

## SILENT WITNESSES: EXPLORING THE BYSTANDER EFFECT AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERVENTION BEHAVIOUR

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### ABSTRACT

*The bystander effect, a key phenomenon of social psychology, sets that the presence of others inhibits individual intervention in emergencies. The current article reviews extensively the case origin of the bystander effect through the Kitty Genovese incident in 1964 and subsequent research by Latané and Darley. The paper criticizes the role of certain situational factors-typically: group size, situational ambiguity, nature of relationship tie between bystander and victim, fear of consequences, and presence or absence of authorities in determining the incidence and nature of the phenomenon of 'bystander effect'. Noting the roles of 'diffusion of responsibility' and 'pluralistic ignorance' have underlined important implications for public safety. The paper will also comment on what Darley and Latane contribute to our understanding of bystander behaviour in the experimental studies that they conducted. Finally, the article analyzes and presents illustrative examples and the attempts made towards actions such as bystander training programs and the current Good Samaritan law in the reformation intended to minimize damage. The ethical considerations around acting based on moral imperative pit utilitarian and deontological worldviews against concerns for personal danger and autonomy. The last part looks at ways of promoting prosocial behavior for a better societal response to crises.*

**Keywords:** Bystander Effect, Diffusion of Responsibility, Pluralistic Ignorance, Prosocial Behavior.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF BYSTANDER EFFECT

A fascinating and frequently frightening socio-psychological phenomenon, the bystander effect reveals the complex dynamics of human behaviour in group settings. Since Kitty Genovese's terrible 1964 murder<sup>1</sup>, psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley conducted groundbreaking

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<sup>1</sup> Haberman C, "Remembering Kitty Genovese" The New York Times (November 4, 2016)

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/11/us/remembering-kitty-genovese.html>>. Accessed March 27, 2024.

studies<sup>2</sup> that led to the public's fascination with this phenomenon. The bystander effect has attracted the attention of academics, professionals and the masses alike.

Fundamentally, the bystander effect explains how people's willingness to help those in need decreases with the number of spectators. This paradoxical inclination casts doubt on widely held beliefs about human compassion and clarifies the complex interactions between social influence, accountability dispersion, and personal decision-making.

The notorious case of Kitty Genovese, whose gruesome murder in Queens, New York, transpired over several minutes as multiple witnesses stayed silent. This case provides a vivid example of the enormous ramifications of the bystander effect on the well-being of society. Crucial opportunities for intervention are lost, frequently with disastrous results, as onlookers struggle with the ambiguity of blame and the diffusion of accountability within a group setting. The bystander effect extends beyond the domain of well-publicised catastrophes and affects many aspects of daily life, such as violent crimes, emergency scenarios and incidents of prejudice.

In order to better understand the bystander effect and find ways to lessen its detrimental effects, researchers investigate the psychological factors that underlie this phenomenon. Studying the bystander effect continues to provide important insights into social dynamics, human behaviour, and the pursuit of a more responsive and compassionate society. These insights come from theoretical models, experimental research, real-world applications, and intervention attempts.

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING BYSTANDER EFFECT**

There are a number of personal factors that can affect the potency of the bystander effect i.e., level of competence, current emotional state, ability to relate to the person involved, etc. but in this blog, we will be focusing more on the situational factors. They are:

### **Size of group**

Research says that the more the number of individuals in the group, the less likely the likelihood of a single individual to intervene is. Here the phenomena of diffusion of responsibility comes

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<sup>2</sup> Cieciora J, "A Summary of the Bystander Effect: Historical Development and Relevance in the Digital Age" (2015) 8 Inquiries Journal <<https://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1493/a-summary-of-the-bystander-effect-historical-development-and-relevance-in-the-digital-age>> Accessed March 27, 2024.

into play. It refers to the diminished sense of accountability an individual feels when they are part of a large group. For example, in an emergency situation, one is less likely to intervene if they know that they are part of a group of witnesses.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ambiguity**

Ambiguity of the situation is a critical factor in bystander intervention. In case of an emergency or distressing situation, a bystander is less likely to take action if the situation is ambiguous. In situations like these, individuals tend to look around for others' reactions and if no one else takes action, it can be interpreted as a signal that the situation is not that serious. For example, in a crowded train station at rush hour, a man collapses on the platform. There is ambiguity regarding the reason for collapse, it could be something fatal such as a heart attack, or something not so severe such as fainting due to dehydration. Without clear indicators of how severe the situation actually is, bystanders would hesitate to take action for fear of escalating the situation or embarrassing themselves for overreacting.

