

Group Influences on the Helpfulness of Accident Witnesses

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Action that occurs in a group or social context has always held a certain fascination for students of human behavior, partly because of our many notions about the powerful forces that groups exert on the individual. Impressions of group forces derive in part from Le Bon's (1895) early account of crowd behavior, which characterized the crowd's power over the individual as control that was essentially hypnotic, resulting in extremities of behavior, from brutal cruelty to altruism. More recent analyses of group influences have been concerned with the means by which groups elicit and maintain individual conformity to goals, values, and standards shared by the group. For example, Kelman's (1961) theoretical analysis of the processes of social influence has been a significant contribution to our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of conformity phenomena.

One of the most dramatic demonstrations of individual compliance to group standards has been contributed by Asch (1951). His research showed that a significant number of individuals, when confronted with a unanimous majority whose judgment on a simple perceptual task contradicted their own, would distort their own judgment so as not to appear in contradiction with the group.

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Groups have also been found to exert considerable influence over their members in other diverse situations, e.g., in setting productivity standards among factory and office workers (Coch and French, 1948) and in shaping attitudes toward a tenants' organization in a housing project (Festinger et al., 1950).

This picture of individual compliance to the demands and expectations of the group seems to indicate that the group influence is largely detrimental, that it pressures the individual to act in a way contrary to his wishes and values. What has often been ignored is the possibility that groups might function to bring about socially valued acts, or action that is actually more congruent with an individual's values than the behavior that would have occurred in the absence of the group. Milgram (1965) has carried out a study which demonstrated that the presence of a supportive group can facilitate an individual's resistance to authoritative commands which demand the cruel punishment of an innocent third party. It might seem intuitively true that acts of altruism would be facilitated by the presence of many people, who would provide a source of approval and potential assistance for the individual who chose to relieve the distress of some innocent victim. Yet the news media have revealed an alarming number of instances where large collections of bystanders have looked on helplessly while another person was robbed, beaten, crippled by a heart attack, or even murdered. Most infamous of these instances is the case of Kitty Genovese, who was murdered in the streets of Queens, while 38 of her neighbors watched from the safety of their apartments, without intervening or even calling the police. This case led Darley and Latané (1968a, 1968b) to hypothesize that the presence of a group might have an *inhibiting*, rather than *facilitating*, effect on the altruistic impulse of the single individual. When more people are present in an emergency situation, there are more people to whom the responsibility can be diffused, hence a decreased likelihood that any single individual will personally take the responsibility for helping the victim. Darley and Latané's laboratory simulation of the Kitty Genovese situation showed that when subjects overheard an epileptic attack by another subject, they were less likely to report his plight as the number of other potential helpers increased.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The purpose of the present study was to take the assumption of an inhibitory group effect on bystander helpfulness and examine several possible mechanisms that might be responsible for the group inhibition. Darley and Latané based their "diffusion of responsibility" explanation on the decreased help-giving by individual subjects that occurred as group size increased. It is possible that other significant variations occur in addition to responsibility diffusion as group size varies, and the first aim of the present study was to make a direct test of the "diffusion of responsibility" explanation with group size held constant.

Responsibility diffusion was manipulated by varying the degree to which a target subject was the *only* bystander capable of initiating helpful intervention during an emergency. This suggests the hypothesis that an individual is more likely to offer assistance in an emergency when his fellow bystanders are incapacitated than when all bystanders are equally free to intervene. This first variable was labeled "focused versus diffuse responsibility."

