

Bystander Effect

Authored by
mohammad looti

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The bystander effect or Genovese syndrome is a social psychological phenomenon that refers to cases where individuals do not offer any means of help in an emergency situation to the victim when other people are present. The probability of help has in the past been thought to be inversely related to the number of bystanders; in other words, the greater the number of bystanders, the less likely it is that any one of them will help. The mere presence of other bystanders greatly decreases intervention. This happens because as the number of bystanders increases, any given bystander is less likely to notice the incident, less likely to interpret the incident as a problem, and less likely to assume responsibility for taking action.

Timothy Hart and Ternace Miethe used data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and found that a bystander was present in 65 percent of the violent victimizations in the data. Their presence was most common in cases of physical assaults (68%), which accounted for the majority of these violent victimizations and less likely in robberies (49%) and sexual assaults (28%). The actions of bystanders were most frequently judged by victims as "neither helping nor hurting" (48%), followed by "helping" (37%), "hurting" (10%), and "both helping and hurting" (3%) Half of the attacks that a bystander was present at occurred in the evening and the victim and bystander were strangers. The nature and startling prevalence of the Bystander Effect is one of the factors that led to the rise of Real-life superhero movement.

Social psychology research

The bystander effect was first demonstrated in the laboratory by John Darley and Bibb Latane in 1968 after they became interested in the topic following the murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964. These researchers launched a series of experiments that resulted in one of the strongest and most replicable effects in social psychology. In 12 years they had conducted four dozen experiments, all having the same results. In a typical experiment, the participant is either alone or among a group of other participants or confederates. An emergency situation is then staged. The researchers then measure how long it takes the participants to act, and whether or not they intervene at all. These experiments virtually always find that the presence of others inhibits helping, often by a large margin. In 2008 a study by Mark Levine and Simon Crowther found that increasing group size inhibited intervention in a street violence scenario when bystanders were strangers but encouraged intervention when bystanders were friends. They also found that when gender identity is salient group size encouraged intervention when bystanders and victim shared social category membership. In addition, group size interacted with context-specific norms that both inhibit and encourage helping. The bystander effect is not a generic consequence of increasing group size. When bystanders share group-level psychological relationships, group size can encourage as well as inhibit helping.

There are, in fact, many reasons why bystanders in groups fail to act in emergency situations, but social psychologists have focused most of their attention on two major factors. According to a basic

principle of social influence, bystanders monitor the reactions of other people in an emergency situation to see if others think that it is necessary to intervene. Since everyone is doing exactly the same thing (nothing), they all conclude from the inaction of others that help is not needed. This is an example of pluralistic ignorance or social proof. The other major obstacle to intervention is known as diffusion of responsibility. This occurs when observers all assume that someone else is going to intervene and so each individual feels less responsible and refrains from doing anything.

In one study the effects of masculinity and the bystander effect were studied. Subjects participated in a simulated group discussion via headphones. One member of the group apparently had a choking fit and called for help. Highly masculine subjects were less likely to take action to help the victim than were other subjects. Femininity and actual gender had no effect on likelihood of helping. Results are interpreted according to past research evidence that highly masculine subjects fear potential embarrassment and loss of poise, so they may be reluctant to intervene in emergencies.

Bibb Latane and Judith Rodin staged an experiment around a woman in distress in 1969. 70 percent of the people alone called out or went to help the woman after they believed she had fallen and gotten hurt, but when there were other people in the room only 40 percent offered help.

The above research was mainly conducted in the context of non-dangerous, non-violent emergencies. A 2006 study tested bystander effect in emergency situations to see if they would get the same results from other studies testing non-emergencies. It turns out that they did not. In situations with low potential danger, more help was given in the solitary condition than in the bystander condition. However, in situations with high potential danger, participants confronted with an emergency alone or in the presence of another bystander were similarly likely to help the victim.

A 2011 study presents the first, major, meta-analysis of studies of the bystander effect since 1981. This is: *The Bystander-Effect: A Meta-Analytic Review on Bystander Intervention in Dangerous and Non-Dangerous Emergencies*, by Peter Fischer, University of Regensburg, Joachim I. Krueger, Brown University, Tobias Greitemeyer, University of Innsbruck, Claudia Vogrincic, University of Graz, Andreas Kastenmuller, Liverpool John Moores University, Dieter Frey University of Munich, Moritz Heene, Magdalena Wicher, and Martina Kainbacher University of Graz: They demonstrate that "research on bystander intervention produced a great number of studies showing that the presence of other people in a critical situation reduces the likelihood that an individual will help." However, their meta-analysis "updates the knowledge about the bystander effect and its potential moderators. The ... work (a) integrates the bystander literature from the 1960s to 2010, (b) provides statistical tests of potential moderators, and (c) presents new theoretical and empirical perspectives on the novel finding of non-negative bystander effects in certain dangerous emergencies as well as situations where bystanders are a source of physical support for the potentially intervening individual." They report research on a "fixed effects model, (with) data from

over 7,700 participants." They report that "The bystander effect was attenuated when situations were perceived as dangerous (compared with non-dangerous), perpetrators were present (compared with non-present), and the costs of intervention were physical (compared with non-physical). This pattern of findings is consistent with the arousal-cost-reward model, which proposes that dangerous emergencies are recognized faster and more clearly as real emergencies, thereby inducing higher levels of arousal and hence more helping." They also "identified situations where bystanders provide welcome physical support for the potentially intervening individual and thus reduce the bystander effect, such as when the bystanders were exclusively male, when they were naive rather than passive confederates or only virtually present persons, and when the bystanders were not strangers." (See Abstract)

Explanations

There are, in fact, many reasons why bystanders in groups fail to act in emergency situations, but social psychologists have focused most of their attention on two major factors. According to a basic principle of social influence, bystanders monitor the reactions of other people in an emergency situation to see if others think that it is necessary to intervene. Each person uses others' behavior as clues to reality. Since everyone is doing exactly the same thing (nothing), they all conclude from the inaction of others that help is not needed. This is an example of pluralistic ignorance or social proof. The other major obstacle to intervention is known as diffusion of responsibility. This occurs when observers all assume that someone else is going to intervene and so each individual feels less responsible and refrains from doing anything.

