

# LATANÉ AND DARLEY: THE UNRESPONSIVE BYSTANDER

In 1964, an event happened that frightened the nation—both for what took place, and for what did not.

Kitty Genovese is set upon by a maniac as she returns from work at 3 a.m. Thirty-eight of her neighbors in Kew Gardens [in New York City] come to their windows when she cries out in terror; none come to her assistance even though her stalker takes over half an hour to murder her. No one even so much as calls the police. She dies. (Latané & Darley, 1970, p. 2.)

*Thirty-eight witnesses* to this tragic event. And not one of them took action—not even the simple, safe action of phoning the police. How could this have happened? This was the topic of a series of experiments by Bibb Latané (rhymes with *matinee*) and John Darley.

Bibb Latané (1937–) was born in New York City. He earned his B.A. at Yale in culture and behavior in 1958, then a Ph.D. in psychology with a minor in journalism at the University of Minnesota in 1963. He taught at Columbia until 1968, then moved to Ohio State University, the University of North Carolina, and Florida Atlantic University, where he is now.

John M. Darley (1938–) was born in Minneapolis. He earned a B.A. from Swarthmore College in 1960, then an M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard in 1962 and 1965, respectively. He taught at New York University from 1964 to 1968, then moved to Princeton, where he has remained.

After the murder of Kitty Genovese, many explanations for the “apathy” of the onlookers were put forward. It was suggested that large cities, and the anonymity that goes with them, had led to alienation—people no longer felt like part of a group, and hence responsible for each other. Or perhaps people were so fearful that they hid from disaster. Or perhaps the pace of modern city life so overwhelms

us—“information overload”—that we simply tune out even the most acute emergencies.

Latané and Darley found these explanations unconvincing. In the first place, interviews with these eyewitnesses revealed that they had not felt at all apathetic, alienated, or tuned out. They were horrified at what they were witnessing—and *still* they took no action. Second, the fact is that we do sometimes help each other, even at great risk. We are not always apathetic or indifferent. Rather, it seems that we act that way under some conditions, but not under others.

So the question is, What are these conditions? What conditions promote helping in an emergency, and what conditions discourage it—and why?

Maybe the crucial difference between action and apathy is not within ourselves, but in the *situation*. And it might have to do, not with our feelings or motives, but with our thoughts—with how we *interpret* the situation. Thus:

When only one bystander is present in an emergency situation, if help is to be given it must be he who gives it. The situation is not so clear when a crowd of bystanders are present. Then the responsibility for intervention is diffused among the bystanders and focuses on no single one. In these circumstances, each person may feel less responsibility to help the victim. “Why me?” he can say. (Latané & Darley, 1970, p. 157)

In other words, if there is a crowd of onlookers, maybe no one is likely to help—*because* there is a crowd of onlookers! Precisely because there are so many, no one of them may take responsibility for action. Each one may wait upon the others, with the result that no one offers help.

Latané and Darley tested that idea in a classic series of experiments. Their question was just this: If a person witnessed an emergency, would the presence of other onlookers make him or her less likely to offer help? The answer, time after time, was yes.

In one such experiment, a male college student was sitting in a waiting room. He was waiting to participate in an experiment, or so he thought; he did not know that he was already in one. Then an emergency was staged: from a vent in the wall, smoke began to pour into the room. Would the participant leave the waiting room to report the “emergency,” or otherwise offer help?

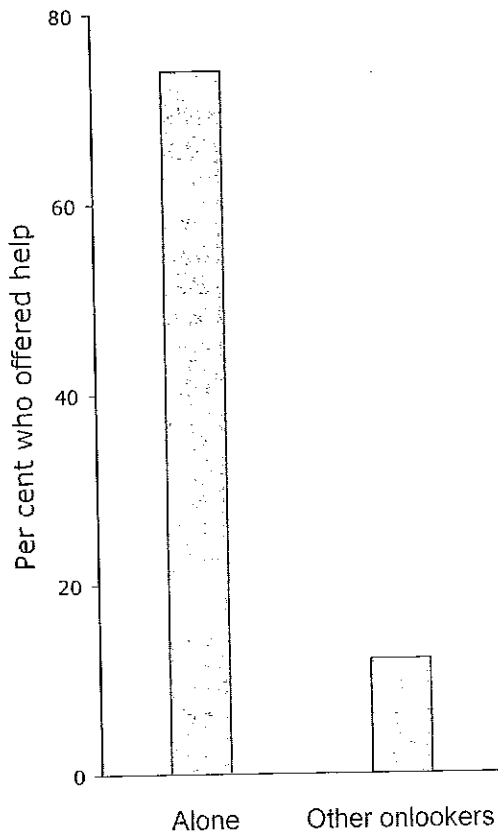
In one experimental condition, each participant was in the room by himself when the smoke came. When the “emergency” occurred, only he could report it; if he did not, no one would. In the other condition, the subjects were waiting in groups of three. This would allow *diffusion of responsibility* to occur. Each person could ask himself, “Should I take action, or will one of these others do it instead?” If he asked himself that question, he might be less likely to do anything.