### **Relationship of the Bystander to the Victim**

The relationship that exists between the bystander and the victim plays a critical role in bystander intervention. According to research, bystanders are significantly more likely to offer assistance to someone they know or feel similar to. This human tendency is termed the kinship effect, which means that emotional bonds and perceived similarities increase the chances of intervention and difference and lack of personal connection lessens the chances of intervention.<sup>4</sup>

### **Fear of Consequences**

Though intervention may be the morally right course of action, it does have repercussions. Intervention could lead to legal consequences or jeopardization of personal safety. Fear of harm to the self can immobilize an individual, leading them to prioritize their own safety over others. For instance, when a bystander is watching a physical altercation between two individuals, they are less likely to intervene due to getting involved in the violence leading to personal harm. In

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<sup>3</sup> Sissons B, "What to Know about the Bystander Effect" (Medical News Today, September 1, 2023) <<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/bystander-effect>> Accessed March 27, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Martin A, "Factors Affecting Bystander Intervention" (Online Learning College, June 2, 2022) <<https://online-learning-college.com/knowledge-hub/gcse/gcse-psychology-help/factors-affecting-bystander-intervention/>> Accessed March 28, 2024.

this same scenario, if the bystander chose to intervene and as a result caused harm to either party, it could potentially lead to legal ramifications as well.<sup>5</sup>

### **Presence of Authority Figures**

Another example of diffusion of responsibility is the presence of an authority figure. When such figures are present, people are naturally influenced and witnessing that authority figure intervene might encourage the bystanders to intervene. This is because when an authority figure is present, the pressure to take responsibility for the bystanders is greatly reduced. This is because the bystanders are likely to believe that the authority figure is more well-equipped to handle the situation.<sup>6</sup>

## **REAL-WORLD IMPLICATIONS OF BYSTANDER EFFECT**

### **Impact on Public Safety**

The most pertinent implication of the bystander effect on public safety is due to the diffusion of responsibility<sup>7</sup> that takes place as a result of the bystander effect.

Diffusion of responsibility is a phenomenon that occurs in group settings, wherein individuals are less likely to take action or feel accountable when others are present. When people find themselves in a group, they tend to perceive that responsibility for addressing a situation is shared among all present, leading to a diffusion or dilution of personal responsibility. This diffusion can result in a reduced sense of urgency to act, as individuals may assume that someone else will intervene. Furthermore, in the presence of others who also appear to be passive, individuals may wrongly interpret this lack of action as a signal that no intervention is necessary. This interpretation on the part of individuals is a phenomenon known as pluralistic ignorance and this reinforces their own inaction. The effect is often more pronounced in larger groups, where the diffusion of responsibility is spread across a greater number of individuals. Consequently, the likelihood of any one person taking action decreases, potentially compromising public safety, especially in emergencies where swift intervention is crucial.

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<sup>5</sup> “Staff Psychology Today, “Bystander Effect” (Psychology Today, December 30, 2020) <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/bystander-effect>> Accessed March 28, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Hortensius R and Gelder BD, “From Empathy to Apathy: The Bystander Effect Revisited” (2018) 27 Current Directions in Psychological Science <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417749653>>. Accessed March 28, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Cherry K, “The Diffusion of Responsibility Concept in Psychology” (Verywell Mind, August 10, 2023) <<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-diffusion-of-responsibility-2795095>>. Accessed March 29, 2024.

In fact, there is a poem 'Cold-within' which illustrates how people misinterpret situations demanding their action and in the end, these situations affect them adversely due to their own inactions. The poem illustrates the bystander effect based on insecurities and prejudices. A person from a particular race may not be willing to intervene if it does not affect their race; a person of a particular sex might not take action if it affects the other sex; a person belonging to a particular caste or religion may not help a person from other caste or religion.

For instance, the case of George Floyd<sup>8</sup>. One unsettling aspect of this event is that three police officers stood there indifferently while the main accused police officer restrained Floyd until he died. This can be understood in two-prongs. Firstly, the police officers were under the same fraternity and hence, in an act of solidarity, they practised the 'blue code' and consequently remained indifferent to the entire situation. Another aspect of this might be far-fetched yet reasonable to make an assumption that it might be because all the police officers belonged to the same race and ethnicity while the deceased belonged to another race. This form of bystander effect is the most dangerous and harmful since it is not just plain indifference but indifference that is perceptive to social constructs like caste, religion, sex, region, and race among others.

