

## **Journal Critique**

### ***When Will People Help in a Crisis?***

This article explores the phenomenon that occurs when people observe someone in distress. Four cases are described where people were in serious danger, yet multiple bystanders failed to respond in any way. Researchers proposed that the more people who watch a person's distress, the less likely the victim will be to get help. The reason for this is because there are strong social factors influencing a person's decision making. In order for a person to intervene, they must notice that something is happening, interpret that event as an emergency, and decide that he has personal responsibility for intervention. Noticing something can be difficult enough in a society where we are taught that a person's privacy should be respected. An experiment confirmed this idea, where students were told to fill out a questionnaire. While doing so, smoke was released into the room. People in groups were much less likely to notice or do anything about the smoke, for the fear of being different or standing out. Determining whether a situation is an emergency can be difficult if no one else is reacting. If multiple people witness an emergency and do nothing, the individual will be less likely to see it as an emergency, giving them no reason to react. Unfortunately, this can lead to false assumptions. Also, the presence of others allows for diffused responsibility. If a person can place the blame on someone else, they feel less obligated to help. In another experiment, an individual was led to believe that someone in another room was having a seizure. 85% of people who believed they were alone in the experiment went to help, while only 31% of people who believed there were four others taking part in the experiment reacted. This phenomenon does not occur because of apathy, as subjects showed clear signs of emotional distress after the situations. Instead they are in a state of conflict about whether to respond or not. There are powerful social influences at work, but ultimately it is our own decision as to whether or not we react.

The methodology in the experiments discussed in the article is not deeply described, but overall they seem well performed. Most experiments, such as the woman hurting her ankle and the man having a seizure, were carried out consistently through the use of tape recordings, and variations were performed with different size groups in order to have sufficient data to draw conclusions from. It is very difficult to control all confounding variables in a social experiment, but assuming a sufficient amount of data was collected, the basic statistic of whether or not a person reacted is pretty straightforward to measure. The researchers approached their findings without bias and used their results to try and interpret and explain a social phenomenon. While these findings are a good start for explaining how the presence of others influences behavior, I think researchers could continue to dig deeper in order to explain why people feel so bound by this social influence.

One thing I found interesting was the idea that we live in an apathetic, cold society. When I read the situations at the beginning of the article, I had the same initial reaction. However, once the article went on to show that it is not apathy but a state of conflict that truly influences people emotionally, I realized that this was true. I remember one time when I was going to the store with my brother, we saw a man walking who slipped while crossing the street and fell onto the ground. At first we didn't really know what to do. I felt bad, but there were other people around who saw it and I didn't want to be the one to go over. Finally, a woman went over and asked him if he was ok and needed any help. Looking back, it seems stupid that I didn't want to do anything, but once this woman went to help him I immediately felt better. I saw that he had help and no longer felt responsible. It is defiantly not apathy causing our inaction, but it is interesting to see the powerful influence that a feeling of responsibility can have on a person's actions and emotions.

Something else I found interesting was the proposition at the end of the article: “We can choose to see distress and step forward to relieve it.” After reading through all the experiments and all the reasons why people don’t respond, I almost forgot that there are no unstoppable social forces at play in these situations preventing us from doing anything. If a person is willing to ignore the feeling of social discomfort, there is no reason why a person in distress should remain without help. The influence of others often seems so strong that we forget that the situation is an easy fix.

Because of how profoundly influenced we are by others, this is a very important subject in the field of psychology. A phenomenon that ignores all logic and general moral standards warrants in depth research. Anything that helps us better understand why people behave the way they do tells us something about how the human mind works and how thought processes influence our behavior. Social psychology topics can often be the most fascinating yet also the most mysterious. By beginning to better understand topics like the bystander effect, we can come closer to reaching the root of racism, sexism, and other illogical prejudices that plague our society. Any findings that could help lead us away from these thought processes would be a step in the right direction.