressure decreases individuality, and the decreased individuality increases the willingness to accept violence.

This is most evident in Jack's becoming the leader. His leadership is the transition from rational rulership to instinctive rule. Jack is less about cooperation and shared responsibility and more about fear, excitement, power, and belonging. He's appealing because he gives an instant emotional release and escape from liability. Ralph, on the other hand, is a symbol of order, co-operation, and future responsibility. The boys divide into two warring groups, one with Ralph's leadership, the other with Jack's, as described by Green (1963): *"*The boys split into two rival factions: one led by Ralph, one by Jack.*"* This incident is the sign of group behavior- a psychological aspect. As the boys become more and more fond of Jack, Golding implies that in an unstable situation, a boy's emotional needs may be more compelling than rational organization, and that destruction may be more easily achieved than cooperation.

Roger builds on this argument by providing examples of what happens when social constraints slowly cease to exist. Early in the novel, he refuses to harm the littluns because the *"*barrier of civilization*"* still holds him back: *"*Roger stooped, picked up a stone, aimed, and threw it at Henry— threw it to miss*"* (Golding, 1954, p. 68). His restraint seems to be more to do with the power of social rules than with any sort of moral conviction. As this power fades, the barrier wears away, and finally Piggy will meet his own death at the hands of Roger on purpose. Roger's growth, then, is one of the best case studies that Golding offers in his case for his argument: once external constraints are removed, impulses that were once controlled might begin to grow stronger.

Piggy, on the other hand, is rational, orderly, and fair, but his logic starts to get weaker. *"*Which is better — to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill?*"* is his question, which encapsulates the principle of the conflict between civilized and instinctive actions. Later, he questions, *"*What are we? Human? Or animals? Or savage?*"* (Golding, 1954, p. 99). His questions show he knows that the boys are ripping up the rules, not just breaking them on an individual basis, but tearing down the framework that gives them meaning. Boyd (2008), quoting Thomas Hobbes, links this situation to the renowned phrase *"*life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.*"* Likewise, Giri (2019) states that the boys fall back into primitivism and barbarism. The singing and dancing by them grows more and more powerful; the pig hunting

ceremony is gaining influence, and the littluns are bewildered and frightened. Kill the beast! Kill the beast!—actually worked. *"*Kill the beast!*"* was repeated, and it did work. Cut his throat! In *"*Spill his blood*"* (Golding, 1954, p. 187), a ritual of collective excitement transforms violence.

The most devastating moment of the collapse of rational order is when Piggy dies, and the conch is broken. This is the ultimate brutal expression of a psychological phenomenon which is called *"*dynamics of authority vacuum.*"* Piggy*'*s death is not just the loss of a character; it is the loss of reason, dialogue, and institutional fairness. The same goes for the conch—that is, symbols of order only have power when the communities collectively recognize the authority they represent. However, the belief ends, and with it, the tower falls. This theme of impending animalhood is echoed throughout the novel, and it is Piggy who warns of it: *"*We*'*ll soon be animals anyway*"* (Golding, p. 101). During the last hunt, Ralph moves like a cat to hunt with his spear (Golding, 1954, p. 215), and he hunts meat *"*like a wolf*"* (Golding, 1954, p. 80). These depictions continually muddy the lines between civilized man and beast, further cementing Golding*'*s frequent link between loss of restraint and appearance of the *"*savage.*"*

Simon*'*s death also reveals the power of collective emotion for destruction. Terrified, dark, chanting, and excited, the boys confuse Simon with the beast, and he tries to show them that the beast is an internal rather than an external one. His death is presented here not so much as a thoughtful individual choice as the result of a collective emotional momentum. The storm adds to this chaos. It is dark, loud, and hard to see. Simon and the storm reflect the boys*'* psychological turmoil. Icelandic storms can be referred to as emotional storms, and this type of storm is associated with a rapid loss of rational judgment. This way, the outer world and the boys*'* inner disarrangements feed off each other.

Once the group is split, the tribe of Jack becomes the emotional authority of the group. He provides protection from the beast, fun while hunting, and freedom from responsibility – directly talking to the boys*'* wants. The growing influence of his shows the power of charismatic authority when the structures break down. Face paint enhances this process by obscuring individual identity and fostering a collective tribal identity. The boys feel at ease to engage in aggression when they are not faced with personal judgment. Zhou (2018) also believes that even in an environment that is not plagued with the normal kind of external corruption, there can be a destructive desire to conquer and control within human beings that can harm nature and the order and harmony it brings.

