

A Study of the Bystander Effect in Different Helping Situations

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Objective. *Explore the presence of the bystander effect in both general situations and emergency situations.*

Background. *The bystander effect, a classic discovery in social psychology, has attracted significant attention in recent years due to instances of bystander indifference in society. This phenomenon raises the question of whether the bystander effect occurs not only in general situations where help is needed but also in emergency situations.*

Study design. *The study uses empirical research to investigate the existence of the bystander effect in general and emergency situations.*

Participants. *Chinese sample: 200 people (university students from Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications, and Xi'an International Studies University in China) from 18 to 28 years old ($M = 23,50$; $SD = 4,15$).*

Measurements. *The used scenarios are based on McGuire's (1994) taxonomy of helping behaviors.*

Results. *The results indicate that the bystander effect is present in general helping situations, but not in emergency scenarios.*

Conclusions. *This means that individuals are more likely to exhibit bystander behavior when encountering a situation where assistance is needed but not urgent. However, in emergency situations, the bystander effect does not seem to influence individuals' willingness to help.*

Keywords: *bystander effect; general scenarios; emergency scenarios; responsibility attribution.*

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Исследование эффекта стороннего наблюдателя в различных ситуациях оказания помощи

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Цель. Исследовать наличие эффекта стороннего наблюдателя как в общих, так и в чрезвычайных ситуациях.

Контекст и актуальность. Эффект стороннего наблюдателя, классическое открытие в социальной психологии, в последние годы стал объектом пристального внимания в связи со случаями равнодушия сторонних наблюдателей в обществе. Это явление ставит вопрос о том, возникает ли эффект стороннего наблюдателя не только в общих ситуациях, когда требуется помощь, но и в чрезвычайных ситуациях.

Дизайн исследования. В исследовании используются эмпирические методы для изучения существования эффекта стороннего наблюдателя в общих и чрезвычайных ситуациях.

Участники. Китайская выборка: 200 человек (студенты Шэньскийского педагогического университета, Сианьского университета почты и телекоммуникаций, Сианьского интернационального университета в Китае) в возрасте от 18 до 28 лет ($M = 23,50$; $SD = 4,15$).

Методы (инструменты). Используемые сценарии основаны на таксономии помогающего поведения Макгуайра (1994).

Результаты. Результаты показывают, что эффект стороннего наблюдателя проявляется в ситуациях оказания помощи в целом, но не в чрезвычайных ситуациях.

Основные выводы. Люди с большей вероятностью будут вести себя как сторонние наблюдатели, когда сталкиваются с ситуацией, когда помощь необходима, но не является срочной. Однако в чрезвычайных ситуациях эффект стороннего наблюдателя, похоже, не влияет на готовность людей помочь.

Ключевые слова: эффект стороннего наблюдателя; общие ситуации; чрезвычайные ситуации; распределение ответственности.

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Introduction

The bystander effect is a social psychological phenomenon that has long captured the attention of researchers and the public.

It refers to the tendency of individuals to be less likely to help others in emergency situations when there are other people around. Despite this fact, circumstances where by-

standers do not intervene to assist others remain a persistent and tragic aspect of modern life.

The social phenomena known as the “bystander effect,” which was originally observed in the 1960s, happens when people are too distracted by other people to act when an emergency arises. Numerous research endeavors have endeavored to comprehend the origins of this phenomenon and pinpoint elements that may stimulate bystander involvement. Notable incidents of bystander inactivity in recent years have drawn more attention to the subject. One of the most famous cases of the bystander effect is the Kitty Genovese murder in New York City in 1964, where 38 bystanders did not intervene while she was being assaulted and fatally stabbed [5]. The episode brought critical questions about human behavior and compassion to light and attracted a lot of media attention. Subsequently, an extensive amount of study has been carried out to examine the consequences of the bystander effect.

Since its discovery in the 1960s, the bystander effect has been thoroughly investigated, with experts looking into its causes and possible remedies [14]. The bystander effect and its effects on people in emergency situations have been the subject of numerous research that have attempted to determine the contributing variables. Research has demonstrated that having additional people around can reduce the possibility that someone will intervene, which could have hazardous repercussions in an emergency [5; 7]. But studies have also shown that variables like the perceived seriousness of the emergency and the onlookers’ proximity to the victim might lessen the bystander effect [1; 14]. Suhaimi and Rahman (2015) conducted a study that looked into the variables influencing bystander behavior in Malaysian traffic accidents [23].

