

Bystander Apathy Experiment ^[1]

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Kitty Genovese Murder Explained

One of the classic experiments in social psychology is the one conducted by John Darley and Bibb Latané in 1964 called Bystander Apathy Experiment.

The experimenters got their inspiration and motivation to conduct this experiment from the highly publicized murder of Kitty Genovese in the same year.

The Murder of Kitty Genovese

On March 13, 1964, Kitty Genovese was murdered in front of her home. She parked her car a number of feet from her apartment when all of a sudden, a man named Winston Moseley chased her down and stabbed her in the back twice. Due to the excruciating pain, Kitty screamed for help and a neighbor responded shouting at the criminal "Let that girl alone!" Immediately after getting the attention of the criminal, Winston fled the scene and left the girl crawling towards her apartment.

Several witnesses reported to have seen Winston fled the scene with his car and returned ten minutes after the response of one of the neighbors. After seeing his prey lying on the ground almost unconscious, he stabbed the already wounded Kitty Genovese several times more. After this, he stole the money of the victim and sexually assaulted Ms Genovese. A neighbor phoned the police and an ambulance arrived but was too late to help the assaulted Kitty Genovese.

Shock to Psychology

Thirty-eight neighbors of Kitty Genovese were aware about the murder that was taking place during that time and yet all of them chose to do nothing in rescue of the assaulted girl. Why were such apathy, indifference and lack of concern observed from all the neighbors of Kitty? Two social psychologists started asking questions why the witnesses demonstrated a lack of reaction towards the victim's need for help.

Bystander Apathy Experiment

Darley and Latané thought of a social psychology experiment that will let them see through an event similar to what took place during the murder of Kitty. First, they recruited [3] university students and told them that they will be participating in a discussion about personal problems. Each participant will be talking to other participants of varying number in a discussion group but each of the participants has separate rooms. This conversation will take place over microphones and speakers just so the participants will not be able to physically see the other participants that they are talking to. The topic upon which the conversations will revolve is their college lives.

Each participant will be given two minutes to speak during their turn. All the microphones of other participants will be turned off. The subject is unaware that all the voices that he will hear are all pre-recorded voices. The number of voices that the subject will be 'talking to' depends on the treatment condition that he is in. There are five treatment conditions. First is a solo, one-on-one conversation and the last is a group of six participants (1 subject and 5 pre-recorded voices).

One of the pre-recorded voices is that of an epileptic student who is having seizures. The voice will first confess to the group that he is prone to seizures and it could be life-threatening during its first turn. During its second turn, the seizure will start.

"I'm... I'm having a fit... I... I think I'm... help me... I... I can't... Oh my God... err... if someone can just help me out here... I... I... can't breathe p-p-properly... I'm feeling... I'm going to d-d-die if..."

The real subject can only hear the event and he cannot see the actual participant who is having the seizures.

The actual response that the experimenters will be measuring during this event is the time it will take for the subject to stand up, leave the room, look for the experimenters and ask for help.

| Bystander Apathy Experiment | |
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| <u>Dependent Variable</u> [4] | Time it takes for the participant to seek help |
| <u>Independent Variable</u> [5] | Number of participants within a discussion group |

Results of the Bystander Apathy Experiment

Only 31% of the subjects tried to seek for help. This means that most of the subjects didn't bother to look for the experimenters to help the suffering participant. Most of them were obviously anxious but the reaction was not there.

However, the significant finding of this experiment lies on the results of the first treatment condition. In a one-on-one conversation, 85% of the subjects actually asked for help. This means that if the subjects think that they are the only one who knows about the incident, there is a higher probability that they will ask for help. On the contrary, the bigger groups displayed

fewer reactions to the incident.

Analysis and Conclusion

The significantly higher percentage of subjects who asked for help in the first treatment condition entails that people react more if there is less number of people around an emergency or an event. On the other hand, the significantly lower percentage of subjects who helped in the other treatment conditions entails that individuals are less likely to help in an emergency when other people are present.

Two reasons were offered to explain the bystander apathy effect. First is diffusion of responsibility. This occurs when other people think that another person will intervene and as a result, they feel less responsible. The second explanation is pluralistic ignorance. This refers to the mentality that since everyone else is not reacting to the emergency; my personal help is not needed. Seeing the inaction of others will lead to the thought that the emergency is not that serious as compared to perception when he is alone.

Criticisms

- Individuals may be lead to thinking that other observers are more qualified to help. In times of medical emergencies, people might think that maybe a doctor is present in the scene and the patient will be better off with the help of the doctor.
- Some people may be too self-conscious that they don't want to give off negative images to other bystanders. For them to avoid this occurrence, these individuals simply do not respond to the emergency.
- Fears associated to perception can also be an explanation of bystander effect. Such fears include being outranked by a superior helper, or being rejected when offering one's help, or having to deal with legal consequences of offering inferior or even worsening assistance.

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