A Lady in Distress: Inhibiting Effects of Friends and Strangers on Bystander Intervention¹

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One hundred twenty male undergraduates waiting either alone, with a friend, or with a stranger, overheard a woman fall and cry out in pain. Two-person groups were less likely to offer help to the injured woman than were subjects who overheard the emergency while alone. Pairs of friends were less inhibited from intervening than were strangers and helped significantly faster. In this ambiguous situation, each bystander may look to others for guidance before acting, misinterpret their apparent lack of concern, and decide the situation is not serious. Friends seem less likely to misinterpret each other's initial inaction than strangers.

"There's safety in numbers," according to an old adage, and modern city dwellers seem to believe it. They shun deserted streets, empty subway cars, and lonely walks in dark parks, preferring instead to go where others are or to stay at home. When faced with stress, most individuals seem less afraid when they are in the presence of others than when they are alone (Wrightsman, 1959). Dogs are less likely to yelp when they face a strange situation with other dogs (Scott and Fuller, 1965); even rats are less likely to defecate and freeze when they are placed in a frightening open field with other rats (Latané, 1969, Latané and Glass, 1968).

A feeling so widely shared must have some basis in reality. Is there safety in numbers? If so, why? Two reasons are often suggested: Individuals are less likely to find themselves in trouble if there are others about, and even if they do find themselves in trouble, others are likely to help them deal with it.

Ecologists have long puzzled over the adaptive functions of such phenomena as schooling in fish and flocking in birds. Such congregations seem ideally designed to make life easy for predators; yet they are widespread in nature. Why? Predators may be inhibited by fear from

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attacking large troops of animals (Lorenz, 1966), and they may be "confused" by the presence of many individuals, unable to focus on any one (Allee, 1951; Shaw, 1962). Similar processes may operate in humans. Roving psychopaths are probably more likely to hit isolated farm dwellings than urban apartment houses. Rapists do not usually work in Times Square.

Even if trouble comes, individuals may feel more certain of getting help if others are present. In 1871, Charles Darwin, in *The Descent of Man*, wrote "As man is a social animal it is almost certain that . . . he would from an inherited tendency be willing to defend, in concert with others, his fellow men; and be ready to aid them in any way, which did not too greatly interfere with his own welfare or his own strong desires." We may quarrel with Darwin's assertion of an *inherited* tendency, but most of us seem ready to assume that others are willing to help us in our distress.

While it is certainly true that a victim is unlikely to receive help if nobody knows of his plight, recent research casts doubt on the suggestion that he will be more likely to receive help if more people are present. In fact, experiments by Darley and Latané (1968) and by Latané and Darley (1968) show the opposite to be true. In the former study, students overhearing someone in the midst of a serious nervous seizure were more likely to attempt help, and did so sooner, if they thought they were the only person present and aware of the emergency than if they thought other people were also listening to it. In the latter study, subjects alone in a waiting room were more likely to report a possible fire than were subjects waiting in groups. In both these experiments, an emergency was less likely to be reported the more people who witnessed it.

The results of these studies may provide some insight into such widely publicized and distressing incidents as the murder of Kitty Genovese, a murder which 38 people witnessed from the safety of their apartments but did nothing to prevent. As in our laboratory studies, the presence of others served in a variety of ways to inhibit taking positive action.

These incidents have been widely cited as examples of "apathy" and "dehumanization" stemming from the urbanization of our society. These glib phrases may contain some truth since startling cases like the Genovese murder often occur in large cities, but such terms may also be misleading. The studies above suggest that situational factors, specifically factors involving the immediate social environment, may be of greater importance in determining an individual's reaction to an emergency than such vague cultural or personality concepts as "apathy" or "alienation due to urbanization."

If the social inhibition effects demonstrated by Latané and Darley and by Darley and Latané are general, they may explain why the failure to intervene seems to be more characteristic of large cities than rural areas. Bystanders to urban emergencies are more likely to be, or at least think they are, in the presence of other bystanders than witnesses of non-urban emergencies.

A second way in which urban emergencies differ from emergencies in other settings is that, in the former, bystanders are not likely to know each other. It is possible that the kinds of social inhibition and diffusion of responsibility generated by the presence of strangers may not arise from the presence of friends. Groups of friends may be even more able and willing to intervene in an emergency than single individuals. It is the purpose of the present experiment to test these possibilities, and to do so in a new emergency setting. In addition to demonstrating possible differences between friends and strangers, this will further test the generalities of social inhibition effects.

