

The Bystander Effect

Through the following essay, I will aim to describe the Bystander effect and its origin in social psychology, why it was a factor in the maintenance of the Nazi Regime, what factors might make a bystander a helper and why ultimately it is impossible to predict who will intervene first.

The bystander effect describes the phenomenon whereby the larger the number of witnesses there are to an emergency or injustice, the less likely any one person is to help. It is believed that research into this effect stems from the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese, on which the New York Times reported that there were thirty-eight eyewitnesses to the murder, none of them calling the police (Gansberg in New York Times, 1964). The very power of social influence and group membership inhibited each individual's ability to properly register the emergency and take responsibility. Although discrepancies have been found in the article since its publication, the research that has come out of investigation into the murder and the associated effect has shown that the bystander effect is a very strong indicator of behaviour when action is required.

One experiment which demonstrates the power of the bystander effect is Latane and Darley's "Where's There's Smoke, There's (Sometimes) Fire" (Latané et al, 1969: 250). A student is placed alone in a room and invited to fill out a form about their experience at Columbia University, and after two pages, white smoke is gradually pumped into the room until eventually visibility and breathability is greatly hindered. Within three minutes, 75% of participants (18/24) reported the smoke. When the experiment was repeated with two experimenters posing as students who pretended not notice the smoke, this figure reduced to 38%. Shockingly however, when the experiment was repeated again, this time with the two planted 'students' noticing the smoke but choosing not to act, only 10% of students reported the smoke. Instead, they coughed, waved the smoke from their face and opened windows, but crucially did not stray away from the assumed group norm of not reporting – showing clearly how the presence of others significantly hinders one's ability to intervene when it is required. The bystander effect, as demonstrated here, consists of three associated effects. "Audience inhibition" – the more witnesses there are to an emergency with nobody acting the greater the belief that there is no emergency at all, "evaluation apprehension" – the fear of being labelled an 'overreactor' for intervening, and "diffusion of responsibility" – the belief that there is another bystander more equipped to help (Latané et al, 1970). The strength of the combined impact of these effects is why in many emergency situations, such as the murder of Kitty Genovese, nobody extends help at all.

More specifically, as argued by Renteln exploring the ideas of Esquith, the bystander effect contributed to the maintenance of the Nazi Regime. This is because bystanding had "adverse consequences" (Esquith cited in Renteln, 2012: 664) in that it allowed the perpetuation of the wider atmosphere which normalised attitudes like anti-Semitism in Germany. This lack of resistance to the regime and help for Jewish victims implied tacit consent, in turn legitimising the policies of the Nazi Party. This is also true of modern governments. When there is a lack of resistance to policy change, the government has little reason to believe the policy is unpopular and will continue to implement policy which supports that agenda. Thus, the effect of

bystanding meant that the gradual worsening of anti-Semitic policy was tolerated, until it was too late to go back on what this atmosphere had created – the ‘Final Solution’ to the ‘Jewish problem’. Latane and Darley also support this notion that bystanding perpetuates an atmosphere which causes further harm in emergency situations (Latané et al, 1969). If it is not dealt with immediately, “the threat will transform itself into damage; the harm will continue or spread” (Latané et al, 1969: 246). Furthermore, Bauman, Geras and Novick argue that the levels of bystanding experienced in Nazi German society had a large psychological impact on Jewish victims. Bauman discusses the “dead silence of unconcern” (Bauman, 2000: 74) and how bystanding signals to victims that nobody cares about their plight. As Helen Bamber (Founder of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture) puts it, “nothing saps people more than the fact that nobody cares” (Bamber in Geras, 1999: 50). Novick further argues that bystanding to the injustice of Nazi anti-Semitism was not a problem exclusively found in Germany. In fact, Western powers on a global level contributed to Jewish victims’ feelings of abandonment. The US for example passed a collection of anti-refugee and anti-immigration bills throughout the twenties and thirties, which further signalled to Jews in Europe that there was a lack of care for their suffering (Novick, 1999: 48).

Latané and Darley, in 1970, conceptualised a five-step process through which a bystander becomes a helper (Latané et al, 1970). First, the individual must perceive the danger, then interpret the situation as an emergency, then take responsibility, then select a form of help and finally implement the help itself. As we have seen already however, there are hinderances at every step to the individual’s ability to help when surrounded by other bystanders. Importantly, in the presence of other bystanders, most individuals will not get past stage one or two – as they will fail to register the situation as one which requires intervention, or even notice it in the first place. Even if they do interpret the situation as an emergency, they are likely to diffuse responsibility to someone who they believe is better suited. The question remains then, what factors might make a bystander more likely to become a helper?

Through investigation into over seven hundred individuals who chose to help victims of Nazi persecution, Samuel Oliner – a child survivor of the Holocaust, concludes that there is an ‘altruistic personality’ type which makes certain people more inclined to extend help when it is required (Oliner, 1988). This is convincing as due to their inclination to help others, they would be more likely to perceive the threat accurately, less likely to care about being labelled an ‘overreactor’ and are ultimately more likely to take responsibility. Arguably it is the fact that those with ‘the altruistic personality’ are more likely to take responsibility, which is most significant, as this is the last grip the bystander effect holds on someone who has accurately perceived a situation which requires intervention. The cost of helping always outweighs inaction, in time, resources and risk, and so the ‘altruistic personality’ could be an effective explanation as to why some individuals are less likely to diffuse responsibility.

