

The Bystander effect

On March 13, 1964, Genovese was returning home from work. She was then 28 years old. When she arrived at her home, she was brutally murdered by a man named Winston Moseley. She was stabbed till death by this man (<https://www.verywellmind.com/the-bystander-effect-2795899>). During the assault, she was repeatedly asking for help but none of the people from the nearby apartments reacted to her cries. They just ignored her assuming it as a personal husband-wife matter. It took 20 minutes to some of the neighbours to call the police. While there are numerous misrepresentations and inaccuracies with the Genovese's case, in recent years numerous other cases are reported (<https://www.verywellmind.com/the-bystander-effect-2795899>). So the question is why exactly it happens? Why we are less likely to help when we are part of a crowd?

The bystander effect provides a possible explanation of why the neighbours did not react to the incident (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect). Why did they take 20 minutes to report the incident to the police. In psychology textbooks, the above mentioned case of Catherine "Kitty" Genovese is the most frequently cited example of the bystander effect. The bystander effect is a theory of social psychology which states that in an alarming situation such as accident/assault, people are less likely to help the victim when other individuals are present nearby. The effect was proposed in 1968, and since then many researchers have focused to study the different factor such as the number of bystanders, group cohesiveness, ambiguity, and diffusion of responsibility influencing the above behaviour. These factors reinforce the mutual denial among the bystanders. The presence of other nearby individuals creates a diffusion of responsibility. Since there are other people, individuals do not feel much pressure to take action. In other words, we can say that the responsibility to prevent or act on the situation is shared among all the bystanders. The another reason is the need to behave in a socially acceptable

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way. When other observers fail to react then individuals get a signal that the responsible act will not be socially acceptable or not appropriate as per society. In Kitty Genovese's case, it was reported that the many of the 38 witnesses thought this was a "lover's quarrel," and had no idea that Kitty was being murdered in real. In a typical experiment, the victim of the crime (an actor) is either alone or with a group of other individuals or confederates. Within this experiment, an emergency situation is staged deliberately and experimenters measure the time of the participants that they take to intervene. This experiment found that the presence of other individuals inhibits helping. For instance, Judith Rodin and Bibb Latané designed an experiment around a distressed woman, where she was either alone, or with a stranger/friend. When she was alone 70 percent of the people asked to help whereas only 40 percent offered help when she was paired with a stranger (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect).

How can we overcome the bystander effect? Some scientist suggests that by simply being aware of this effect is the greatest way to escape this ignorance. Whenever we face this alarming situation where someone is in trouble and needs immediate help then take a deep breath and think how the bystander effect might be holding you to take the necessary actions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that you put yourself in danger. On the other hand, what if you are the victim or need an immediate assistance? How can you urge bystanders or movers to give you help? One good technique is to single out the individual person by using eye contact or asking specifically from the crowd. When you personalize the things, it is much harder for people to turn down your request.

Rajesh Kumar, PhD Scholar NIT J