METHOD

Subjects waited either alone, with a friend, or with a stranger to participate in a market research study. As they waited, they heard someone fall and apparently injure herself in the room next door. Whether they tried to help and how long they took to do so were the main dependent variables of the study.

Subjects. One hundred fifty-six male Columbia undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 21 were selected at random from the college dormitory list. They were telephoned and offered \$2.00 to participate in a survey of game and puzzle preferences conducted at Columbia by the Consumer Testing Bureau (CTB), a market research organization. Each person contacted was asked to find a friend who would also be interested in participating. Only those students who recommended friends, and the friends they suggested, were used as subjects. Fourteen per cent of the students called were unwilling to participate and 9% with appointments did not come, leaving 120 who served in the study.

Procedure. Subjects were met at the door by the market research representative and taken to the testing room. On the way they passed the CTB office and through its open door they were able to see a desk and bookcases piled high with papers and filing cabinets. They entered the adjacent testing room which contained a table and chairs and a variety of games, and they were given a preliminary background information and game preference questionnaire to fill out.

The representative told subjects that she would be working next door in her office for about ten minutes while they completed the questionnaires, and left by opening the collapsible curtain which divided the two rooms. She made sure that subjects were aware that the curtain was unlocked and easily opened and that it provided means of entry to her office. The representative stayed in her office, shuffling papers, opening drawers, and making enough noise to remind the subjects of her presence. Four minutes after leaving the testing area, she turned on a high fidelity stereophonic tape recorder.

The emergency. If the subject listened carefully, he heard the representative climb on a chair to reach for a stack of papers on the bookcase. Even if he were not

listening carefully, he heard a loud crash and a scream as the chair collapsed and she fell to the floor. "Oh, my God, my foot... I... I... can't move it. Oh... my ankle," the representative moaned. "I... can't get this... thing ... off me." She cried and moaned for about a minute longer, but the cries gradually got more subdued and controlled. Finally she muttered something about getting outside, knocked around the chair as she pulled herself up, and thumped to the door, closing it behind her as she left. The entire incident took 130 seconds.

If a subject intervened, the post-experimental interview was begun immediately. If he did not intervene, the representative waited one minute after the end of the tape and then entered the testing room through the door, visibly limping. The representative asked all subjects about the noises next door, their reactions to them, and the reasons for the course of action they had taken, and then explained in detail the true purposes of the experiment. At the end of the interview, subjects were paid and asked to fill out an anonymous questionnaire concerning their feelings about the experiment. Reasons for secrecy were discussed and all subjects readily agreed.

Measures. The main dependent variables of the study were whether the subject took action to help the victim and how long it took him to do so. There were actually several modes of interaction available. A subject could open the screen dividing the two rooms, leave the testing room and enter the CTB office by the door, find someone else, or, most simply, call out to see if the representative needed help.

Design of the experiment. Four experimental groups were used. In one condition (Alone, N=26), each subject was by himself in the testing room while he filled out the questionnaire and heard the fall. In a second condition (Stooge, N=14), a stranger, actually a confederate of the experimenter, was also present. The confederate had instructions to be as passive as possible and to answer questions put to him by the subject with a brief gesture or remark. During the emergency, he looked up, shrugged his shoulders, and continued working on his questionnaire. Subjects in the third condition (Strangers, N=20 pairs) were placed in the testing room in pairs. Each subject in the pair was unacquainted with the other before entering the room and they were not introduced. Only one subject in this condition spontaneously introduced himself to the other. In a final condition (Friends, N=20 pairs), each subject had been scheduled with a friend and remained with him throughout the experiment.

RESULTS

Check on manipulation. In the post-experimental interview, subjects were asked to describe what they thought had taken place next door. All thought the market research representative had fallen and hurt her foot. Less than 5% reported any suspicion that they had been listening to a tape recording. All subjects in the Two Strangers condition reported that they were unacquainted before the experiment.

Mode of intervention. Across all experimental groups, the majority of subjects who intervened did so by pulling back the room divider and coming into the CTB office (61%). Few subjects came the round-about way through the door to offer their assistance (14%), and a surprisingly small number (24%) chose the easy solution of calling out to offer help. No one tried to find someone else to whom to report the accident. Thus

all interveners offered some kind of direct assistance to the injured woman. Since experimental conditions did not differ in the proportions choosing various modes of intervention, the comparisons below will deal only with the total proportions of subjects offering help.