According to the study, when spectators believed there was little danger to their own safety, they were more likely to witness the victim suffering serious injuries. These results imply that the bystander effect can differ depending on the setting and that bystander behavior can be influenced by situation-specific factors. The effect of social identification on the bystander effect was the subject of another study [15]. According to the study, people who strongly associated with a social group were more inclined to step in to help a victim who also belonged to that group in an emergency. These results imply that social identity can affect the bystander effect and that the victim-bystander relationship can affect how the bystander behaves during an intervention. Moreover, a recent Malaysian story emphasizes the consequences of the bystander effect; during the COVID-19 outbreak, an elderly woman passed away at home alone, and her neighbors did nothing because of social distancing protocols [18].

Despite the wealth of existing research on the bystander effect, there is still much to learn about the circumstances in which it does and does not occur. This gap creates an opportunity to investigate the phenomenon in various situations further, exploring nuances that have not previously been fully explored. Therefore, our study aims to address this gap by investigating the bystander effect across different helping scenarios. By doing so, hope to gain fresh insights into how different situations impact the behavior of bystanders.

Our goal in this study is to fill in the gaps in the prior research by looking into the bystander effect in different assisting scenarios. The purpose of the study is to identify the situations in which people are more inclined to assist or not. This subject is crucial because it provides understanding of the social psychology of various situations, which

is helpful in boosting bystanders' readiness to step in. The study's conclusions can be applied to enhance social interventions that motivate individuals to lend a hand to one another in times of need, particularly during difficult and contentious situations. In the end, we hope that this research will contribute to a decrease in the annual number of tragedies caused by the bystander effect.

Methods

Participants. Chinese sample: 200 people (university students from Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications, and Xi'an International Studies University in China) from 18 to 28 years old ($M = 23,50$; $SD = 4,15$). This selection of participants is justified as college students are a relevant population to study the bystander effect due to their presence in situations where it often occurs. Additionally, their unique stage of life, characterized by identity formation and social relationships, may influence their willingness to intervene. Choosing students from these three universities allows for a comprehensive examination of the bystander effect among college students and its potential universality.

Research Design. We employed a 2×2 mixed-design experimental approach. The presence or absence of others, which we manipulated as either "presence" or "absence." The type of situations that helping behavior was treated as a within-subject factor and categorized as "general" or "emergency." Participants were randomly assigned toughest conditions, where each participant faced only one situation with or without the presence of others. To further explore the role of situations, participants were categorized into two groups based on their subjective attributions: external attributions and internal attributions. These attributions were assessed based on participants' own percep-

tions of the causes of events or situations. The dependent variable (DV) was helping behavior, which served as an indicator of the bystander effect. The Helping Behavior Scale is a 7-point Likert scale (totally unwilling to totally willing).

After reading each scenario, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire comprising three items related to perceived responsibility and three items measuring behavioral reactions. Perceived responsibility was assessed by respondents to rate the controllability of the cause of the stranger's plight, the degree of responsibility the stranger bears for their situation, and whether they considered it the stranger's fault. These items aimed to capture participants' perception of the stranger's responsibility for their predicament. Behavioral reactions were measured using three items that gauged participants' likelihood of helping the stranger, the importance they attributed to helping, and their certainty in providing assistance. All items were rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 7 (entirely), allowing participants to express the extent of their agreement or endorsement for each item.

Scenarios. In the general scenarios, participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which a stranger approached and asked to borrow a book to study for an exam. Importantly, it was emphasized that participants did not currently need the book themselves. This specific context was used to examine participants' perceived responsibility and behavioral responses in situations where borrowing a book would not inconvenience them.

In the emergency scenarios, based on Greitemeyer et al. [8], participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which they were waiting at a train station and could clearly see a train approaching the station. Suddenly, a stranger fell on the rails. The purpose of this

situation is to examine the participant's sense of responsibility and behavioral responses in critical and life-or-death emergencies requiring immediate assistance.

Each scenario presented participants with two situations. In the first situation, participants were informed that there were no other pedestrians in the vicinity except for themselves. In the second situation, it was mentioned that there were many pedestrians in the vicinity. Importantly, each participant experienced one of these conditions, ensuring that they faced either a situation with no other pedestrians nearby or one with several pedestrians except for themselves. This design allowed for a comparison of participants' responses based on the presence or absence of others in the specific context of the scenario.