Sure enough, fewer subjects took any action, and those who did took longer to act, in the grouped condition.

In their book, the authors report several other experiments like this, with different kinds of emergencies, and the findings remained the same: the mere presence of multiple bystanders made it less likely that any of them would offer help. Moreover, it did indeed depend on how the bystander *interprets* the situation. Further experiments showed that if the bystander *believes* other people are around, even if they are not, that is enough! He or she is less likely to offer help (Darley & Latané, 1968).

Figure 59.1

Results of a bystander-intervention experiment. The presence of other onlookers made it much less likely that a participant would offer help in an emergency.



Source: From *Psychological Research: The Ideas behind the Methods* by Douglas G. Mook. Copyright 2001 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Now, these experiments, it is true, were conducted in an artificial laboratory situation. Would the same sort of thing happen in a natural situation? To find out, Latané and Darley staged some of their experiments in natural settings—in one case, for example, a liquor store.

This experiment was worked out in advance with the proprietor of the store, who agreed to help the experimenters stage an apparent emergency: two men stealing a case of beer while the proprietor's back was turned.

The participants in this experiment were real liquor-store customers, who had no idea that they were in an experiment. The "crimes" were staged sometimes

when only one real customer was present, and sometimes when there were two real customers, so again there were two experimental conditions: waiting alone, and waiting with another person. Then the question was whether the real customer(s) would report the theft to the proprietor when he came back.

(Here, by the way, we see one great advantage of experiments: they make things happen at will, so we don't have to wait for the right events to happen naturally. The liquor-store "emergency" was made to happen 96 times in a single week!)

The results were quite consistent with the earlier, smoke-filled-room study. If only one real customer was present, the chances were that he or she would report the theft. But when there were two, it was less likely that *either one* would report it. The multiple-onlooker effect showed up again.

Further follow-up research showed that there are limits to the multiple-onlooker effect. If, for instance, one member of a group has some special expertise that is relevant to the emergency, then it is likely that he or she will take action even if other onlookers are present. Then again, that situation probably occurs only in a minority of real-life emergencies.

The authors sum up the implications of their studies as follows:

"There's safety in numbers" according to an old adage, and modern city dwellers seem to believe it . . . It may be that people are less likely to find themselves in trouble if there are others present. But if a person does find himself in trouble, safety in numbers may be illusory . . . In fact, the opposite seems to be true. A victim may be more likely to get help or an emergency to be reported, the fewer people who are available to take action. (Latané & Darley, 1970, p. 156)

We say that there is "safety in numbers," and intuitively it seems obvious that this should be so. The more people are around, the more likely it should be that *someone* will intervene. But it appears that our intuition is wrong.

These experiments tell us something more as well. When such a tragedy as the murder of Kitty Genovese occurs, the standard explanations of failures to help will speak about such things as alienation, apathy, indifference, and similar personality characteristics thought to be produced by modern city environments. But in the smoke experiment, subjects were assigned *at random* to wait alone, or to wait with others. Therefore, each group of subjects should have contained about equal numbers of alienated, apathetic, and indifferent people. Still, the two groups behaved very differently. Therefore, it was not the participants' personal characteristics, but the *presence of other onlookers* that made participants so much less likely to help if they were in a group. The external social situation was a much more powerful influence than internal personal or personality factors. Moreover, in some of their studies, Latané and his coworkers measured a whole series of personality variables to see if there were differences between people who helped and people who did not. No such differences were found.

Finally, this research bears on a more general issue. The findings challenge the "safety in numbers" prediction, yes. But they also take their place along with many other findings to suggest a more general conclusion: external, situational factors can be much more powerful influences on our actions than internal personality factors are. We tend to believe the opposite—that a person tends to act as he or she does because he or she is "that kind of person." That may sometimes be true. But

the bystander effect, and many other findings, suggest that we should not be too quick to jump to that conclusion. The *situation* can be a powerful influence on the way we behave, and we discount it at our peril.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Aronson, E. (1999). *The social animal* (8th ed.). New York: Worth Publishers.
- Aronson, E., Wilson, T. D., & Akert, R. M. (1994). *Social psychology: The heart and the mind*. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers.
- Darley, J., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8, 377–383.
- Latané, B., & Darley, J. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Latané, B., & Rodin, J. (1969). A lady in distress: Inhibiting effects of friends and strangers on bystander intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 5(2), 189–202.