Alone vs. Stooge conditions. Seventy per-cent of all subjects who heard the fall while alone in the waiting room offered to help the victim before she left the room. By contrast, the presence of a nonresponsive by-stander markedly inhibited helping. Only 7% of subjects in the Stooge

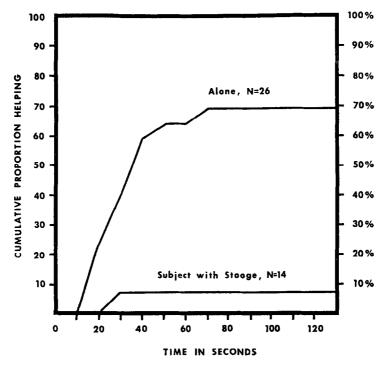


Fig. 1. Cumulative proportion helping in the Alone and Stooge conditions.

condition intervened. These subjects seemed upset and confused during the emergency and frequently glanced at the passive confederate who continued working on his questionnaire. The difference between the Alone and Stooge conditions is, of course, highly significant ($\chi^2=13.92$, p<.001).²

Figure 1 presents the cumulative proportion of subjects who had intervened by any point in time following the accident. For example, Fig. 1 shows that by the end of 60 seconds, 64% of Alone subjects and only 7% of subjects tested with a stooge had intervened. The shapes of

² All statistical tests in this paper are two-tailed.

these curves indicate that even had the emergency lasted longer than 130 seconds, little further intervention would have taken place. In fact, over the experiment as a whole, 90% of all subjects who ever intervened did so in the first half of the time available to them.

It is clear that the presence of an unresponsive bystander strongly inhibited subjects from offering to help the injured woman. Let us look now at whether this effect depends upon some specific characteristic or unnatural behavior of the passive confederate. Will the same social inhibition occur when two naive subjects are tested together?

Alone vs. Two Strangers. Once one person in a group of two by-standers has intervened, the situation confronting the other bystander changes. It is no longer necessary for him to act (and indeed, nobody did so). For this reason, we took the latency of the first person's response as our basic measure. This procedure, however, complicates a simple comparison between the Alone and Two Strangers conditions. Since there are twice as many people available to respond in the latter condition, we should expect an increased probability that at least one person would intervene by chance alone.

To compare the two groups, we computed a hypothetical baseline from the Alone distribution. This was achieved by mathematically combining all possible "groups" of two scores obtained from subjects in the Alone condition, and taking the distribution of the fastest scores in each "group" for the hypothetical baseline. This baseline is graphed in Fig. 2, and represents the *expected* cumulative proportion of pairs in which at least one person helps if the members of the pairs are entirely independent (i.e., behave exactly like Alone subjects). Since 70% of Alone subjects intervened, we should expect that at least one person in 91% of all two-person groups would offer help, even if members of a pair had no influence upon each other.³

In fact, the results show that members of a pair had a strong influence on each other. In only 40% of the groups of subjects in the Two Strangers condition did even one person offer help to the injured woman. Only 8 subjects of the 40 who were run in this condition intervened. This response rate is significantly below the hypothetical base rate ($\chi^2 = 11.34$, p < .001). Figure 2 shows that at every point in time, fewer subjects in the Two Strangers condition had intervened than would be expected on the basis of the Alone response rate (p < .01 by Kolmogorov-Smirnov). This result demonstrates that the presence of another person strongly inhibits individuals from responding, and that this

³ The probability that at least one member of a group will help by a given time is $1-(1-p)^n$ where n is the number of people in the group and p is the probability of a single individual helping by that time.

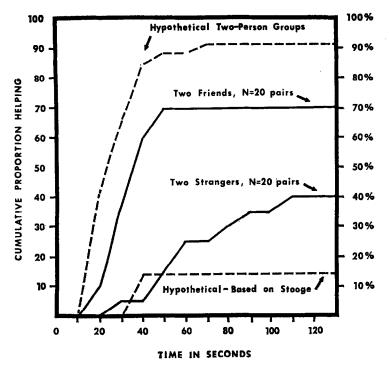


Fig. 2. Cumulative proportion helping in the Friends and Strangers conditions and hypothetical baselines.

inhibition is not a function of some artificiality of a stooge's behavior. Strangers vs. Stooge. The response rate of 40% in the Two Strangers condition appears to be somewhat higher than the 7% rate in the Stooge condition. Making a correction similar to that used for the Alone scores, the expected response rate based on the Stooge condition is 13%. This is significantly lower than the response rate in the Strangers condition (p < .05 by binomial test).