Results

The data were analyzed with a 2 (external vs. internal) x 2 (presence vs. absence) x 2 (general vs. emergency) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with ratings of help as the dependent variable.

Effects of independent variables on helping behavior

The analysis of the data yielded a significant main effect for responsibility attribution, $F(1,198) = 24,70; p < 0,001$. Consistent with attribution theorists' predictions, participants demonstrated a greater willingness to help individuals who were not seen as responsible for predicament compared to those needing assistance due to controllable factors. This finding aligns with the notion that individuals are more inclined to provide aid when they perceive the individual's situation as beyond their control, suggesting a potential role of responsibility attribution in influencing helping behavior.

The presence or absence of others also yielded a significant main effect,

$F(1,198) = 151,55; p < 0,001$. This finding aligns with the predictions of the bystander effect, as demonstrated a higher willingness to help when there were no other individuals present compared to when others were in the vicinity. These results suggest that the presence of others can have a suppressing effect on inclination to provide assistance, supporting the notion of reduced responsibility diffusion in situations with fewer bystanders.

The type of situations significantly influenced helping behavior, $F(1,198) = 35,18; p < 0,001$. Participants exhibited a greater willingness to help in life-or-death emergency situations compared to general situations. This finding indicates that the urgency and severity of the situation have a substantial impact on individuals' propensity to provide assistance, with a heightened response observed in critical emergency scenarios.

Effect of situation type and others presence or absence on responsibility attribution

The results of the ANOVA analysis showed that the participants' attributions of responsibility were significantly impacted by the presence or absence of individuals ($F(1) = 415,63; p < 0,001$). This research suggests that people's propensity to assign internal causes to events and results is strongly influenced by other people's presence. Specifically, when there are other people present, individuals are more likely to attribute responsibility to factors within themselves rather than external circumstances. The significant main effect of the presence or absence of others implies that the presence of individuals does play a significant role in influencing an individual's attribution of responsibility.

In contrast, the effect of the situation type on participants' attributions of responsibility was found to be non-significant, as indicated by the $F(1) = 1,94; p = 0,077$. This

suggests that the specific type of situation did not significantly impact individuals' tendency to attribute responsibility. These results imply that people's perceptions of responsibility are more strongly influenced by the social context than by the particular sort of circumstance.

Effects of responsibility attribution, others presence or absence and situation type on Helping Behavior

Additionally, a significant interaction between Situation Type and Responsibility Attribution was found by ANOVA analysis ($F(1,198) = 10,75; p < 0,001$). Further analysis of the simple effects indicated that in general situations, participants were more inclined to help external attributions persons compared to internal attributions individuals, showing a significant difference, $F(1) = 61,41; p < 0,001; r = 0,80$. However, in emergency situations, no differences in helping behavior were observed between individuals attributed to external or internal, $F(1) = 1,39, p = 0,227; r = 0,08$. This implies that different conditions have different effects of responsibility attribution on helping behavior, with general situations showing a stronger distinction between responsibility categories than emergency situations.

An important interaction between Others Presence or Absence and Situation Type was found by the ANOVA analysis, $F(1,198) = 35,18; p < 0,001$. For every scenario, simple effect analyses were carried out in order to learn more about this relationship. The findings showed that in general helping scenarios, with no other bystanders present, participants were more likely to offer aid ($F(1) = 288,65, p < 0,001; r = 0,75$). On the other hand, under emergency circumstances, participants' answers were invariant to the presence of additional participants ($F(1) = 1,39; p = 0,242;$

$r = 0,01$). This implies that rather than in crucial and urgent situations, the impact of bystanders on helpful conduct may be more significant in informal contexts.

The interaction between Responsibility Attribution, Situation Type, and Others Presence or Absence was not determined to be significant, according to the ANOVA analysis's results ($F(1,198) = 1,40; p = 0,160$). This suggests that there was no evidence found in the study to support an interaction relationship among Others' Presence or Absence, Situation Type, and Responsibility Attribution.

Discussion

Responsibility attribution and bystander effect

Others' presence can have a significant impact on how much responsibility a person assigns to a certain occurrence or result. In particular, it seems that people tend to attribute the reason of an event or outcome internally when others are around, but external attributions may be more common when no one else is. This has consequences for our comprehension of how social context influences people's attributions and, eventually, how they behave. Put another way, people are less likely to intervene while others are around when events are internally attributed, which increases the likelihood of the bystander effect. On the other hand, people are more willing to help when events have an external attribution. The study's findings support the idea that helpful behavior is influenced by responsibility attributions and that situational conditions have an effect on how people respond to requests for help.

