

THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

Introduction

The Bystander Effect is a social psychological theory that explains why people are less likely to offer help to a victim in the presence of others. The first reported incidence cited as an example of the bystander effect occurred on March 13, 1964. Kitty Genovese was brutally stabbed to death in the presence of many of her neighbors. After work at about 2:30 a.m., Genovese drove home to her apartment. As she parked her car and began to walk towards the front door, a man named Winston Moseley got out of his car, ran towards her, and stabbed her twice in the back with a hunting knife. One of Genovese's neighbors saw the struggle and called out, "Leave that girl alone." Moseley returned to his car, but came back a few minutes later. By this time, Genovese had dragged herself closer to her apartment door where Moseley raped and repeatedly stabbed her. Reportedly, 38 neighbors were awakened by her screams. More than a dozen neighbors saw her murder. Two called the police. No one tried to help as the crime occurred.

Diffusion of Responsibility

To understand the Bystander Effect, psychologists have done many studies since the Genovese murder and have come up with several reasons that explain the inability of an individual to get involved and help in a critical situation. Diffusion of responsibility is one explanation. *Diffusion of responsibility* occurs when we are less likely to take responsibility for our actions or inactions when other bystanders are present. We assume that others who are present will be responsible and help someone in need. We feel less of a need to act when we know there are others who are also watching the situation. Another important thing to know about diffusion of responsibility is that it is more likely to occur when the bystanders who witness a crime do not know the victim. If we do not know the person who is in need, we will be less likely to help them.

Social Influence

Another factor is *social influence*. As a species, we are invested in what other people think of us. So, this factor may influence how likely people are to get involved. If we are with others who know us, we may feel forced to act to maintain their goodwill. When we are anonymous, we may not help others because we want to avoid drawing attention to ourselves. Also, we may fear that we are being judged by our actions, and we want to be judged positively, so we choose not to act on the chance that we might be interfering where it is not our business. This fear of being judged increases when people are strangers.

Intimidation

A third factor is intimidation. Whether we want to admit it or not, intimidation plays a role in our social interactions every day. Some people present themselves as physically threatening; others are intimidating because of their size, personality, intellect, wealth, or social status. This phenomenon can carry real risks since the feeling of being threatened can trigger a fight-or-flight response just as any other perceived threat does. *Intimidation* factors into the Bystander Effect when we are afraid to act for fear that someone or something might seek revenge or cause us harm. People who are easily

intimidated, especially those for whom self-esteem is a challenge, may find their behavior changing for reasons they do not always realize. Even the most seemingly secure people can feel threatened sometimes.

Empathy

A quality that is largely human is that of empathy. *Empathy* is the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of another. It is empathy that can override the Bystander Effect and result in an “upstander” response, in which a person helps someone in need despite the risks they may face. We are mostly social creatures with a habit of caring about others for their sakes, not our own. Empathy results in selfless motivation; something that all people have the ability to perform. We may put ourselves in the victim’s place and act out of a desire to make sure a similar act does not occur in our lives.

Social Media and the Bystander Effect

The popularity of social media has significantly affected the Bystander Effect and sadly not in a good way. Witnesses to crimes have often found it more important to record those events by uploading their photos and videos to TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social media platforms, rather than get involved in the situation. It seems that the thrill of recording these crimes or conflicts fulfills our need for attention. Peer approval is a major factor in adolescent behavior. In August 2012, a girl who went to a high school in Steubenville, Ohio, was sexually assaulted while impaired by alcohol. As the crime occurred, several boys were filming and laughing about the situation. Those videos and photos were then posted on a few social media platforms. Social media is a central part of young people’s lives, friendships, and relationships. It can provide a sense of community, connection, and voice. Posting videos or photos of crimes on social media may give a bystander the attention that they want, but it endangers the wellbeing of the victims involved.

Conclusion

As the world around us continues to change and grow, it is becoming easier for us to disconnect from others. While we like to think that we are good people, we assume that if we were to see a crime that we would attempt to stop it or, at the very least, report it to the police. But truthfully, instead of embracing a sense of community and willingly helping each other, it is just easier to videotape or photograph an event and then gain some social networking notoriety by posting it. At face value, the Bystander Effect leads us to think that refusing to act paints a picture of the world as one where people lack kindness and tolerate suffering. The knowledge of the Bystander Effect, however, can be used to make the world a better place. With this knowledge, we can have the courage to be an “upstander” by helping someone in trouble and bringing an end to the difficult situation they are facing.

Sources

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