Fire is transformed along a parallel. In the beginning, it is a sign of rescue, cooperation, and hope, but with the influence of Jack, it turns into a weapon of hunting and destruction. When it is used to chase Ralph out of hiding, it burns the island. The change is thus symbolic as well as physical: what was a sign of the boys*'* desire to go back to a civilized world is now the vehicle for the almost complete annihilation of the civilization. Similarly, the conch goes from being in charge to being insignificant, and the beast changes from being a fearsome foreign enemy to a symbol of fear. The two shifting meanings demonstrate how the social environment alters the values of objects, symbols, and institutions.

The external force of the naval officer brings an end to the boys*'* descent into violence. His shock that civilized English boys could act so savagely is an illustration of the mistaken idea that inner morality is the assumption of civilized boys. When Ralph realizes that the last innocence, *"*the darkness of man*'*s heart*"* and *"*the fall through the air of the true wise friend called Piggy*"* (Golding, 1954, p. 248) are lost, he is finally able to comprehend what has taken place. The tears he gives show that the violence on the island has exposed in the boys something destructive that already existed in them. Golding thus views human behavior as the result of an interaction between inner drives and outer

circumstances. The boys start working together, but as they grow up, they become more prone to violence due to fear, instability, group pressure, and charismatic leadership.

This is supported by the major symbols in the novel. As the boys stop listening to the order the conch embodies, the conch is losing its power, fire can be used for good or ill, and the beast gains strength by being given a physical form to the collective fear. Leadership also changes as the boys' psychological needs evolve; Jack's psychological manipulations replace Ralph's rational authority. As they become more drawn to strength, excitement, and protection, it shows how precarious environments create a value for emotional leadership rather than reasoned governmental leadership.

Lastly, the boys' loss of responsibility and identity as individuals reinforces the impact of their surroundings. Tasks like running shelters and the signal fire become insignificant if not supervised: undone, and there are no immediate consequences to neglect. Meanwhile, face painting and tribal rituals erode individual identity and foster conformity. It is to the extreme in the hunt for Ralph: the boys hunt the boy; they hunt Ralph as a part of Jack's group, because Jack's group requires Ralph's destruction. Their actions are a reflection of the last phase of the process: responsibility fades away, individuality fades away, and group allegiance and loyalty outstrips morality.

So, ultimately, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* shows that moral stability can be neither guaranteed nor taken for granted in people; it relies on social order, hierarchy, and responsibility. The boys' development from cooperation to violence is not random; it is connected. The loss of the conch, the change of fire, the creation of the beast, and the deaths of Simon and Piggy all demonstrate the breakdown of order and the unleashing of destructive forces. But Golding is not merely a witness to the badness of man or his inability to cooperate. Rather, he displays the delicate tension between the civilized and the instinctive and violent. When supervision and structural order break down, individual accountability falls, the human collective takes over, and the moral boundaries can quickly be eroded, and the island becomes a microcosm of society.

Conclusions

Golding's *Lord of the Flies* illustrates that the distinction between civilized and uncivilized behavior is tenuous and can easily be blurred, especially when there is no social control. The rules, habits, and moral standards of the adult world come with the boys to the island, but as authority and supervision are removed, these systems begin to de-escalate. The imagined beast comes from fear, emotion replaces reason, the group of Jacks challenges Ralph's authority, and finally, with the death of Simon and Piggy, moral restraint gives way. Such changes, however, are not a natural tendency of man to do evil; they are an illustration of how individual judgment is impaired, and collective violence is encouraged as a result of the removal of external restraints, conformity, and deindividuation. The conch, the signal fire, and the beast symbolically demonstrate this metamorphosis: order to disorder, hope to destruction, and imagined fear to deadly reality. The boys' growing sense of belonging to the group reduces individual responsibility and leads to uniformity of thought, which supplants the individual's moral judgment. The naval officer's arrival and the boys' instant return to a civilized social structure emphasize the importance of external authority and accountability in maintaining civilized behavior. Ralph's last tears are thus the central symbol throughout the novel: the darkness on the island is caused not by the island itself but by the gradual loss of restraint, individuality, and moral responsibility. Finally, Golding implies that social or psychological conventions are essential to the maintenance of civilization: as such conventions decay, deindividuation and conformity can further contribute to the collapse of civilized order from the individual's moral instability.

Declaration of Interest Statement

We declare that the article is free from any conflict of interest in data collection, analysis, editorial processes, and the overall publication process.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

Basically, we used "Grammarly" for checking the proper language orientation and sometimes used "ChatGPT" to get relevant information. Then we reformulated, redesigned, and cited the information correctly to give it a perfect shape.

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