In addition to diffusing the responsibility, it is possible that a group setting inhibits individual help-giving in another way. This second inhibitory mechanism is based on the premise that the crisis bystander experiences the need for a collective social reality and a confirmation of his own definition of the situation. What the social context may do is to confront the individual with fellow witnesses who fail to provide the feedback that allows the bystander to surmise that his situational assessment is shared by the other bystanders and thus is likely to be a correct reading of the situation. The lack of feedback from other bystanders, i.e., their silence and composed bearing, may occur as a result of the ambiguity and novelty of an emergency situation. Persons in such a situation are likely to hold in abeyance communication (verbalization, facial expression, and the like) of their initial perceptions and reactions until they have had some confirmation that their feelings and interpretations are shared by others in the situation rather than being some mistaken, idiosyncratic reaction which, expressed or acted upon, would prove embarrassing to the person and cause him to appear highly excitable, foolish, or the like. The inability of the individual to ascertain that there exists a mutual recognition among group members that the situation is in fact an emergency leaves him with an unstable definition of the situation that is insufficient as the grounds for action. If this explanation is correct, then we would predict that an individual faced with a distressed victim in a group context would be more likely to intervene when he receives feedback from the other bystanders which establishes the crisis as real than when there is only silence. A further hypothesis is that assistance is least likely to be offered when a "minimizing" feedback is received from the other bystanders, i.e., feedback that identifies the crisis as something less serious than what it appears to be. This leads to a second variable, "bystander communication," with the following predicted order of conditions from greatest likelihood of intervention to least: (1) communication of a crisis interpretation from the bystanders (true communication, TC, condition); (2) no communication received from the other bystanders (no communication, NC, condition); and (3) communication of a minimizing interpretation from the other bystanders (minimizing communication, MC, condition).

One direct approach to help-giving is to regard it as largely dependent on individual motivation and personality characteristics. Paradoxically, personality measures have proven to be poor predictors of helping behavior (see Darley and Latané, 1968a), the one exception being Rotter's measure of internal versus external locus of control. Midlarsky (1968) found that subjects low in fatalism,

i.e., having a sense of internal rather than external control, were more likely to give aid to other subjects who needed help in completing some problem tasks in a laboratory setting. Yet for the most part, very few personality correlates of help-giving have been found. It may be that personality correlates are too small to be detected in relation to the much larger impact of situational determinants of help-giving or that any particular personality trait has associated with it tendencies toward both aiding the victim and suppressing the urge to help, the opposite effects thus canceling each other out. To pursue the question of the relationship between helping behavior and personality variables, three scales related to social dependency and other-orientation were included in the experimental design—Edwards' (1953) scales of deference and autonomy and Allport's (1928) ascendancy-submissiveness scale. These scales were chosen because of their utility for the final hypothesis of the study—that the presence versus absence of group feedback or communication would be of greater significance for subjects high on social dependency and other-orientation. Thus we predict a significant interaction between bystander communication and the personality measures.

METHOD

Subjects

Sixty male subjects were recruited from the Harvard Summer School, ten subjects in each of the six conditions created by the 2 x 3 experimental matrix (two responsibility levels crossed with three communication levels). Subjects were paid two dollars for the sixty-minute sessions.

Procedure

Three subjects—a true subject, a confederate, and a phantom subject—were run in each session, which was described as an experiment in limited-contact group discussion. Upon arrival, subjects were placed separately in small adjacent rooms that were interconnected by intercom sets with attached headphones. The first half-hour was used for completing a background questionnaire and the personality measures. The subject was then instructed that the remainder of the experiment would be conducted via the intercom set. The three subjects were to discuss a particular topic, taking turns in a specified order. The true subject was assigned the middle position. After a certain point in the discussion, subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire that had been left with them by the experimenter, containing items which pertained to the quality of the discussion and the perception of the other participants, as well as a request for a short essay to be written as fast as possible.

As the experimenter delivered these instructions (over the intercom) he suffered what appeared to be a serious asthma attack; he had earlier made casual reference to an asthma condition when excusing a mild coughing seige. The experimenter's speech at first was only temporarily halted by a respiratory obstruction, but his condition quickly deteriorated, as choking sounds of greater severity were audible over the intercom. There was a final gasp, as the experimenter struggled to say "I-I-I . . . can't . . . seem to . . . breathe"; then there was silence. This sequence of events was accomplished by means of a tape recorder, which delivered the entire proceedings through the subject's intercom headphones. The tapes were designed with dead time at places where the subject himself was participating.