The bystander effect essentially stems from the societal effects of capitalism. Capitalism is primarily based on the philosophy of 'laissez faire'<sup>9</sup> which is essentially based on the principle of non-intervention. This principle makes the economy highly robust but when it comes to society, it makes the societal cohesiveness weak. Lack of social cohesiveness and responsibility towards other people often leads to the materialisation of the bystander effect.

Capitalist societies have become so 'possessive'<sup>10</sup> individualistic and self-centric that individuals take no action unless it affects them directly. A person might suffer an accident and there will hardly be anyone who helps that injured person. This is because the social fabric has evolved in such a manner that the people have developed beliefs that unless it affects them, they do not have any business whatsoever.

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<sup>8</sup> Arango T, "How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next" The New York Times (July 29, 2022) <<https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd.html>> Accessed March 29, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> The Investopedia Team, "What Is a Laissez-Faire Economy, and How Does It Work?" (Investopedia, April 16, 2024) <<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/l/laissezfaire.asp>> Accessed 27 Mar. 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Day JP and MacPherson CB, "The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke." (1964) 14 Philosophical Quarterly 266 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2955469>> Accessed March 29, 2024.

## Social Psychology of Humans

In several studies<sup>11</sup>, it has been found that humans are essentially more proactive when they perform tasks alone. When it comes to group work, it is only a few who take action and initiative and the rest grow lax. The bystander effect is essentially seen in group settings where strangers form a group. A group setting such as this lacks social cohesiveness and a sense of responsibility. In return, the group lacks innate responsibility towards each other. This bystander effect is different from the conventional understanding of bystander effect wherein a group or an individual is indifferent towards a certain event, action or person that does not directly concern that individual or group.

However, in this case, the bystander effect occurs within the group itself and this indifference within the group materialises since there does not exist a strict sense of responsibility that binds the individuals unless it is commercial or monetary in nature.

Group assignments that are given to students in schools and colleges serve as pertinent examples that exemplify the 'inward' diffusion of responsibility due to the bystander effect. It is essentially a stereotype that in a group of five, it is only one or two who actually do the whole work while the other majority just enjoys the fruit of their peer's labour.

In commercial settings, these very groups become highly proactive for the fact that the extent of group and individual liability becomes very high and the career and prestige of individuals and group as a whole comes at stake. On top of the high stakes existing in commercial settings, there is also the existence of monetary compensation that the group gets to complete a particular task or work.

From these examples, it is clear that without incentivisation and high stakes, people do not really take initiative by themselves for their mindset keeps a chain around them which breaks only when there is some 'profit' or 'loss' directly affecting them.

### Plausible Solutions to minimise the problem of bystander effect:

By establishing a legal framework that promotes intervention, defends bystanders who take action, and holds people accountable for failing to aid in emergencies or avoid injury,

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<sup>11</sup> Hortensius R and Gelder BD, "From Empathy to Apathy: The Bystander Effect Revisited" (2018) 27 Current Directions in Psychological Science <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417749653>> Accessed March 29, 2024.



legislation and policy changes play a critical role in addressing the bystander effect. Adopting legislation known as "Good Samaritan laws"<sup>12</sup>, which give those who assist others in need legal protection, is one strategy. These rules, which shield bystanders from culpability for any accidental injury that may arise during their intervention attempts, are intended to allay bystanders' anxieties about facing legal consequences for interfering. Furthermore, legislation requiring witnesses to report suspected cases of damage in particular situations, like child or elder abuse, can guarantee that incidents are immediately addressed and victims receive the required aid. Furthermore, by establishing clear procedures for handling harassment, anti-bullying policies in businesses and schools might motivate 'bystanders' to report instances of discrimination or bullying. Legislation and policy reforms can facilitate the creation of a supportive atmosphere that encourages bystanders to intervene and fosters a culture of responsibility and assistance in communities by making individuals accountable for their acts or inaction through legal measures.

