

The Bystander Effect

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Preview

Most of us think of ourselves as decent, helpful people. We certainly wouldn't turn our backs on someone in obvious need of help . . . or would we? Sociologists' experiments confirm what occasional, shocking news stories suggest: Many of us, when faced with a person who seems to be in desperate trouble, do absolutely nothing. In this article, Dorothy Barkin explores some of the possible explanations for this troubling "bystander effect."

Words to Watch

intervene (2): interfere
phenomena (4): facts
apathy (23): indifference
diffusion (32): spreading thin
paralysis (32): inability to act

It is a pleasant fall afternoon. The sun is shining. You are heading toward the parking lot after your last class of the day. All of a sudden, you come across the following situations. What do you think you'd do in each case?

Situation One: A man in his early twenties dressed in jeans and a T-shirt is using a coat hanger to pry open a door of a late-model Ford

sedan. An overcoat and a camera are visible on the back seat of the car. You're the only one who sees this.

Situation Two: A man and woman are wrestling with each other. The woman is in tears. Attempting to fight the man off, she screams, "Who are you? Get away from me!" You're the only one who witnesses this.

Situation Three: Imagine the same scenario as in Situation Two except that this time the woman screams, "Get away from me! I don't know why I ever married you!"

Situation Four: Again imagine Situation Three. This time, however, there are a few other people (strangers to you and each other) who also observe the incident.

Many people would choose not to get involved in situations like these. Bystanders are often reluctant to intervene^o in criminal or medical emergencies for reasons they are well aware of. They fear possible danger to themselves or getting caught up in a situation that could lead to complicated and time-consuming legal proceedings.

There are, however, other, less obvious factors which influence the decision to get involved in emergency situations. Complex psychological factors, which many people are unaware of, play an important part in the behavior of bystanders; knowing about these factors can help people to act more responsibly when faced with emergencies.

To understand these psychological phenomena^o, it is helpful to look at what researchers have learned about behavior in the situations mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Situation One: Research reveals a remarkably low rate of bystander intervention to protect property. In one study, more than 3,000 people walked past 214 staged car break-ins like the one described in this situation. The vast majority of passers-by completely ignored what appeared to be a crime in progress. Not one of the 3,000 bothered to report the incident to the police.

Situation Two: Another experiment involved staging scenarios like this and the next situation. In Situation Two, bystanders offered some sort of assistance to the young woman 65 percent of the time.

Situation Three: Here the rate of bystander assistance dropped down to 19 percent. This demonstrates that bystanders are more reluctant to help a woman when they believe she's fighting with her husband. Not only do they consider a wife in less need of help; they think interfering with a married couple may be more dangerous. The husband, unlike a stranger, will not flee the situation.

Situation Four: The important idea in this situation is being a member of a group of bystanders. In more than fifty studies involving many different conditions, one outcome has been consistent: bystanders are much less likely to get involved when other witnesses are present than when they are alone.

In other words, membership in a group of bystanders lowers the likelihood that each member of the group will become involved. This finding may seem surprising. You might think there would be safety in numbers and that being a member of a group would increase the likelihood of intervention. How can we explain this aspect of group behavior?

A flood of research has tried to answer this and other questions about bystanders in emergencies ever since the infamous case of the murder of Kitty Genovese.

In 1964 in the borough of Queens in New York City, Catherine "Kitty" Genovese, 28, was brutally murdered in a shocking crime that outraged the nation.

The crime began at 3 a.m. Kitty Genovese was coming home from her job as manager of a bar. After parking her car in a parking lot, she began the hundred-foot walk to the entrance of her apartment. But she soon noticed a man in the lot and decided instead to walk toward a police call box. As she walked by a bookstore on her way there, the man grabbed her. She screamed.

Lights went on and windows opened in the ten-story apartment building.

Next, the attacker stabbed Genovese. She shrieked, "Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me! Please help me!"

From an upper window in the apartment house, a man shouted, "Let that girl alone!"

The assailant, alarmed by the man's shout, started toward his car, which was parked nearby. However, the lights in the building soon went out, and the man returned. He found Genovese struggling to reach her apartment—and stabbed her again.

She screamed, "I'm dying! I'm dying!"

Once more lights went on and windows opened in the apartment building. The attacker then went to his car and drove off. Struggling, Genovese made her way inside the building.

But the assailant returned to attack Genovese yet a third time. He found her slumped on the floor at the foot of the stairs and stabbed her again, this time fatally.

The murder took over a half hour, and Kitty Genovese's desperate cries for help were heard by at least thirty-eight people. Not a single one of the thirty-eight who later admitted to having witnessed the murder

Comments made by bystanders after this murder provide important insight into what group members think when they consider intervening in an emergency.

These are some of the comments:

- 1 "I didn't want my husband to get involved."
- 1 "Frankly, we were afraid."
- 2 "We thought it was a lovers' quarrel."
- 2 "I was tired."

The Genovese murder sparked a national debate on the questions of public apathy^o and fear and became the basis for thousands of sermons, editorials, classroom discussions, and even a made-for-television movie. The same question was on everybody's mind—how could thirty-eight people have done so little?

