Why People Stand By: A Comprehensive Study About the Bystander Effect

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ABSTRACT

Bystander effect is the phenomenon that describes how, when more people are around, each individual is less likely to intervene. While the bystander effect is an integral part of studying social behaviors and group thinking, the many caveats it presents itself with must be considered. Every situation differs based on location, people, and circumstance, so the idea of the bystander effect is not valid in every scenario, as evidenced by the various counterexamples and contradictory findings researchers have discovered. However, the bystander effect is still very important to study because understanding what encourages/prevents people from helping is critical to decrease the effect of the bystander effect to promote helping behavior. In this paper, we discuss the various factors that affect the prevalence of the bystander effect: perceived physical and social harm to the helper, responsibility diffusion, and perceived helpfulness.

Introduction

In Queens, New York in 1964, 28-year-old Kitty Genovese was raped and murdered in front of 38 nearby-apartment dwellers (Geyer-Schulz, Ovelgönne, & Sonnenbichler, 2010). Though facts are disputed, it is largely agreed that the first person to call the police as they witnessed this gruesome attack did so over 45 minutes after the incident began. By then, Kitty was already dead. The question of why or how these events could have happened is a timeless one. With so many witnesses, how could such a brutal criminal act go unreported? The answer lies in three words: the bystander effect.

According to Darley and Latané (1968), the bystander effect is a "phenomenon that an individual's likelihood of helping decreases when passive bystanders are present in a critical situation." In other words, the bystander effect refers to the reduced likelihood of an individual intervening in a situation as the number of people nearby increases (Latané & Darley, 1968, 1970; Latané & Nida, 1981). The opposite of a bystander is an upstander, a term we will be using to denote someone who steps up to help. The bystander effect explains why, in Kitty Genovese's case, not a single person intervened, though they may have been able to save her life. To understand the answer of why what happened to Genovese and many other similar cases may have happened, we must look into what factors affect the bystander effect itself.

Understanding these factors can help promote more intervention and large-scale reform by providing a resource for hosting workshops that teach the general public about the effect to reduce its prevalence in the community, thereby reducing the number of victims. Previous studies have shown that increasing knowledge about factors that cause social behaviors can be helpful to mitigate the negative effects of those social behaviors. For example, students who were given seminars on how to identify and help peers with suicidal thoughts were more likely to help by intervening in a positive manner (Kalafat & Elias, 1994). By increasing awareness of the problem at hand, intervention increased, therefore decreasing cases of potentially fatal inaction. Also, O'Connell, Pepler, and Craig (1999) found that students equipped with the correct resources and teachings to counteract bullying are more likely to intervene in bullying situations than those without, given that it is a schoolwide initiative. It was found that, at the very least, awareness campaigns are extremely useful in increasing knowledge and acceptance overall (Dumesnil & Verger,

2009). In the example of depression and mental health awareness, public campaigns are extremely useful in educating the populace on what it is and how to deal with it. It has been specifically found that public awareness can help stop the bystander effect (Van Bommel, van Prooijen, Elffers, & Van Lange, 2012). Therefore, it is extremely important to spread awareness about the effect and its factors in order to reduce its prevalence and increase the number of upstanders and reduce the number of bystanders in any given situation.

However, there has not been a comprehensive study to date on the factors that may affect the bystander effect. Therefore, in this study, we discuss the possible factors that influence a bystander's decision to help a victim in order to reduce the number of victims of the bystander effect by increasing intervention. Based on the literature review, we found four common themes that the factors fall into to explore. We will explore these factors more in-depth and present possible methods of interventions to reduce the impact of these factors to promote intervention. Literature was selected based on purposeful searches for key terms, including "bystander effect" and "upstander," on Google Scholar and JSTOR, among other credible databases. Sources were then separated into groups. We discuss how the bystander effect is affected by four broad categories of factors: perceived physical harm to the helper, perceived social harm, diffusion of responsibility, and perceived helpfulness.

