

What is the Bystander Effect?

The term *bystander effect* refers to the phenomenon in which the greater the number of people present, the less likely people are to help a person in distress. When an emergency situation occurs, observers are more likely to take action if there are few or no other witnesses.

In a series of classic study, researchers Bibb Latane and John Darley⁽¹⁾ found that the amount of time it takes the participant to take action and seek help varies depending on how many other observers are in the room. In one experiment, subjects were placed in one of three treatment conditions: alone in a room, with two other participants or with two confederates who pretended to be normal participants.

As the participants sat filling out questionnaires, smoke began to fill the room. When participants were alone, 75% reported the smoke to the experimenters. In contrast, just 38% of participants in a room with two other people reported the smoke. In the final group, the two confederates in the experiment noted the smoke and then ignored it, which resulted in only 10% of the participants reporting the smoke.

Example of the Bystander Effect

The most frequently cited example of the bystander effect in introductory psychology textbooks is the brutal murder of a young woman named Catherine "Kitty" Genovese. On Friday, March 13, 1964, 28-year-old Genovese was returning home from work. As she approached her apartment entrance, she was attacked and stabbed by a man later identified as Winston Moseley.

Despite Genovese's repeated cries for help, none of the dozen or so people in the nearby apartment building who heard her cries called police for help. The attack first began at 3:20 AM, but it was not until 3:50 AM that someone first contacted police.

Initially reported in a 1964 *New York Times* article, the article sensationalized the case, despite a number of factual inaccuracies. While frequently cited in psychology textbooks, an article in the September 2007 issue of *American Psychologist* concluded that the story is largely misrepresented mostly due to the inaccuracies repeatedly published in newspaper articles and textbooks.

Explanations for the Bystander Effect

There are two major factors that contribute to the bystander effect. First, the presence of other people creates a **diffusion of responsibility**. Because there are other observers, individuals do not feel as much pressure to take action, since the responsibility to take action is thought to be shared among all of those present.

The second reason is the need to **behave in correct and socially acceptable ways**. When other observers fail to react, individuals often take this as a signal that a response is not needed or not appropriate. Other researchers have found that onlookers are less likely to intervene if the situation is ambiguous⁽²⁾. In the case of Kitty Genovese, many of the 38 witnesses reported that they believed that they were witnessing a "lover's quarrel," and did not realize that the young woman was actually being murdered.