THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

In this multi-session activity, pairs of participants conduct a field study on helping behavior to explore concepts related to the *bystander effect*, a situation in which a greater number of observers is associated with a reduced likelihood of assistance in an apparent emergency. This activity is an excellent introduction to research on helping behavior and key principles and techniques in the scientific study of human behavior. It is appropriate for courses on psychology, sociology, urban studies, ethics, philosophy, or research design.

The activity requires approximately 60 minutes of setup time with the group. Participants will require several hours of out-of-class time to collect data. Then, data will be analyzed and discussed in a subsequent group session.

PROCEDURE

MATERIALS

⊙ A standardized data-collection form for each pair of students. The form should look like this:

	DAY OF WEEK	TIME	# OF OBSERVERS	IGNORE	WATCH	HELP
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						

PREPARATION

Determine how you will break the class into pairs—randomly, alphabetically, etc. Print out one data collection form for each pair of participants.

INSTRUCTIONS

Setting up the field study

Tell the class:

> " You are going to do a real field study on human behavior. Where you'll be paired with another student. One of you will perform a very brief scenario in which you appear to need help in a public place; the other will record whether or not you are actually helped. We'll look at the data together, see what patterns we can find, and see how our results compare to the results of other lab and field studies. The question at the heart of this study—what factors determine whether or not a person in an emergency will be helped—has been studied by experimental psychologists for decades, and we'll go into what they found, and how they've explained what they found, once we complete our study. "

Give each pair of students a data-collection form. Tell them:

> " Use this form to collect data. Each pair will do five observations. For each observation, one of you will perform the helping scenario, and the other will record the response. You need to record the day of the week, time of day, and number of observers present. Then you'll record what those observers did: Did they ignore you? Watch you but do nothing? Help you?
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> And what is this "helping scenario"? It's very simple: The performer will be carrying a stack of books (five to seven hardbacks is fine), and when you're both ready, the performer will "drop" those books in close proximity to one or more observers. Then the recorder will write down which one of the three responses they saw: ignore, watch, or help. That's all there is to it.
>
> There are several important things to remember when you're doing this. (1) Most important, pick a spot and observers where you feel safe. (2) Vary the number of observers from observation to observation. That is, if you drop the books in front of one person on the first observation, try to drop the books in front of two or three or five observers on the second observation, and keep mixing it up for all five observations. (3) Once you've done

INSTRUCTIONS (CONT'D)

an observation, you need to tell the observers what you're up to: specifically, that (a) you're doing a social psychology experiment for this class, and (b) you're collecting data on factors that influence helping behavior, but their data is completely anonymous, and there is no right or wrong response. Finally, make sure to thank them for their participation. Questions? 🙰

Data collection

Give students enough time to collect their data. Plan for at least two days between the initial setup session and data analysis and discussion. You will also need some time to collate the data and present it in an easily understandable format before discussing it. Ask the students to turn in their data collection forms at least one day prior to the discussion. When you have their forms, calculate these results:

- total number of observations made

- number and percent ignored/watched/helped on each day of the week on which observations were made

- number and percent ignored/watched/helped in morning/afternoon/evening observations

- number and percent ignored/watched/helped when one observer was present

- number and percent ignored/watched/helped when two to four observers were present

- number and percent ignored/watched/helped when five or more observers were present

Analyzing and discussing the results

First, share the results you've calculated by giving out handouts or writing results on a black/whiteboard. Ask the students what patterns they see in the data. If they have trouble finding patterns, be more specific: Does the day of the week or time of day seem to be related to helping behavior? What about the number of observers?