In a welcome move, the Supreme Court of India framed guidelines for rescuing people injured due to road accidents<sup>13</sup> wherein the court made it clear that the person who brings the injured to the hospital shall not be interrogated by the police officers of concern. This has essentially alleviated the concerns of rescuers and has, at the same time, removed an impediment to rescue cases.

## CASE STUDIES

### Kitty Genovese Case

Kitty Genovese was murdered in the early hours of March 13, 1964 in Queens, New York. She was raped and stabbed outside the apartment building she lived in. This is the landmark incident that prompted inquiries into what came to be known as the bystander effect. The first report painted a troubling picture: 38 witnesses watched in silence as Kitty was stabbed to death over a period of 2 hours.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Content Team Legal Dictionary, "Good Samaritan Law - Definition, Examples, Cases, Processes" (Legal Dictionary, November 29, 2018) <<https://legaldictionary.net/good-samaritan-law/>> Accessed March 30, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Bhatnagar GV, "SC Guidelines Now Protect Good Samaritans Who Help Road Accident Victims" The Wire (2016) <<https://thewire.in/health/sc-guidelines-now-protect-good-samaritans-who-help-road-accident-victims>> Accessed March 30, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> McFadden RD, "Winston Moseley, Who Killed Kitty Genovese, Dies in Prison at 81" The New York Times (April 4, 2016) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/05/nyregion/winston-moseley-81-killer-of-kitty-genovese-dies-in-prison.html>> Accessed March 30, 2024.

But closer examination reveals a more nuanced story. Investigators started casting doubts on the credibility of the number of witnesses present and their respective awareness of the situation. Most definitely heard noises, but could have been interpreted as a case of domestic violence of a lover's quarrel. The fear of getting involved, the social norms around not intervening in people's personal matters, the ambiguity of the situation in front of them, etc. are all factors that played a role in bystander non-intervention.

Despite this new info, the Genovese case remains the landmark case of study for the bystander effect. Sociologists analyse this through various factors like diffusion of responsibility, pluralistic ignorance, decision-making in emergencies, etc. but the Genovese case also highlights the importance of considering the context. For example, the urban environment in New York could lead to a sense of detachment and fear of intervention. The social norms of the time i.e., 1960's may have been different compared to now.<sup>15</sup>

### **Darley and Latane Experiments**

After the tragedy of the Kitty Genovese case, two social psychologists, John Darley and Bibb Latane began a series of experiments that would revolutionize our understanding of bystander intervention.<sup>16</sup>

Their experiments involved seminary students invited to participate in discussions regarding the pressures of urban life. Unbeknownst to them, they were participating in an experiment that involved a staged emergency. The experimenters staged 3 scenarios. In the first, one participant was alone with the experimenter. In the second, the participant was joined by two confederates posing as participants. In the third, the participant was joined by four confederates posing as participants.

During the discussion, a staged "medical emergency" took place. The participants heard a voice from another room in distress due to a seizure and needed help. The researchers observed closely to track how quickly the participants intervened. These were the findings:

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<sup>15</sup> The New York Times, "Queens Woman Is Stabbed To Death in Front of Home" (March 1, 1964) <<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/03/14/archives/queens-woman-is-stabbed-to-death-in-front-of-home.html>>Accessed March 30, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Team, "Who Were Latane and Darley? AP® Psychology Bystander Effect Review" (Albert Resources, March 1, 2022) <<https://www.albert.io/blog/latane-and-darley-ap-psychology-bystander-effect-review/>>Accessed March 30, 2024.



- Alone: When participants were alone, almost 70% reported the emergency within two minutes.
- Two Others: When two others were present, only about 60% intervened within the same timeframe.
- Three Others: In the largest group, a mere 30% reported the emergency within two minutes.

The results strengthened the hypothesis about the bystander effect. The sociologists explained this phenomenon through the diffusion of responsibility. As the number of individuals increases in the room, the responsibility felt by each individual separately becomes diluted leading them to feel less personally accountable to intervene.<sup>17</sup>

The researchers then conducted further experiments to explore the other factors affecting bystander intervention. One such experiment involved the participant walking down a hallway, supposedly on their way to a meeting. In that hallway they would encounter a man slouched over, evidently ill. It was noticed that if the participants believed that they were the only witnesses, they were more likely to take action. But in cases where the participant knows that someone ahead has already taken notice of this slouched person, they were less likely to take any action.