Factor 1: Physical Threat to the Potential Helper

In 2009, in Munich, Germany, 50-year-old Dominik Brunner was killed when he stepped up to help young children from two 18-year old assailants (Geyer-Schulz, Ovelgönne, Sonnenbichler, 2010; Fischer et al. 2011). Several on-lookers passed by, but no one intervened to help Brunner. Brunner stepped up despite the bystander effect to help the children from the predators by becoming a helper. However, Brunner became prey to the fatal effect, showing the potential negative consequences to intervening. Still, this is a factor that needs to be overcome. This leads us to our first factor - that the perception of physical threats to the potential helper cannot be overlooked.

When presented with a dangerous situation, such as a fierce-looking bike thief (wearing torn or military-wear jeans with streetwear), each increasing number of additional witnesses seemed to increase the likelihood of individual intervention (Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2013). This is because the perceived level of negative physical consequences to the potential helper was mitigated upon the presence of other passersby. In sum, when presented with a dangerous situation, the presence of others increased the likelihood of helping because fear of being physically assaulted was low with other witnesses nearby. This factor is paradoxical because the bystander effect describes inaction during the presence of other witnesses, but this factor is defined by the fact that people are only more likely to help in dangerous situations when more people are nearby.

By spreading awareness about this paradox through workshops, the general public will be more likely to understand that this is a misconception, and that each can provide support to each other for safety. More specifically, by knowing that it is likely that no one else is calling the police, a person will hopefully call the police him/herself. Once a person understands this phenomenon, they will also know to support another person stepping into a potentially dangerous situation. It is important to accompany the presentation with plans for how to keep upstanders safe, perhaps through recommending that they get out of sight before calling the police in a murder/assault case, for example.

Factor 2: Social threat to the Potential Helper

The second factor is the perception of social threat. Social threats refer to any threats to the social life of a person (Karakashian, Walter, Christopher, & Lucas 2006). "Social threat" refers to any threat that may affect the way a person is viewed by their peers, family members, and strangers. Social consequences are important because they drive people's actions and motivations: being mocked, scorned, disliked, or otherwise bullied discourages certain behaviors, while being praised and complimented tend to encourage them (Asch, 1995). Social pressure is a huge driver of individual actions, especially to those seeking social approval. However, there are many social threats that could be

discussed. As a result, there are two main social threats that we will discuss regarding the bystander effect: fear of sticking out and gender norms.

Factor 2a: Fear of Sticking Out

Fear of sticking out directly relates with shyness; those that are more "shy" are more likely to be afraid of sticking out of the norm (Karakashian et al., 2006). Shyness influences a person's desire to step up and help because of the fear of negative evaluation from their peers. "Shy people," or those with a high level of shyness, tend to lack the confidence in their abilities to actually create a change, assuming they lack the social skills necessary to interact with others (Karakashian et al., 2006). It has been shown in numerous studies that fear of negative responses from others can affect a person's willingness to help.

This phenomenon can be expanded to a larger audience; the fact that shy people are less likely to help has been found across all ages (Guyton, 1997). Though still empathetic, shy people hesitated to help because they feared negative feedback from others. People made more self-aware, who could see that the need for their specific help was legitimate, and who did not have some other thought or activity as a preoccupation, were more likely to help than those with any of the above restrictions (Gibbons & Wicklund, 1982). Hudson & Bruckman (2004) likewise stated that a person will not act when many others are around because "he or she does not want to appear foolish or inappropriate in front of others." The perception of an audience demotivates many from stepping out of their comfort zone to help someone in need immediately, a direct result of the fear of failing that many people face.

The fear of sticking out can also affect how the bystanders may be influenced by groupthink. Groupthink is the idea that members of a group tend to mask their true feelings to avoid going against the rest of the group and the power of the group often allows them to feel personally less responsible, enabling them to act irrationally (Hensley & Griffin, 1986). Anyone that deviates from set norms are seen as an "other," and they often receive less sympathy (Falk & Gardner, 2002). Because of this, people might be less willing to help someone who is an "other" due to the fear of the reaction from people in their group. Groupthink is extremely detrimental to society when it comes to intervention for two main reasons: responsibility is diffused among the many people (more on this later) and people seen as "outsiders" are less likely to receive help because they are seen as different.