INSTRUCTIONS (CONT'D)

This second question is at the heart of the *bystander effect*, which predicts that the greater the number of observers to an emergency, the less likelihood there is that the victim will be helped. This formulation was first described by social psychologists Bibb Latane and John Darley. Their work on helping behavior was prompted in part by the 1964 murder of a woman named Kitty Genovese in New York City. Although a number of Genovese's neighbors heard or saw the assault, many of them did not provide assistance, and Latane and Darley wanted to understand why. Ultimately, they concluded that it wasn't that these observers were callous, unfeeling people; rather, a phenomenon called *diffusion of responsibility* was occurring: When only one person witnesses an apparent emergency, it is clear to that person that he or she is the only one able to respond—in other words, that the responsibility to respond rests solely with that observer. However, the greater the number of observers, the less responsibility *each individual observer* may feel to offer assistance. (In cases of multiple observers, it is obviously critical that those observers are aware of each other for diffusion of responsibility to occur.)

Once you've described the bystander effect and diffusion of responsibility to the group, discuss whether or not you see evidence for it in the data your group collected. (Note that a rigorous study requires that data be analyzed using special statistical techniques.) If you did, explain that you've done something very important in scientific research—you've *replicated* a previous pattern of results, which adds strength to the theory proposed by earlier researchers. If you did not, one possibility is that you may have conducted your study in a way that obscured the bystander effect. Perhaps students didn't perform the helping scenario in the same way. For example, some performers may have only dropped 1 or 2 paperbacks while others dropped 10 heavy hardbacks, or some may have worked in close proximity to observers while others stayed many feet away from them. Different teams may also have defined *help* in different ways, with some noting that they were helped if observers simply offered to pick up some books, but others defining *help* only as actually picking up books and handing them back. Variations like these, rather than diffusion of responsibility, might have been the primary factors influencing observers' helping behavior. Explore these possibilities with the group by asking how they set up their scenarios and recorded results, and make the point that methodological *standardization* is an important part of scientific observations.

(More information about the Genovese case and about the research of Latane, Darley, and others can be found in the Resources section.)

DISCUSSSION QUESTIONS

- Why was it important that we all used the same helping scenario? What if some of us had used a different scenario—a person who appeared to be injured or ill, for example?

- What other factors could have affected whether people helped in this study? What about gender? Ethnicity? Age? Why do you think those might have been important here, and how might those have affected what happened?

- Do different cultures have different rules or expectations about helping? Generate some examples. Why might those differences exist?

- Why do you think I didn't deeply review the research on the bystander effect *before* we began to collect our data? (This question offers an opportunity to discuss possible *experimenter bias* and *demand characteristics*, factors that can influence the results of a study by changing the way a researcher treats participants.)

- What are the ethical concerns associated with doing this kind of research? What did we do here that requires very careful consideration? (Hint: We deceived observers, a step that triggers more oversight by research review committees.) Could we have done a study like this without deception? How?

VARIATIONS

- Have the class define the helping scenario. For example, rather than staging the "dropped books" scenario, the performer, holding a map, could pretend to be lost and in need of directions. Brainstorm scenarios with the class and discuss pros and cons of each.

- To push this idea further, you could vary the scenario in the study itself by having some groups perform one scenario and others perform another, then comparing results. Do some scenarios result in no helping at all or 100% helping?

- Collect additional data on observers and context, such as gender, age, or ethnicity of observers and victim, or type of environment (a busy street, a public park, etc.) Do the data you collect suggest that these variables might be related to the likelihood of help being given?

RESOURCES

The Bystander Effect
youtube.com/watch?v=z4S1LLrSzVE
Dangerous Conformity
youtube.com/watch?v=vjP22DpYYh8
Videos showing experiments on the bystander effect and the phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility.

Bystander Effect
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bystander_effect
Wikipedia's comprehensive article on the bystander effect describes the research of Latane, Darley, and others on this ubiquitous and powerful social phenomenon.

Kitty Genovese: What Really Happened?
thepsychfiles.com/2007/11/episode-36-the-myth-of-the-kitty-genovese-story
This compelling podcast describes the Kitty Genovese case and its impact on the scientific study of social behavior and provides additional links to articles and videos on the bystander effect.

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