This experiment highlighted the factor of pluralistic ignorance. This refers to the tendency of a person to act after gauging others' reactions to the event. If others seem unfazed by the event, then the individual may deem the situation to be less urgent, and justify their non-intervention.

The Darley and Latane experiments were monumental in the study of social psychology. These experiments challenged the assumption that people are inherently helpful in emergencies and hence revealed the complex decision-making process behind bystander intervention.<sup>18</sup>

## RECENT EVENTS

The recent events regarding bystander intervention show the growing public awareness of this phenomenon, here are some developments:

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<sup>17</sup> Chiang IC, "Chapter 6: Experimental Research" (opentextbc.ca, October 13, 2015) <<https://opentextbc.ca/researchmethods/part/experimental-research/>> Accessed March 31, 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Latane B and Darley JM, "Bystander 'Apathy'" [1969] *American Scientist* 244 <<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Latane-BystanderApathy.pdf>> Accessed March 31, 2024.

*Bystander Intervention Training:* There's a growing emphasis on training bystanders to recognize and respond to emergencies.

*Legal Developments:* Laws are being made in order to promote bystander intervention but it can vary from situation to situation. Some countries have “Duty to Rescue” laws that obligate individuals to assist those in danger in certain situations.<sup>19</sup>

*Social media:* The role of social media in bystander intervention is a double-edged sword. While it may amplify non-intervention by exposing individuals to more situations where they cannot take action it can also spread awareness and empower intervention.

### **OBLIGATION TO INTERVENE: DO THE BYSTANDERS HAVE A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TO ACT**

Ethical concepts and intricate moral concerns are at the centre of the controversy around the duty to step in when others are in need. Proponents of the moral duty to aid contend that people have a basic duty based on compassion, empathy and reciprocity to help others who are in need. Hence, this group of thinkers believes in an interventionist approach. According to this viewpoint, humans are social animals by nature and it is our collective duty to lessen the suffering of not only ourselves but also of others besides advancing the welfare of all. Advocates may invoke ethical theories like Utilitarianism<sup>20</sup> or Kantian ethics to bolster their stance, stressing the significance of optimising collective well-being or honouring the inherent worth and dignity of each person.

However, some who doubt the need to step in and help others express legitimate concerns about the difficult practical decisions and moral quandaries that come with knowing when and how to help others. This group of thinkers essentially takes a ‘Machevillian’<sup>21</sup> or ‘Cautious’ approach to the bystander effect. They contend that enforcing an unbending moral obligation to intervene may ignore crucial elements like permission, one's own safety and the intervention's possible unforeseen repercussions. Critics further point out that forced action could cause more harm or intensify the issue and that people may not have the resources,

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<sup>19</sup> Cherry K, “How Psychology Explains the Bystander Effect” (Verywellmind, June 7, 2023) <<https://www.verywellmind.com/the-bystander-effect-2795899>> Accessed March 31, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Ethic Unrapped, “UTILITARIANISM” (<https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/>) <<https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/utilitarianism>>. Accessed March 31, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Jones DN, “Machiavellianism” [2017] Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8\\_1245-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_1245-1)>. Accessed March 31, 2024.

expertise and abilities to help in some circumstances. Furthermore, some defend the value of autonomy and individual freedom, arguing that laws requiring obligatory involvement may violate people's rights to privacy and autonomy.

In the end, conflicting moral considerations and values are reflected in the argument over whether or not to intervene. Skeptics point out the challenges and restrictions of interfering in actual circumstances, while supporters stress the value of empathy and unity in creating a caring society. In ethical discourse and policy-making, striking a balance between upholding individual autonomy and fostering a culture of responsibility and mutual aid is still a difficult but crucial endeavour.

## CONCLUSION

The bystander effect highlights a disconcerting reality: amid a crowd, people are less inclined to assist. When faced with an emergency, people may be reluctant to act for a variety of reasons, such as pluralistic ignorance (thinking that others' passivity indicates the problem isn't serious) or diffusion of responsibility (feeling less accountable to others around). It's important to comprehend these elements. We can enable bystanders to take action by encouraging social responsibility via education and developing intervention skills through training. Although social media might have drawbacks, it also has advantages in terms of raising awareness and organizing support. Additionally, "good Samaritan" rules can foster an atmosphere that is conducive to intervention.

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The bystander effect is a challenge, but also an opportunity. By working together, we can cultivate a society where people feel obligated to intervene, fostering a world where bystanders become upstanders.