The bystander effect in different helping scenarios

We know that there are all aspects of the bystander effect, among which the helping

scenario is also one of the main factors affecting the bystander effect.

The bystander effect's prediction is somewhat supported by the study's findings. When no one else was around, people were more inclined to help in general assisting circumstances. In line with the idea of the bystander effect, on the other hand, the presence of bystanders decreased the tendency to assist. The dispersion of responsibility theory, which holds that people feel less personally responsible to assist when others are around, explains this phenomena. Nonetheless, the bystander effect had a negligible impact on people's intentions to help in emergency situations. This implies that when analyzing scenarios having life-or-death consequences, the bystander effect can have less explanatory ability. The results suggest that the bystander effect theory may not fully account for the complexity of emergency circumstances, and so cannot be used alone to forecast people's readiness to assist.

The study's conclusions imply that the bystander effect theory may change based on the circumstances, especially when considering situations with urgent and crucial

consequences. It seems possible that the curve characterizing the bystander effect's occurrence is inverted U-shaped. Put another way, people are more likely to provide assistance in ordinary situations and the likelihood of the bystander effect is quite low. The bystander effect steadily increases as circumstances get more neutral or unclear, which lowers people's inclination for helping. The aid curve does, however, grow once more in emergency scenarios, suggesting that people are capable of overcoming the bystander effect and attending to urgent requirements for assistance.

Future research should make use of a more precise cost metric in order to investigate this pattern more thoroughly and validate the anticipated inverted U-shaped curve. This would allow researchers to assess the perceived costs associated with providing help in different situations and examine how these costs influence the willingness to help. By integrating a comprehensive analysis of cost and examining various scenarios along the severity spectrum, a more nuanced understanding of the bystander effect can be developed.

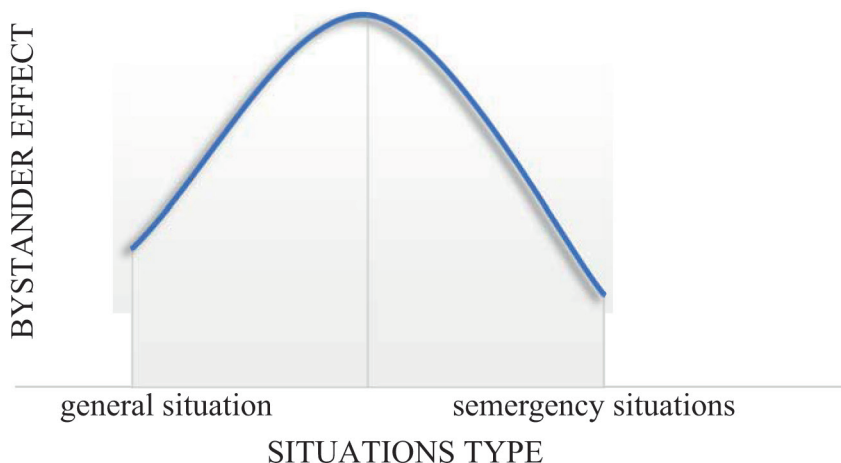


Fig. Curve of bystander effect in different helping situations

Conclusions

The present study offers valuable insights into the intricate interplay of situational and personal factors that influence an individual's inclination to assist others in diverse contexts. One of the main findings posits that attribution theory may possess limited explanatory power in emergency aid situations. In these circumstances, individuals may exhibit heightened motivation to provide assistance owing to the urgency and gravity of the situation, resulting in the potential overshadowing of any perceived diffusion of responsibility stemming from the presence of other bystanders.

Furthermore, the presence of additional onlookers exerts a significant impact on an individual's proclivity to offer help. The bystander effect, a well-established phenomenon, denotes that individuals are less

inclined to extend aid when others are present, particularly in impromptu aid scenarios. This pattern can be partially attributed to the diffusion of responsibility and the diminished sense of personal obligation that individuals experience when in the company of others. However, the findings of the current research suggest that the influence of the bystander effect on individuals' willingness to provide aid may be attenuated in emergency situations.

It is important to underscore the study's focus on emergency aid situations, as the applicability of these findings to other contexts, such as non-emergency or casual scenarios, may differ. Nevertheless, this research underscores the complexity inherent in the interplay between situational and personal factors when it comes to determining an individual's propensity to assist others across various circumstances.

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