Experimental Conditions

Subjects run in the focused responsibility condition were led to believe that the other two subjects were strapped down during the session to allow for physiological recording. This was pointed out by the experimenter when the subject was placed in his room, referred to in the printed copy of the instructions each subject had at hand, and reiterated just before the experimenter began the instructions which terminated in the attack. This manipulation was simply excluded in the conditions of *diffused* responsibility.

In the *no communication* condition, nothing was heard from the other subjects at any time once the asthma attack had begun. In the *true communication* condition, at the first sign of the asthma attack, the other two subjects were heard to say (in turn, rather excitedly) "Hey, are you all right? It sounds like you're choking!" and "He sounds in serious trouble—he seems to be—" And finally, in the *minimizing communication* condition, the subject heard the other two subjects give the following remarks (in turn, somewhat casually) at the first sign of the attack—"Should we start on the questionnaire now? . . . I mean you're all right, aren't you?" and "I guess he's O.K. Sounds all right, like—"

Dependent Measures

The criterion response was whether or not the subject emerged from his room and located the experimenter to see if he needed help. To do this it was necessary for the subject to leave his own room and find the experimenter by opening the door to the small room where he was located. The latency of this response was timed. At this point the subject was assured that the experimenter had recovered and was asked to return to his room. The subject was then carefully debriefed and given a final questionnaire. It was also possible to scale the suboptimal responses, which ranged from quick peeps out from the subject's room to extended but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to find the experimenter.

After four minutes had elapsed from the start of the attack, nonintervening subjects were interrupted in their rooms and informed of the true nature of the experiment. Any feelings of guilt or resentment were carefully discussed until the subject was in a satisfactory state of mind. A final questionnaire was then administered and the subject discharged.

RESULTS

Subjects gave clear indication that the crisis was an engaging and momentous experience. This was evident in their spontaneous comments at the moment of the experimenter's attack, recorded through the intercom set—"Where are you? We'll come and help you! Where are you?"; "Do you think we should see what—"; "I'll see what's wrong with him"; and "Hey, get that guy an inhalator, fast!" Only two subjects verbally expressed doubts about the genuineness of the accident as the crisis ensued; one of these subjects solicited advice from the other two subjects as to whether they thought it was real. A problem of interpretation was presented by twelve subjects who rated themselves in a postexperiment questionnaire administered subsequent to debriefing as completely skeptical of the genuineness of the experimenter's accident. These skeptics were evenly distributed across the experimental conditions. The clear possibility that much of the skepticism was of a defensive nature, motivated by a failure to offer assistance and a subsequent need to justify one's performance, rather than genuine skepticism, precluded eliminating these subjects from the design and producing a possibly biased sample. Of the twelve self-described skeptics, eleven had failed to intervene in the crisis; only three of the twelve had gone so far as to emerge from their rooms. The situation of the subject who hears the cries of the experimenter and doubts that they are real is a genuine dilemma that is similar in many ways to the dilemma of the real-life bystander who is assailed by doubts that what he is seeing or hearing is not really a crisis, but rather something else, perhaps even a callous prank. But he must act in *spite* of his skepticism, as the experimental subject must, if there is any chance that the incident is in fact a real emergency. The dilemma of the skeptical subject was perhaps best portrayed by the introspection of one subject who remained in his room throughout the attack, and wrote the following remarks on the questionnaire that confronted him as the attack proceeded:

I am wondering if this is a put-on job, and I am the only subject. Is this part of the experiment, not seeming to breathe—I'll bet it is—if not, the other two can take care of him; am I willing to risk someone's life just to prove I'm right? I guess so—No legal obligation, of course—should I just feel stupid or guilty for the rest of my life?

