

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: The following passage is adapted from an article published in 1968 by John Darley and Bibb Latane. Darley and Latane, both professors of psychology, collaborated on research about bystanders' responses to emergencies and crimes. Interest in this subject was high during the 1960's as a result of people's surprise and shock at the behavior of witnesses to the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese: after her cries for help awakened them, Genovese's New York City neighbors watched from their apartment windows but did not call police or otherwise aid Genovese during the half hour that she was repeatedly stabbed in a parking lot across the street.

WHY PEOPLE DON'T HELP IN A CRISIS

Andrew Mormille is stabbed as he rides in a New York City subway train. Eleven other riders flee to another car as the 17-year-old boy bleeds to death; not one comes to his assistance, even after his attackers have left the car. He dies. Eleanor Bradley trips and breaks her leg while shopping on New York City's Fifth Avenue. Dazed and in shock, she calls for help, but the hurrying stream of people simply parts and flows past. Finally, after 40 minutes, a taxi driver stops and helps her to a doctor. How can so many people watch another human being in distress and do nothing? Why don't they help?

Since we started research on bystanders' responses to emergencies, we have heard many explanations for the lack of intervention in such cases. All of these explanations share one characteristic: they set witnesses who do not intervene apart from the rest of us and assume they are indifferent to what is happening. But if we look closely at the behavior of these witnesses, they begin to seem less indifferent. The 38 witnesses to the famous murder of Kitty Genovese, for example, did not merely look at the scene once and then ignore it. They continued to stare out of their windows, caught, fascinated, distressed, unwilling to act but unable to turn away.

Why, then, didn't they act? There are three things bystanders must do if they are to intervene in an emergency: notice that something is happening, interpret that event as an emergency, and decide that they have personal responsibility for intervention. The presence of other bystanders may at each stage inhibit action.

People trying to interpret a situation often look at those around them to see how to react. If everyone else is calm and indifferent, they will tend to remain so; if everyone else is reacting strongly, they are likely to do so as well. This tendency is not merely slavish conformity; ordinarily we derive much valuable information about new situations from how others around us behave. It's a rare traveler who, in picking a roadside restaurant, chooses to stop at one where no other cars appear in the parking lot.

Suppose that a man has a heart attack. He clutches his chest, staggers to the nearest building and slumps sitting to the sidewalk. Will a passerby come to his assistance? First, the bystander has to notice that something is happening. He must tear himself away from his private thoughts and pay attention. But Americans consider it bad manners to look closely at other people in public. We are taught to respect the privacy of others, and when among strangers we close our ears and avoid staring. In a crowd, then, each person is less likely to notice a potential emergency than when alone.

Once an event is noticed, an onlooker must decide if it is truly an emergency. Emergencies are not always clearly labeled as such; "smoke" pouring into a waiting room may be caused by fire, or it may merely indicate a leak in a steam pipe. Screams in the street may signal an assault or a family quarrel. A man lying in a doorway may be having a coronary—or he may simply be sleeping off a drunken binge. In a crowd, each individual fears looking like a fool as a result of behaving as if a situation is an emergency when, in fact, it is not.

Even if a person defines an event as an emergency, the presence of other bystanders may still make each person less likely to intervene. Each individual feels that his or her responsibility is diffused and diluted. Thus, if your car breaks down on a busy highway, hundreds of drivers whiz by without anyone's stopping to help—but if you are stuck on a nearly deserted country road, whoever passes you first is likely to stop.

Thus, the stereotype of the unconcerned, depersonalized urbanite, blandly watching the misfortunes of others, proves inaccurate. Instead, we often find that a bystander to an emergency is an anguished individual in genuine doubt, wanting to do the right thing but compelled to make complex decisions under pressure of stress and fear. The bystander's reactions are shaped by the actions of others— and all too frequently by their inaction.

ESSAY TOPIC

According to Darley and Latane, what factors explain people's lack of response to others' distress? To what extent do you think that their ideas explain-or justify-such behavior? Write an essay responding to these questions; to develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading—including "Why People Don't Help in a Crisis" itself.