The results above strongly replicate the finding by Latané and Darley (1968) in a different experimental setting: Smoke trickling into a waiting room. In both experiments, subjects were less likely to take action if they were in the presence of passive confederates than if they were alone, and in both studies, this effect showed up even when groups of naive subjects were tested together. This congruence of findings from different experimental settings supports their validity and generality: It also helps rule out a variety of explanations suitable to either situation alone. For example, the smoke may have represented a threat to the subject's own personal safety. It is possible that subjects in groups were less likely to respond than single subjects because of a greater concern

to appear "brave" in the face of a possible fire. This explanation, however, does not fit the present experiment in which the same pattern of results appeared. In the present experiment, non-intervention cannot signify bravery.

Comparison of the two experiments also suggests that the absolute number of nonresponsive bystanders may not be a critical factor in producing social inhibition of intervention. One passive confederate in the present experiment was as effective as two in the smoke study; pairs of strangers in the present study inhibited each other as much as did trios in the former study.

Let us look now at our final experimental condition in which pairs of friends were tested together.

Alone vs. Two Friends. Pairs of friends often talked about the question-naire before the accident, and sometimes discussed a course of action after the fall. Even so, in only 70% of the pairs did even one person intervene. While, superficially, this appears as high as the Alone condition, again there must be a correction for the fact that two people are free to act. When compared to the 91% base rate of hypothetical two-person groups, friends do inhibit each other from intervening ($\chi^2 = 2.84$, p < .10). Friends were less likely, and they were also slower, to intervene than would be expected on the basis of the Alone rate (p < .05 by Kolmogorov-Smirnov).

Friends vs. Strangers. Although pairs of friends were inhibited from helping when compared to the Alone condition, they were significantly faster to intervene than were pairs of strangers ($U=96,\,p<.01$). The median latency of the first response from pairs of friends was 36 seconds; the median pair of strangers did not respond at all within the arbitrary 130-second duration of the emergency.

One sort of alternative explanation which plagues comparisons of friends and strangers in many experiments was ruled out by the present procedure. If some subjects are asked to recruit friends, and others are not, different degrees of commitment may be aroused. In this experiment, all subjects either recruited friends or were recruited by them, equalizing commitment across conditions.

From the victim's viewpoint. In order to determine whether an individual's likelihood of responding is affected by the presence of other people, we have compared scores in the Friends and Strangers conditions with a hypothetical base rate computed from the distribution of responses in the Alone condition. By this procedure, we have shown that an individual is less likely to respond when he is with either a friend or a stranger. But what of the victim? Under what conditions is she most likely to get help? For this question, the use of hypothetical baselines

is unjustified. The results show that the victim is no better off if two friends hear her cry for help than if only one person does. When the bystanders are strangers, social inhibition was so strong that the victim actually got help significantly faster the fewer people who heard her distress (Alone vs. Strangers, $U=112,\ p<.01$). In this instance, she would be foolish indeed to count on safety in numbers.

Post-experimental interview. Although the interview began differently for the interveners and noninterveners, all subjects were encouraged to discuss the accident and their reactions to it in some detail before they were told about the tape and the purpose of the experiment.

Subjects who intervened usually claimed that they did so either because the fall sounded very serious or because they were uncertain what had occurred and felt they should investigate. Many talked about intervention as the "right thing to do" and asserted they would help again in any situation.

Many of the noninterveners also claimed that they were unsure what had happened (59%), but had decided it was not too serious (46%). A number of subjects reported that they thought other people would or could help (25%), and three said they refrained out of concern for the victim—they did not want to embarrass her.⁴ Whether to accept these explanations as reasons or rationalizations is moot—they certainly do not explain the differences among conditions. The important thing to note is that noninterveners did not seem to feel that they had behaved callously or immorally. Their behavior was generally consistent with their interpretation of the situation. Subjects almost uniformly claimed that in a "real" emergency, they would be among the first to help the victim.

Interestingly, when subjects were asked whether they had been influenced by the presence or action of their co-worker, they were either unwilling or unable to believe that they had. Subjects in the passive confederate condition reported, on the average, that they were "very little" influenced by the stooge. Subjects in the Two Strangers condition claimed to having been only "a little bit" influenced by each other, and friends admitted to "moderate" influence. Put another way, only 14, 30, and 70% of the subjects in these three conditions admitted to at least a "moderate" degree of influence ($\chi^2 = 12.2$, 2 df, p < .01). These claims, of course, run directly counter to the experimental results, in which friends were the least inhibited and subjects in the Stooge condition most inhibited by the other's actions.