Confronted with the cries of the distressed experimenter struggling for breath, 73% of all subjects responded to the extent of emerging from their

rooms. The latency time of this initial response ranged from 2 to 119 seconds, with a mean response of 40 seconds. Thus the first two minutes that elapsed after the onset of the attack appeared to be the crucial period for decision—everyone who was to emerge did so within this time period. The decision to leave his room did not guarantee that the person would undertake the task of locating the experimenter in his control room, hence intervening in the crisis. Of the 45 subjects who emerged, only 26, or 43% of all subjects, actually reached the experimenter in his room. The time that had elapsed before the experimenter was located varied from 28 to 115 seconds; the mean intervention time for intervening subjects was 74 seconds. All subjects who ultimately intervened had emerged from their rooms in the first 90 seconds after the onset of the attack. Efforts to utilize the intercom as a first response were quite common—25 of the 60 subjects, or 42%, tried communicating with the experimenter when the attack occurred, while 28% attempted communicating with the other subjects. Table 1 summarizes the behavior of subjects according to a five category continuum of action.

The diffusion of responsibility hypothesis was supported by the variation in intervention rates that occurred between focused (FR) versus diffuse (DR) responsibility conditions (see Table 2). Fifty percent of all FR subjects intervened by locating the stricken experimenter in his room, while only 37% did so when the responsibility was diffuse. Variation in bystander communication likewise had an effect on the likelihood of intervention, but in a manner quite contrary to what was expected. The highest level of intervention, 55% of all subjects, occurred in the no communication (NC) condition, while the next highest was among minimizing communication (MC) subjects, 40%, and the lowest rate of intervention, 35%, occurred where the most was expected, among true communication (TC) subjects. Table 3 summarizes the analysis of variance of the arc-sin transformed percentage intervention rates (Snedecor, 1956). Both the responsibility and communication effects were found to be marginally significant ($p < .07$, $p < .08$, two-tailed, respectively). The Snedecor model,

TABLE 1
ACTION TAKEN BY SUBJECTS

	%	n
1. Does not emerge from cubicle.	27	16
2. Emerges from cubicle, returns without locating experimenter.	15	9
3. Emerges twice from cubicle, both times returns without locating experimenter.	15	9
4. Emerges twice from cubicle, locates experimenter on second occasion.	23	14
5. Emerges from cubicle, locates experimenter.	20	12

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS LOCATING EXPERIMENTER

Communication	Responsibility		Total %
	Focused %	Diffuse %	
None	60	50	55
True	40	30	35
Minimizing	50	30	40
Total	50	37	43

NOTE: Cell percentages based on n=10.

TABLE 3
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF PERCENTAGE INTERVENTION
(transformed into arc-sins)

Source	d.f.	M.S.	F	p (two-tailed)
Responsibility	1	92.82	16.20	$p < .07$
Communication	2	74.25	12.96	$p < .08$
Error	2	5.73		
Total	5			

suitable for single-cell entries, assumes no interaction between main effects, which can only be estimated from a three-way analysis, utilizing an additional independent variable (in this case the personality measures). This analysis showed the interaction between responsibility and communication to be nonsignificant. Estimation of the significance of the differences between communication conditions (Snedecor, 1956) showed the NC-TC and NC-MC differences to be significant beyond the .05 level, while the TC-MC difference was not significant. We may conclude then that there was a marginally significant effect of responsibility on bystander intervention as predicted, and the unexpected finding of a significantly greater amount of help-giving in the absence of feedback than when feedback, of either a realistic or minimizing nature, was present.

An additional hypothesis of the study predicted an interaction between the communication variable and social dependency, on the basis that persons high in social dependency would be more influenced by the presence versus the absence of feedback. No significant interactions occurred between the communication variable and any of the three personality measures—Edward's Autonomy and Deference, and Allport's A-S. The data which showed feedback to inhibit rather

TABLE 4
MEAN SCORES ON THREE PERSONALITY SCALES:
INTERVENERS VERSUS NONINTERVENERS

Scale	Interveners	Noninterveners
Autonomy	16.6	15.5
Deference	7.9	8.2
A-S	2.1	0.2

NOTE: All interveners-noninterveners differences are nonsignificant by t-test analysis.

than to facilitate intervention made the interaction hypothesis largely untenable, in that high social dependency was hypothesized to augment a presumed facilitative effect of feedback.

