#86 A critical appraisal: ‘Group inhibition of bystander intervention in emergencies’.


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Overview

In this essay I will discuss and critically appraise “group inhibition of bystander intervention in emergencies”\(^1\) in a general critique\(^2\) and in reference to ‘The Psychology of Financial Decision Making’ module content\(^3\). I will also consider further possible research directions to build upon this research.

Paper summary

Research into bystander intervention developed in popularity in the 1960’s following the Kitty Genovese murder case\(^1,4\) where psychologists sought to identify why people may not act in aid of an individual in an emergency. Darley and Latané argue that a considerable influence in the decision of whether to intervene comes from other bystanders and how they react to the situation. Their experiment manipulates the influence of fellow bystanders to identify which social situation will produce more bystander intervention in a critical event.

Predictions

Darley and Latané predicted that participants (ppt’s) in the ‘confederate’ condition would be less likely to take action during the critical situation than ppt’s in the ‘alone’ condition. They also predicted that in comparison to the performance of the individuals in the ‘alone’ condition, groups of naïve ppt’s would be less likely to act in the emergency situation.

Methodology

58 Male university students were recruited under the guise of interviews about “life at an urban university”. Upon arrival ppt’s were placed in a waiting room to complete a questionnaire when faux smoke would begin to appear from a small vent in the wall. Ppt’s underwent this experiment in one of three experimental conditions: The ‘alone’ condition had only one ppt in the room throughout the experiment. The ‘confederate’ condition had one ppt accompanied by two passive others (confederates of the experiment who showed minimal reaction to the critical situation), and the ‘naïve’ condition which saw three naïve ppt’s in the
room together throughout the experiment. Observers noted when ppt’s first noticed the smoke and, from then, how long it took them to intervene. “Groups” of three scores from ppt’s in the alone condition were calculated to serve as a baseline for comparison with the naïve groups. The naïve group response was measured in terms of how long it took one member of the group to intervene.

Results

In the ‘alone’ condition, 75% of the 24 ppt’s reported the situation before the experimental period ended with the median ppt reporting within 2 minutes of noticing. In the ‘confederate’ condition, only 10% of the 10 ppt’s reported the situation and in the ‘naïve’ condition, 38% of the groups (eight groups of three participants) had a member who reported the situation.

Critical appraisal

Is the study’s research question relevant?

At the time the research question was extremely relevant in light of the aforementioned Kitty Genovese case [4] and even today the question remains relevant as it deals with a potential moral issue than any individual may have to deal with at any given time.

Does the study add anything new?

It was the second study of its kind at the time [5] yet the first study to explicitly demonstrate the ‘bystander effect’. Furthermore, this study served to inform the development of the bystander intervention model [6] which continues to inform the basis of further research.

Did the study methods address the key potential sources of bias?

The potential bias of the male sample was not addressed within the experimental methodology but only identified as relevant due to the social pressure placed on American males to “appear poised and collected in times of stress”. This bias in the sample means that
the results of the research are not generalizable as the finding cannot be extrapolated to females. Indeed, sex differences in bystander intervention have been identified in subsequent research\cite{7,8,9}.

Another potential source of bias is the small sample size. With small samples come issues of reliability. The false belief that small samples will reflect the properties of its parent population is known as “the law of small numbers”\cite{10,11}. Kahneman and Tversky’s case study\cite{12} highlights that individuals often assume that a larger data set is more likely to have more variation in its average, however a larger data set is actually more likely to remain stable than a small data set where a few pieces of data are more likely to skew the average.

In addition to this, ppt variables may also pose potential reliability threats to the results as certain ppt’s may have been more likely to intervene in the critical situation. Our recallability\cite{13} of past experiences or events can affect our perception of unfolding events. For example, past experiences with fires may have influenced those who intervened in the critical situation to do so. Therefore biasing the results which are already easily influenced by the small dataset.

\textit{Loss aversion}

Darley and Latané explain the results of the experiments as a product of the social situation in which they had to deal with the critical event. However, another potential explanation for the results may be loss aversion\cite{14}. In deciding whether or not to act in the critical event ppt’s may perceive a cost of action to be embarrassment in front of others for potentially overreacting to the situation and thus they may have used this as a cue to inhibit action. This would be particularly relevant as the authors highlight that American males often experience social pressure in such situations. This explanation employs prospect theory\cite{15,16,17} which highlights that where probabilities of specific outcomes are not given, the decision weight associated with a specific outcome will depend on its perceived likelihood.
Further research considerations

As an extension from this paper and its focus on the group effects of bystander intervention I’d suggest that an incremental design be put in place to test the bystander effect in groups of varying size. Extending the ‘confederate’ condition from this research, I’d consider reapplying that approach but with the number of confederates ranging from 1 to 10 in order to determine how increasing group size effects the behaviour (e.g. ppt:confederate ratio from 1:1 – 1:10). Alongside this, manipulation in the confederates’ reaction to the critical situation so that the participant experiences both passive and reactive cues of other bystanders when deciding whether or not to intervene. With these manipulations, minority influence during an emergency situation may be assessed if just one of the confederates, among passive others, expressed concern in a critical situation (e.g. ppt:confederate [passive, reactive] ratio ranging from 1:1,1 – 1:8,1). In line with the critique of this paper, and research extensions in existing literature, potential research extensions should aim to include a large, more representative sample in order to increase reliability of results.

Summary & conclusions.

The findings of this paper were some of the first of its kind in attempting to identify a ‘bystander effect’ and demonstrate how bystander intervention may be influenced by the social situation. The author’s work has been the basis of multitudes of research into bystander intervention and helping behaviour and remains as relevant today as it was at the time of publication. However, the research suffers from methodological biases in sampling and reliability. Furthermore, the conclusions drawn by the authors may not provide the ‘full picture’ in explaining the paper’s findings. Potential research extensions are considered.
References