Reactions to the experiment. After the post-experimental interview, debriefing, and payment of the promised \$2.00, subjects were asked to fill

⁴ Noninterveners reported an average of 1.9 different reasons.

out a final questionnaire concerning their mood and their reactions to the experiment, Subjects were convincingly assured that their answers would be entirely anonymous and the experimenter departed. On an adjective check list, 85% of the subjects said they were "interested," 77% "glad to have taken part," 59% "concerned about the problem," 33% "surprised," 24% "satisfied," 18% "relieved," 12% "happy," 2% "confused," 2% "annoyed," 1% "angry at myself," and 0% "angry at the experimenter," "afraid," or "ashamed."⁵ One hundred per cent said they would be willing to take part in similar experiments in the future, 99% that they understood what the experiment was really about, 99% that the deceptions were necessary, and 100% that they were justified. On a 5-point scale, 96% found the experiment either "very interesting" or "interesting," the two extreme points. The only sign of a difference in reaction between interveners and noninterveners was that 47% of the former and only 24% of the latter checked the most extreme interest ($\chi^2 = 4.64$, p < .05). In general, then, reactions to the experiment were highly positive.

DISCUSSION

The idea of "safety in numbers" receives no support from the results of this experiment. When it was first designed, our major worry was that everyone would act, or at least call out to offer help to the injured woman. Yet on almost 40 occasions, she limped away from her accident without even the offer of help. In general she fared fairly well when only one person heard her distress. Her luck was much worse when several did. Although in the combined group conditions, 23 people offered help, 49 did not. What is there about a group setting which caused such ungentlemanly behavior? Two lines of explanation seem plausible. The first involves the workings of social influence processes (Latané and Darley, 1968), and the second the concept of "diffusion of responsibility" (Darley and Latané, 1968). Let us consider each of these lines of explanation and see how they fit the present case.

A bystander to an emergency must first come to some general interpretation of the situation, and then, on the basis of this interpretation, he may choose what to do. Many emergencies are rather ambiguous: It is unclear whether anything is really wrong or whether anything can be done about it. In a previous experiment, smoke might have represented fire, but it might have been nothing more than steam from a radiator. In the present experiment, a crash and the sounds of sobbing might have indicated a girl with a badly injured leg, but it might have meant nothing more than a slight sprain and a good deal of chagrin.

⁵ Subjects checked an average of 3.1 adjectives.

In deciding what interpretation to put on a particular configuration of emergency symptoms, a bystander will be influenced by his experience and his desires as well as by what he sees. In addition, if other people are present, he will be guided by their apparent reactions in formulating his own impressions. Unfortunately, their apparent reactions may not be a good indication of their true feelings. Apparent passivity and lack of concern on the part of other bystanders may indicate that they feel the emergency is not serious, but it may simply mean that they have not yet had time to work out their own interpretation or even that they are assuming a bland exterior to hide their inner uncertainty and concern. The presence of other bystanders provides models for each individual to observe, but it also provides an audience to any action he may undertake. In public, Americans generally wish to appear poised and in control of themselves. Thus it is possible for a state of "pluralistic ignorance" to develop, in which each bystander is led by the apparent lack of concern of the others to interpret the situation as being less serious than he would if he were alone. To the extent that he does not feel the situation is an emergency, of course, he will be unlikely to take any helpful action.

Even if an individual does decide that an emergency is actually in process and that something ought to be done, he still is faced with the choice of whether he himself will intervene. His decision will presumably be made in terms of the rewards and costs associated with the various alternative courses of action open to him. The presence of other people can alter these rewards and costs—perhaps most importantly, they can alter the cost of not acting. If only one bystander is present at an emergency, he bears 100% of the responsibility for dealing with it; he will feel 100% of the guilt for not acting; he will bear 100% of any blame others may level for nonintervention. If others are present, the onus of responsibility is diffused, and the individual may be more likely to resolve his conflict between intervening and not intervening in favor of the latter alternative.