Damningly however, through extensive interviews on morality with thirteen European rescuers, Monroe has found that there is no ‘type’ of person who is more likely to help (Monroe, 1990). He measured the results of these interviews against the results of interviews with a ‘baseline’ group of European bystanders in occupied Europe, and found “baseline samples would rank just as high as our selfless individuals on conventional measures of morality” (Monroe, 1990: 111). Furthermore, Monroe

found that helpers did not feel better about themselves after saving Jewish victims. When asked about how helping victims made her feel, one interviewee Margot responded, "nothing special" and to the question of whether it was important to her that she was the one who saved them, she replied, "no they just had to be saved" (Monroe, 1990: 110). Monroe instead argues that help in the Holocaust was purely situational, anyone could have been a helper, much like anyone could have been a bystander. The case of Oskar Schindler gives weight to this argument. Oskar Schindler saved circa 1200 victims of persecution under the Nazi Regime, but it is assumed that he did so out of self-interest. Schindler was a prominent businessman and member of the Nazi Party, and used the situation to his advantage, employing Jewish people destined for concentration camps in his factories.

Monroe's argument that help was purely situational is however weakened by his findings that many of the helpers have shown consistent patterns of 'helper' behaviour since the Holocaust. One helper for example has saved eighteen people from drowning, and another has raised several foster children (Monroe, 1990: 112). This suggests that there may be a character factor or 'psychic' utility from helping which makes these people more likely to help when it is required, giving weight to the argument that they have an 'altruistic personality'. However, as Monroe points out, this effect crucially "cannot be tested reliably" (Monroe, 1990: 112). If the helpers themselves are unable to articulate how their tendency for helping people is part of their personality, it is unfounded to assume this is why these particular individuals transitioned from bystander to helper in the context of the Holocaust. Therefore, while 'the altruistic personality' is a possible factor as to why someone may transition from bystander to helper, evidence is lacklustre.

Fischer et al. puts forward more concrete factors which might make a bystander become a helper (Fischer et al, 2011). They argue that the bystander effect is greatly diminished when the threat is visible rather than assumed, as this reduces the threshold at which an individual perceives a situation as one that requires intervention. This holds weight, as these findings are in line with Monroe's findings that many helpers were directly asked for help by Jewish victims and felt they had no choice other than to help (Monroe, 1990). Furthermore, this could explain why bystanding was such a strong phenomenon in Nazi Germany, as the most serious cases of persecution of Jews happened away from the public gaze. For example, through ghettoization and eventually concentration camps. This also addresses the "Where There's Smoke There's (Sometimes) Fire" experiment, as it could be argued that in the event of an actual fire instead of an assumed fire through smoke, the number of students who reported the emergency would have been much greater – even in the presence of others.

Fischer also suggests that bystanders are more likely to help when bystanders know each other, or at the least know of their competence (Fischer et al, 2011). This is because there is always the threat of violence or danger toward yourself when intervening in emergency situations. If you know other bystanders, you are aware that they will not be a further bystander to your suffering should you be harmed in the prevention of harm. Therefore, making you more likely to assume responsibility and enact help. Arguably, this means that bystanding will only worsen with modernisation, as more people move to cities. While Latane and Darley warn against making this jump to wider society and modernisation, they do support the notion that

the bystander effect is strongest in cities as when emergencies occur, bystanders are almost always formed of strangers (Latane et al, 1969: 267).

One experiment conducted in 2009 outside Liverpool Street Station strongly supports this suggestion (Coolpsychologist, 2009). An experimenter was placed on the steps to the entrance, entirely unresponsive apart from when he cried for help. After twenty minutes the experiment had to be called off, as not one of the dozens of passers-by stopped to help the man, or even asked if he was okay. In this example, if the man truly was suffering a medical emergency, he almost certainly would have died. A variation of the same experiment, however, does show that bystanders are more likely to lend a helping hand when they share characteristics (such as status) with the victim. When the experiment was repeated, this time with the same man in a suit, he was helped within ten seconds. One suited helper jokingly said, "it's wet, he must really be ill, otherwise he'd ruin his suit". The same experiment, however, shows that others exhibiting active reactions is still the most important factor in overcoming the bystander effect. As soon as one person responded to the suited man in need, four more quickly followed to offer assistance. This is because the costs of helping are reduced when others are also helping, as the perceived threat to one's safety is diminished and the possibility of being outcast from the social group as an overreactor is redundant.

Overall then, while there are factors which reduce the effects of being a bystander, such as the obviousness of the emergency or knowing who the other bystanders are, ultimately the most important factor which makes a bystander transition to helper still remains the presence of an initial helper. What makes the first bystander interact with the victim is still illusive. While Oliner advocates the "altruistic personality", there is little evidence to support it. Monroe's conclusion that there is no such thing as a 'helper' class is most convincing, as anybody is just as likely (or unlikely) to help others in the presence of others. It is instead the specific situation itself which harbours action or inaction, for example if a bystander is asked for help directly, or if they relate to the victim in characteristics or in experience of similar suffering. This leaves us with the tough to swallow, but accurate conclusion that if nobody else is helping, it is highly unlikely that you will either.

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