While aiming to eliminate this fear of sticking out in every individual may be difficult, as it depends on a person's inbuilt characteristics, we can work towards empowering people to step up beyond what they might find scary. Through various workshops, we can offer multiple ways people can intervene without making themselves known to everyone. This will allow those that are shy to be reassured that they can still help without stepping too far out of their bounds. Additionally, explaining how some help is often better than no help could help promote participation such as in Kitty Genovese's case (where, had one person called the police earlier, the outcome may have been different).

Factor 2b: Gender Norms

The second social threat we examine is the potential violation of gender norms. In this paper, we refer to traits that are stereotypically assigned to a certain gender more than the other as "gender norms." Gender norms, broken down into masculinity versus femininity, play a huge role in determining whether or not a person intervenes. Bystander intervention requires initiative to be taken to overcome social stigma in order to help (Tice & Baumeister, 1985).

On the one hand, masculinity might be both an obstacle and a catalyst to intervening. Decisiveness and initiative are traditionally masculine traits, a part of "self-assertiveness" that comes in the form of dominance. By this idea, men that are more masculine would likely be expected to help, at least as a way to secure their masculinity. Interventions could be seen as acts of heroism, increasing the desire to intervene (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). However, the construct of masculinity equates lack of poise and level of "coolness" with weakness (Tice & Baumeister, 1985). As a result, more masculine people might be more reluctant to help in the face of danger, upon the fear that their masculinity might

be threatened. When faced with danger, often true panic and emotions are exposed, which may diminish the masculine image one has created for oneself.

Specifically, in cases involving sexual aggression, traditional gender norms and masculine ideals often prevent men from intervening (Casey & Ohler, 2012). This is another way masculinity is threatened; the fear of losing respect or being seen as "gay" when "intervening against another man's 'sexual conquest'" is what often deters men from getting involved (Carlson, 2008; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). Leone, Parrott, Swartout, & Tharp (2016) found that if men knew they had the respect of others, or knew that they could gain respect by intervening, they were confident enough to step in without the fear of negative consequences. However, if men perceived greater negative consequences, especially in terms of losing respect or friendships, they were less likely to step in. We will discuss more about the social threats that factor into the bystander effect later in this paper.

On the other hand, femininity might also be both an impetus and a barrier to bypassing the bystander effect. It has been theorized that intervention requires empathy and nurturance, a trademark of traditional feminine values and a stark contrast to masculine ideals (Tice & Baumeister, 1985). Thus, it seems that women are more likely to intervene in dangerous situations. However, other stereotypical feminine traits, such as shyness and humility, are barriers to intervention (Tice & Baumeister, 1985). Also, interestingly, women are more likely to diffuse responsibility over men, a factor we will cover later in this paper (Schwartz & Clausen, 1970).

Taking both ideals into account, perhaps an extreme combination of highly masculine (those with self-assertiveness) and highly feminine (those with the most empathy), known as "androgynous," people would be most likely to intervene (Tice & Baumeister, 1985). Unfortunately, the rarity of such people and the lack of distinction from other gender ideals renders it an impractical solution to solving the bystander effect (Spence, 1983; Tice & Baumeister, 1985).

Instead, to combat the great effects gender-based ideals might have on the bystander effect, schools can begin breaking stereotypes by not teaching "boy traits" and "girl traits." If schools began encouraging boys to be in touch with their feelings and empathize and girls were taught to be more assertive, then they would likely act rather than being a bystander (Joyce, 2014; Hurley 2017). By conditioning children to be both empathetic and assertive, regardless of their gender, society would have the best chance at overcoming gender-barriers as catalysts of the bystander effect. Making people more aware of the effects of the fear of sticking out and gender norms on their willingness to help will encourage people to participate and help those in need. By knowing that everyone hesitates to help because they also fear social threat, people may be able to overcome their fear and intervene in a time of need.

Factor 3: Diffusion of Responsibility

The third factor is the diffusion of responsibility. As the number of bystanders increases, each person feels less responsible for what is happening and the potential negative consequences of inaction (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). By bringing attention to this intrinsic characteristic, people will be more likely to step up when they know that no one else will hold themselves accountable. As aforementioned, workshops discussing this phenomenon of diffusing responsibility will enable people to intervene. Perhaps explaining how the diffusion of responsibility does not only apply to the bystander effect will help situate the factor in a broader context and help people understand.