Interveners did not differ significantly from noninterveners on any of the personality measures (see Table 4). The pattern of differences was nevertheless consistent, with interveners more ascendant and autonomous, and less deferential than noninterveners. A cluster of individual test items which did discriminate significantly between interveners and noninterveners constitutes a central component of the autonomy scale:

- (1) I like to avoid situations where I must do things in a conventional way ($p < .05$).
- (2) I like to feel free to do what I want to do ($p < .02$).
- (3) I like to do things that other people regard as unconventional ($p < .07$).

Thus, the only indication for personality correlates of help-giving in a laboratory crisis situation was a small cluster of items which tap a person's tendency to describe himself as unrestrained by conventionality. Other background information besides personality measures was collected from subjects—age, college level, birth order, number of siblings, size of home community, and college enrollment. The only one of these variables to show even marginally significant differentiation between interveners and noninterveners was age—interveners were slightly older than noninterveners (21.5 years versus 20.2 years, $t=1.8$, $d.f.=58$, $p < .08$).

DISCUSSION

It may be considered an encouraging sign that nearly three-quarters of all subjects were willing to break off from the proceedings by leaving their rooms in response to the experimenter's attack. Yet the fact that 57% of all subjects either remained in their rooms or returned to their rooms without locating the

experimenter is significant, especially given the absence of any personal risk threatening interveners and the low incentive for subjects to maintain the experimental procedure by remaining in their rooms, with the experiment so apparently at an unfortunate end. Yet not all subjects saw the attack as terminating the session; in fact, 42% of all subjects reported that during the time of the attack they were reluctant to do anything that would "ruin the experiment." So it appears that subjects did not preclude the possibility that the experimenter would be able to weather the present storm and bring the session to a successful conclusion. Was such faith built on a superlative respect for the perseverance of scientific investigators or wishful thinking that rationalized noninvolvement? It is quite possible that interpretations of the situation, such as the hardness of the experimenter and the genuineness of the attack, are post hoc constructions used to justify whatever the subject has done or explanations forged in the heat of decision that allow the subject to act in accordance with a wishful reality. Latané (1967) has reported a study which demonstrated that a help-giving situation appears far more genuine to subjects when they do not have the responsibility for help-giving than when the responsibility for helping is solely theirs. The question of motivated distortions in the perception of situations remains an intriguing idea, not totally resolved by the present study but very much suggested by the nature of subjects' postexperiment reports.

The likelihood of help-giving was greater when subjects were in a situation of focused rather than diffuse responsibility. This confirmation of the diffusion of responsibility hypothesis was corroborated by data from the postexperiment questionnaire. Subjects were asked to rate the other two participants, P₁ and P₃, on the degree to which it appeared likely that (1) they had left, or (2) they were about to leave their rooms to check on the experimenter, using a scale from one (very unlikely) to five (very likely). In all instances, focused subjects had lower expectancies that the other two subjects had intervened or would intervene; in addition, they saw more dire consequences from their not helping the experimenter than did the diffuse subjects.

The effect of group feedback, the communication variable, was nearly the opposite of what had been expected. Greatest intervention occurred in the absence of any feedback, while a lesser degree of helpfulness was evident under conditions of minimizing feedback, and the least intervention occurred when subjects were exposed to feedback labeling the crisis as real. The obtained ordering of conditions can be handled by the alternative explanation that the communication variation acted more to define *responsibility*, i.e., variation in feedback created variations in the subject's expectation that someone else would respond to the experimenter's need for assistance. In TC and MC conditions, there was knowledge that the other subjects were aware of and concerned about the experimenter's plight and thus some reason existed to expect that they would intervene, especially since a public commitment of their awareness and concern had been made. This contrasts with NC subjects, who had no basis for

believing that a response might be forthcoming from the other subjects. The difference in likelihood of intervention between TC and MC conditions, though very small and nonsignificant, is compatible with this new explanation for the feedback effect. While the two conditions exhibited similar awareness and public commitment on the part of the other participants, there was a greater show of concern in TC, and hence a greater reason for the subject to expect that the other participants would assume the responsibility for help-giving. Thus we are arguing that the feedback variable appears to operate through the mechanism of responsibility diffusion: the feedback works primarily to determine a person's perception of the degree to which it is he that must offer assistance if the experimenter is to be helped at all.