Nine years later, another well-publicized incident provided additional information about the psychology of a group witnessing a crime.

On a summer afternoon in Trenton, New Jersey, a twenty-year-old woman was brutally raped in a parking lot in full view of twenty-five employees of a nearby roofing company. Though the workers witnessed the entire incident and the woman repeatedly screamed for help, no one came to her assistance.

Comments made by witnesses to the rape were remarkably similar to those made by the bystanders to the Genovese murder: For example, one witness said, "We thought, well, it might turn out to be her boyfriend or something like that."

It's not surprising to find similar excuses for not helping in cases involving a group of bystanders. The same psychological principles apply to each. Research conducted since the Genovese murder indicates that the failure of bystanders to get involved can't be simply dismissed as a symptom of an uncaring society. Rather, the "bystander effect," as it is called by social scientists, is the product of a complex set of psychological factors.

Two factors appear to be most important in understanding the reactions of bystanders to emergencies.

First is the level of ambiguity involved in the situation. Bystanders are afraid to endanger themselves or look foolish if they take the wrong action in a situation they're not sure how to interpret. A person lying face down on the floor of a subway train may have just suffered a heart attack and be in need of immediate medical assistance—or he may be a dangerous drunk.

Determining what is happening is especially difficult when a man is attacking a woman. Many times lovers do quarrel, sometimes violently. But they may strongly resent an outsider, no matter how well-meaning, intruding into their affairs.

When a group of bystanders is around, interpreting an event can be even more difficult than when one is alone. Bystanders look to others for cues as to what is happening. Frequently other witnesses, just as confused, try to look calm. Thus bystanders can mislead each other about the seriousness of an incident.

The second factor in determining the reactions of bystanders to emergencies is what psychologists call the principle of moral diffusion^o. Moral diffusion is the lessening of a sense of individual responsibility when someone is a member of a group. Responsibility to act diffuses throughout the crowd. When a member of the group is able to escape the collective paralysis^o and take action, others in the group tend to act as well. But the larger the crowd, the greater the diffusion of responsibility, and the less likely someone is to intervene.

The more social scientists are able to teach us about how bystanders react to an emergency, the better the chances that we will take appropriate action when faced with one. Knowing about moral diffusion, for example, makes it easier for us to escape it. If you find yourself witnessing an emergency with a group, remember that everybody is waiting for someone else to do something first. If you take action, others may also help.

Also realize that any one of us could at some time be in desperate need of help. Imagine what it feels like to need help and have a crowd watching you suffer and do nothing. Remember Kitty Genovese.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever encountered someone who seemed to be in an emergency situation? How did you respond?
3. In your experience, is it true that people take less responsibility when they are in a group than when they are alone? What examples can you think of to support this idea?

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

- In the sentence below, the word *scenario* means
 - question.
 - relationship.
 - sequence of events.
 - quotation.

“Imagine the same scenario as in Situation Two except that this time the woman screams, ‘Get away from me! I don’t know why I ever married you!’” (Paragraph 1)
- In the sentences below, the word *assailant* means
 - observer.
 - bystander.
 - victim.
 - attacker.

“Next, the attacker stabbed Genovese. . . . From an upper window in the apartment house, a man shouted, ‘Let that girl alone!’ . . . The assailant, alarmed by the man’s shout, started toward his car. . . .” (Paragraphs 10–12)
- In the sentences below, the word *ambiguity* means
 - argument.
 - uncertainty.
 - lack of interest.
 - crowding.

“First is the level of ambiguity involved. . . . Bystanders are afraid to endanger themselves or look foolish . . . in a situation they’re not sure how to interpret.” (Paragraph 29)
- In the sentence below, the word *cues* means
 - laughs.
 - hints.
 - blame.
 - danger.

“Bystanders look to others for cues as to what is happening.” (Paragraph 31)

B. Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from “Words to Watch.”

- “I resent your parents’ *intervention* in our marriage problems,” Alan told Susan. He meant that he resented the way
 - her parents ignored their problems.
 - her parents always sided with her when the couple had problems.
 - her parents interfered in the couple’s problems.
- When I asked where we should go for dinner, I received this *apathetic* response from my daughter:
 - “Who cares?”
 - “I can’t decide—pizza and Chinese food both sound so good!”
 - “Please, please, please let’s go to the Tex-Mex Cafe!”
- Caught cheating on the test, the student tried to *diffuse* his guilt by
 - saying, “I am really, truly ashamed of myself.”
 - insisting that he had not been cheating.
 - saying, “I can name eight other people who were cheating on it, too.”
- Permanent physical *paralysis* is often caused by
 - chicken pox.
 - a broken arm.
 - a severe spinal cord injury.

WRITING CHECK

1/ Point and Main Ideas

- Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
 - People don’t want to get involved in emergencies.
 - Kitty Genovese was murdered because no one came to her assistance or called the police.
 - People don’t care what happens to others.
 - Understanding why bystanders react as they do in a crisis can help people act more responsibly.