Factor 4: Perceived Helpfulness

For the final factor, we explored perceived helpfulness in two parts: magnitude of the situation and blocking. When discussing perceived helpfulness, we are referring to the amount a potential upstander feels that they can successfully contribute to a situation. The amount a person perceives they can help greatly affects their willingness to step into a situation that is possibly dangerous. These two factors can be thought of as the final factor preventing potential upstanders from intervening because these have a direct relation with the overall outcome of the situation. In other words,

if a person is able to get past all other "selfish" obstacles (regarding the effect of their actions on themselves), perceived helpfulness is often the "selfless" obstacle (regarding the effect of their actions on others) that prevents intervention.

Factor 4a: Pluralistic Ignorance

The first part of the final factor is the magnitude of the situation. Bystanders may assume that a situation is not as dangerous as they perceive because no one else is intervening. This is otherwise known as "pluralistic ignorance," as coined by Fischer et al. (2011). Due to the fact that no one else is intervening, each individual may perceive the situation as less critical than it actually is (Latané & Nida, 1981). Each person gauges how necessary it is for them to help by assessing the reactions of the people around them. Therefore, when no one else is helping, the bystander may believe that their potential actions will not be very useful in the situation.

While it may be expected that in more dangerous situations, the bystander effect might be stronger because people will want to do what is in their best interest (survive), Fischer et al. (2006) found that, in more dangerous situations, the bystander effect vanished. For example, when presented with a non-dangerous situation, like a bike thief wearing a suit and tie or a fancy dress, each increasing bystander reduced the likelihood of any single one intervening because the low perceived negative consequence was only decreased with the presence of more people (Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2013). This may be because more dangerous situations allow for more easily and quickly identifiable distress, leaving no room for pluralistic ignorance, as mentioned above. This may be due to natural instincts and be supported biologically via mirror neurons which incite empathy and provoke a person to act in a beneficial way to another (Iacoboni, 2009). Mirror neurons and adrenaline, which kicks in and convinces a person to help another in danger, could be biologically involved in moving past the bystander effect (Jansen, Van Nguyen, Karpitskiy, Mettenleiter, & Loewy, 1995).

Again, teaching about pluralistic ignorance to the general public will help reduce the number of victims to this vicious effect. Teaching the public about this bias can show that a situation that necessitates help can still have no helpers and can encourage people to step up even when no one else is helping. It is important to make the connection that perhaps no one else is intervening for the same reason the audience may not be: they assume it is not that serious either. This large-scale misconception needs to be broken down to reduce the prevalence of the bystander effect.

Factor 4b: Blocking

The second part of the final factor is a phenomenon known as "blocking." This especially comes to light after assuming that all other obstacles have been mitigated and the person is ready to step in and help. Blocking is the idea that once a person steps in, everyone else is less motivated to help because of the fear that they could worsen the situation rather than help solve the problem (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). People are worried about the negative effects offering their aid may have: perhaps they are a distraction, or they will not be able to help, but rather fail and harm the entire operation by introducing "too many cooks in the kitchen." The fear that offering assistance may be more detrimental than beneficial is a clear barrier to intervention. Spreading awareness about "blocking" as an obstacle to intervention would help in reducing the number of victims that are affected by the bystander effect. Showing people that while it may seem that someone else already helped and that their aid would be useless, they could save a life by stepping up anyway.

These two factors (magnitude of situation and blocking) are two whose successes are more directly reliant on the effect the action creates on the person in need rather than the person helping. When everyone assumes their help is not useful, the person-in-need may not receive any help at all. By educating about these common misconceptions, we can promote intervention and help people understand that their help is often critical for changing the outcome of a situation for the better.