This interpretation of the feedback effect was supported by data from the postexperiment questionnaire. In ratings of both P_1 and P_3 , TC subjects were most likely to assume that the others had left or were about to leave their rooms, MC subjects were next most likely to make this assumption, while NC subjects were least likely to suppose that the other participants had intervened or would intervene. This pattern obtains for the sample as a whole, as well as within the nonintervening and intervening subsamples.

One pattern of data not entirely compatible with the diffusion of responsibility interpretation of the feedback variable is the occurrence of a feedback effect within the focused responsibility condition. Given the incapacitation of the other participants in this condition, it would not seem to make much sense that variation in the comments uttered by these subjects should affect the target subject's expectation that the other persons would provide the needed assistance for the experimenter. One possible explanation for the occurrence of a feedback effect here is that while focused subjects saw themselves as more able to help the experimenter, they did not see the other participants as totally *unable* to give assistance. This was clearly the case, as evidenced by the "likelihood of intervention ratings" of P_1 and P_3 by focused subjects, who generally attributed their incapacitated fellow bystanders with something less than the extreme "unlikely" ratings. Part of the experimental procedure, which admonished the subjects "not to remove any of the attachments yourself . . . wait until I am there to do it for you," implied the possibility that subjects could, if they had wanted to disengage themselves from the apparatus. The utterance of comments in TC and MC conditions may have created the basis for believing that such disengagement was a possibility.

Paradoxically, while effective as an inhibitor of help-giving, the communication received from other bystanders was perceived by the subjects as a factor making it *more* likely that they would leave their rooms to help the experimenter. Subjects also reported that the comments made them more certain both of what was happening and that the experimenter needed help (see Table 5).

TABLE 5
SUBJECTS' REPORTS ON THE EFFECTS OF FEEDBACK
(true and minimized combined)

Effect of comments on	Increase %	Decrease %	n
certainty of what was happening;	63	37	19
certainty that the experimenter needed help;	73	27	15
likelihood that I would help.	79	21	19

This contradiction between the real versus perceived effect of feedback points to the difficulty of postexperiment assessment of subjects' perception and motives. The contradiction in this case may be a matter of how the question is asked and how much the subject's defensiveness about his performance is engaged. Subjects' ratings of the likelihood of intervention by others showed quite consistently the increase in perceived likelihood that was associated with the presence of comments. Yet the logical extension of this, that comments make a person sure that others will help and hence have the effect of lessening the likelihood that he will intervene, was not admitted by subjects, who perhaps found this a distasteful admission to make.

A great deal of insight was afforded by creating some difficulties for the help-giver and making emergence from his room only a first step in the helping sequence. There were two thresholds that had to be crossed in the present situation. We can conceive of a certain amount of pressure that was necessary first to draw a subject out of his room, and then additional pressure necessary to set him on a determined search for the experimenter. Twenty-seven percent of the subjects were lost at the first threshold, while an additional 30% were lost at the second threshold. The fact that many experiments on altruism and help-giving utilize a single threshold may mean that we have underestimated the vulnerability of helping responses to situational and ecological barriers that often characterize real-life help-giving situations. Part of the dilemma of the emergency bystander is that frequently there are courses of action which when taken are found to be insufficient. The apartment dweller may find that his shouts are not enough to disrupt a sidewalk beating; he must then decide if he has done all that is possible or whether he must descend to the street and offer direct assistance. It is this second threshold which may often be the more crucial one in the help-giving process.

The centrality of the diffusion of responsibility factor, demonstrated by the effect of the responsibility variation as well as the utility of this explanation in accounting for the unexpected pattern of data relevant to the feedback hypothesis, might be disappointing to those who would hope that help-giving is a simple enactment of a person's altruistic impulse. It appears that the decision to

offer assistance to some distressed person is not necessarily a first response to an emergency, but that emergencies may often produce Good Samaritans only by default. Persons will help out in a crisis, but most reliably when it seems apparent that the other available sources of help are not forthcoming.

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