Both the "social influence" and "diffusion of responsibility" explanations seem valid, and there is no reason why both should not be jointly operative. Neither alone can account for all the data. For example, the "diffusion" explanation cannot account for the significant difference in response rate between the Strangers and Stooge conditions—there should be equal diffusion in either case. The difference can more plausibly be attributed to the fact that strangers typically did not show such complete indifference to the accident as did the stooge. The diffusion process also does not seem applicable to results from the Smoke situation (Latané and Darley, 1968). Responsibility for protecting one-self should not diffuse. On the other hand, social influence processes

cannot account for results in the Seizure situation (Darley and Latané, 1968). Subjects in that experiment could not communicate with one another and thus could not be influenced by each other's reactions.

Although both processes probably operate, they may not do so at the same time. To the extent that social influence leads an individual to define the situation as nonserious and not requiring action, his responsibility is eliminated, making diffusion unnecessary. Only if social influence is unsuccessful in leading subjects to misinterpret the situation should diffusion play a role. Indirect evidence supporting this analysis comes from observation of nonintervening subjects in the various emergency settings. In settings involving face-to-face contact among bystanders, as in the present study and in the Smoke situation, noninterveners typically redefined the situation and did not see it as a serious emergency. Consequently they avoided the moral choice of whether or not to take action. During the post experimental interviews, subjects in these experiments seemed relaxed and self-assured. In the Seizure situation, on the other hand, face-to-face contact was prevented, social influence could not help subjects define the situation as nonserious, and they were faced with the moral dilemma of whether to intervene. Although the imagined presence of other people led many subjects to delay intervention, their conflict was exhibited in the post experimental interviews. If anything, subjects who did not intervene seemed more emotionally aroused than did subjects who reported the emergency.

How can we fit friend-stranger differences into this framework? There are several possibilities. It may be that people are less likely to fear possible embarrassment in front of friends than before strangers, and that friends are less likely to misinterpret each other's inaction than are strangers. If so, social influence may be less likely to lead friends to decide there is no emergency. It also may be that individuals are less likely to lay off responsibility on their friends than on strangers, reducing the effectiveness of responsibility diffusion. There is some evidence consistent with both these possibilities.

When strangers overheard the emergency, they seemed noticeably confused and concerned, attempting to interpret what they heard and to decide on a course of action. They often glanced furtively at one another, apparently anxious to discover the other's reaction yet unwilling to meet eyes and betray their own concern. Friends, on the other hand, seemed better able to convey their concern nonverbally, and often discussed the incident and arrived at a mutual plan of action. Although these observations are admittedly impressionistic, they are consistent with a further piece of data. During the emergency, a record was kept of whether the bystanders engaged in verbal conversation. Unfortunately, no attempt

was made to code the amount or content of what was said, but it is possible to break down whether there was any talking at all. Only 29% of subjects attempted any conversation with the stooge; while 60% of the pairs of strangers engaged in some conversation, mostly desultory and often unrelated to the accident. Although the latter rate seems higher than the former, it really is not, since there are two people free to initiate a conversation rather than just one. Friends, on the other hand, were somewhat more likely to talk than strangers. Eighty-five per cent of the pairs did so (p < .15 by Fisher's Exact test). Friends, then, may show less mutual inhibition than strangers because they are less likely to develop a state of "pluralistic ignorance."

Friends may also be less likely to diffuse responsibility than strangers. In a variation on the Seizure situation, Darley and Darley⁶ recruited pairs of friends to serve as subjects at the same time. During the course of the emergency, friends could have no contact with each other and thus could have no direct influence on each other. Even so, subjects tested with friends were quicker to intervene than subjects tested with strangers.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this experiment, in conjunction with those of previous studies in this series, suggest that social inhibition effects may be rather general over a variety of emergency situations. In three different experiments, bystanders have been less likely to intervene if other bystanders are present. The nature of the other bystander seems to be important: A nonreactive confederate provides the most inhibition, a stranger provides a moderate amount, and a friend the least. Overall, the results are consistent with a multiprocess model of intervention: The effect of other people seems to be mediated both through the interpretations that bystanders place on the situation, and through the decisions they make once they have come up with an interpretation. The results suggest situational reasons why our large cities may be less safe than smaller towns: Even if there be an equal likelihood of getting involved in an emergency, the presence of many strangers may prevent you from getting help. There may be safety in numbers, but these experiments suggest that if you are involved in an emergency, the best number of bystanders is one.

In a less sophisticated era, Rudyard Kipling prayed "That we, with Thee, may walk uncowed by fear or favor of the crowd; that, under Thee, we may possess man's strength to comfort man's distress." It appears that the latter hope may depend to a surprising extent upon the former.

⁶ Personal communication.

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