Conclusion

Put simply, the bystander effect is the phenomenon in which as the number of people nearby increases, the likelihood of any individual person helping is decreased. It is, however, subject to the specific circumstances of the incident in question; while the general idea is largely undisputed, there are debates about the psychological reasons behind the bystander effect. Therefore, in this study, we examined some of the most prevalent factors that inhibit intervention and promote the bystander effect. We found that the bystander effect relies on various personal and social motives, from reasons of safety to reasons of social acceptance, which is threatened when straying from the group at large. Specifically, we examined how the perceived physical harm, social influences (fear of sticking out and gender norms), diffusion of responsibility, and perceived utility of the upstander (magnitude of the emergency and blocking) influence a potential helper's decision to intervene.

We found that people were less likely to intervene in a dangerous situation if it seemed to them that they could be hurt physically. In seemingly dangerous situations, people were more likely to intervene if more people were around rather than if there were fewer people nearby, showing that each relies on the other for support. In this case, the bystander effect is reduced when the number of people increase, showing the complexities of this effect. In the same workshop mentioned earlier, if we offered methods of intervention that would protect their safety as well, people would be more likely to step in. This would break down the second factor: high perceived physical risk to the helper. Next, we found that there are various social factors that come into play when a person is faced with a situation in which they need to help or not. The fear of sticking out can be overcome by showing the slight irrationality of the fear and by offering multiple methods in which people can intervene without being uncomfortable. The harmful effect of gender norms can be defeated by producing more androgynous people from a young age (encouraging boys to be more empathetic and girls to be self-assertive). Combined, these would break down the third factor: high perceived social harm to the upstander.

Third, we looked at the dangers of each person not feeling responsible. We found that as the number of people nearby increases, each person takes less responsibility for the situation at hand because they feel less at fault for what happened. By spreading information and awareness about this phenomenon, people will step up when in need because they understand that each person is taking less responsibility for what is occurring. This awareness will let a person bypass the bystander effect and act accordingly, breaking the fourth factor: high diffusion of responsibility.

Finally, we found that there are multiple factors related to the perception of helpfulness that are assessed before intervening. To understand how the magnitude of a situation affects participation, we looked into the role of mirror neurons and adrenaline combined with the idea of "pluralistic ignorance." This is the idea that people act based on the reactions of others; if no one is stepping in, people assume the situation to not be as serious as they originally thought and will also not intervene. We also found how blocking, or the fact that once one person intervenes, everyone else is less likely to step in, is a factor that contributes to the bystander effect. By breaking down this misconception and teaching that everyone assumes the same concept of pluralistic ignorance (meaning no one steps in) and educating the populace about blocking and how smartphones are increasing bystanders, we can promote intervention and break down the fourth factor: low perceived helpfulness by the helper.

As for solutions, we found that the most effective solution to mitigating the negative effects of the bystander effect would be a series of workshops that address each of the aforementioned factors and how to bypass them to become an effective upstander rather than a bystander.

Limitations

This study is significant because it is the first to conduct a comprehensive study on various factors that influence the bystander effect. Despite this, this study suffers from a number of limitations. First, it does not address all factors that could affect the bystander effect. For example, it was claimed that smartphones were responsible for increasing

inactivity as many people simply watched a man be violently dragged off of a United Airlines flight (Badalge, 2017). However, this study assesses some of the most important factors according to previous research. Second, this paper reviews each factor as independent obstacles to the bystander effect and does not explore the potential compounding effects. While it is important to remember that multiple factors can affect the bystander effect, this paper is a strong foundation, to which future researchers can add and combine more factors.

Despite these limitations, this study adds value to the field of psychology and can help understand why people do not intervene, which can help develop solutions to save lives. This study enables further research on the biological components of intervening in a dangerous situation, with a specific focus on the role of mirror neurons on the bystander effect. Understanding the biological aspects of the bystander effect through current research is crucial to coming up with solutions. Research must be conducted on how this effect has changed over time because many findings are slightly outdated.

Discussion

Further research may be conducted on the bystander effect's far-reaching sphere. For example, it would be interesting to study how the bystander effect plays out online, in the case of cyberbullying, where everyone is conveniently hidden behind a screen. In addition, the effect's prevalence in academic situations, from elementary schools to post-graduate schools might be a path to look into. Further research on its effect on mental health, specifically at these levels of education and how it varies, for instance, must be done to gain a more holistic understanding of the true impact the bystander effect has on daily life.

Acknowledgements

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