Lance Shotland and Margaret Straw (1976) also found that people's interpretations affect their reactions to street crime. When witnessing a man and a woman fighting bystanders intervened 65 percent of the time when the woman yelled "Get away from me; I don't know you," but only 19 percent of the time when the woman yelled "Get away from me; I don't know why I ever married you".

There are other reasons why people may not help. They may assume that other bystanders are more qualified to help, such as doctors or police officers, and that their intervention would be unneeded. People may also experience evaluation apprehension and fear losing face in front of the other bystanders. They may also be afraid of being superseded by a superior helper, offering unwanted assistance, or facing the legal consequences of offering inferior and possibly dangerous assistance. An example is the limitation of California's Good Samaritan Law, limiting liability for those attempting to provide medical services as opposed to non-medical (extraction from automobile) services.

Children can be bystanders too. A study conducted by Robert Thornberg in 2007 came up with seven reasons why children do not help when another classmate is in distress. These include:

trivialisation, dissociation, embarrassment association, busy working priority, compliance with a competitive norm, audience modelling, and responsibility transfer.

Organizational Ombuds Practitioners' research

A 2009 study published by International Ombudsman Association in the Journal of the International Ombudsman Association suggests that--in reality--there are dozens of reasons why people do not act on the spot or come forward in the workplace when they see behavior they consider unacceptable.

The most important reasons cited for not acting were: the fear of loss of important relationships in and out of the workplace, and a fear of "bad consequences." There also were many reasons given by people who did act on the spot or come forward to authorities.

This practitioners' study suggests that the the "bystander effect" can be seen in a broader fashion. The broader interpretation would include not just what bystanders do in emergencies, and helping people in need, but also their reactions when they perceive unacceptable behavior. The practitioners' study also suggests that the bystander effect could also be interpreted as reporting unacceptable behavior (and emergencies and people in need), as well as acting on the spot to help. The ombuds practitioners' study suggests that what bystanders will do in real situations is actually very complex, reflecting views of the context (and relevant organizations if any) and also many personal reasons.

Implications

Many institutions have worked to provide options for bystanders who see behavior they find unacceptable. These options are usually provided through complaint systems - so bystanders have choices about where to go. One option that is particularly helpful is that of an organizational ombudsman, who keeps no records for the employer and is near-absolutely confidential.

Another step that has been taken by some organizations is bystander training. The United States Department of the Army is doing bystander training with respect to sexual assault. Some organizations routinely do bystander training with respect to safety issues. Many organizations have been doing bystander training with respect to diversity issues.

The Charter of human rights and freedoms from Quebec, Canada, makes it mandatory to "come to the aid of anyone whose life is in peril, either personally or calling for aid, unless it involves danger to himself or a third person, or he has another valid reason". It is therefore a legal obligation to assist people in the province of Quebec.

Notable examples

Kitty Genovese

The case of Kitty Genovese is often cited as an example of the "bystander effect". It is also the case that originally stimulated social psychological research in this area. 28 year-old Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death on March 13, 1964 by a serial rapist and murderer on her way back to her Queens, New York apartment from work at 3am. According to newspaper accounts, the attack lasted for at least a half an hour during which time Genovese screamed and pleaded for help. The murderer attacked Genovese and stabbed her, then fled the scene after attracting the attention of a neighbor. The killer then returned ten minutes later and finished the assault. Newspaper reports after Genovese's death claimed that 38 witnesses watched the stabbings and failed to intervene or even contact the police until after the attacker fled and Genovese had died. This led to widespread public attention, and many editorials.

According to an article published in American Psychologist in 2007, the original story of Kitty Genovese's murder was exaggerated by the media. Specifically, there were not 38 eyewitnesses, the police were contacted at least once during the attack, and many of the bystanders who overheard the attack could not actually see the event. The authors of the article suggest that the story continues to be misrepresented in social psychology textbooks because it functions as a parable and serves as a dramatic example for students.

Stanley Milgram hypothesized that the bystanders callous behavior was caused by the strategies they had adopted in daily life to cope with information overload. This idea has been supported to varying degrees by empirical research.

New York's Central Park Parade

In June 2000 following a parade alongside New York's Central Park which more than a million locals and tourists had attended, a pack of alcohol-fueled men became sexually aggressive. They began to grope and strip nearly 60 women. At least two victims approached nearby police who did nothing to help them. Nobody dialed 911 or offered assistance.

Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax

In April 2010 Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax was stabbed to death after coming to the aid of a woman who was being attacked. At least twenty people walked by while he lay dying on a sidewalk in Queens.

Simone Back

On Christmas Day 2010, Brighton UK woman, Simone Back, posted a suicide note on the social networking site Facebook. Several of her 1,082 Facebook friends commented on her status, but

none of them called for emergency services or went to check on her personally. Some of her friends lived within walking distance of Simone's flat. Her body was discovered by police the next day. The incident likely reflects a popular myth about suicide, that a person who talks about killing themselves is unlikely to do it.

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