

The Dark Side of Social Validation

Bystander Apathy

Numerous studies demonstrate that when someone is in trouble or in need of help, as the number of bystanders increases, the number of people who actually help decreases. Termed “Bystander Apathy,” this effect occurs because, in almost any situation, the more people that are present, the more we feel a diffusion of responsibility. Our sense of social pressure is lessened when we feel that there might be any number of people more capable of helping than we are.

Have you ever been in a situation where, because of the numbers in your group, you didn’t really give it your all? For example, maybe on an academic group project you noticed you weren’t as diligent as you would have been had you been solely responsible for the assignment. Or, maybe you’ve helped push a stalled car to safety with some other people and you realized you didn’t really push your hardest. When we find ourselves in groups, there is a diffusion of responsibility. Sometimes we don’t know if we should even involve ourselves in the first place, since there are so many other people who could take action. Have you ever seen someone pulled over on the side of the road, but you just kept driving along with all the other cars speeding by? When there are large numbers of people involved, we tend to assume someone else will respond and take action first, or we might conclude that our help is not needed.

One particular case in history stands out as a classic example of Bystander Apathy. Catherine Genovese, a young woman living in *New York City*, was murdered one night when she was coming home from work. The unfortunate truth of the matter was that, in a city like New York, her death was just another of countless murders. Consequently, the incident didn’t receive any more coverage than a few short lines in *The New York Times*. Genovese’s story would have remained an obscure and incidental case had it not been for one, small incident.

A week later, A.M. Rosenthal, editor of *The New York Times*, went out to lunch with the city police commissioner. Rosenthal asked the commissioner about another homicide in the area, but the commissioner, mistakenly thinking he was being asked about the Genovese case, revealed a shocking piece of information that had been uncovered by the police. Genovese’s death had not been a silent, hidden, or secretive occurrence. Rather, it had been a loud, drawn-out, public event. As her attacker chased her down and stabbed her three separate times in a 35-minute period, 38 neighbors watched from their apartment windows and didn’t even call the police!

Rosenthal promptly assigned a team to investigate this incidence of “Bystander Apathy.” Soon following, *The Times* came out with a lengthy, front-page article detailing the incident and the alleged reactions of the neighbors:

“For more than half an hour, 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens. Twice the sound of their voices and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and

frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out, and stabbed her again. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead.”

Everyone was completely stunned and baffled. How could people just stand by, witness such a scene, and do absolutely nothing? Even the very neighbors alluded to in the article didn't know how to explain their inaction. Responses included, “I don't know,” “I was afraid,” and “I didn't want to get involved.” These “explanations” didn't really answer anything. Why couldn't one of them have just made a quick, anonymous call to the police? Different branches of the media – newspapers, TV stations, magazines, radio stations, etc. – pursued their own studies and investigations to explain the incredible scenario, all of them finally arriving at the same conclusion: the witnesses simply didn't care. They concluded that there was just no other explanation, or so they thought. Do you really think 38 people did not care enough to make an anonymous phone call? Did the researchers not understand the diffusion of responsibility? The neighbors did not react, thinking someone else would help or someone else would call the police. Most of us are good people. If each individual neighbor knew it was up to them to phone the police and get help, I guarantee they would have made the call.

Another experiment conducted in New York highlighted this tendency for “Bystander Apathy.” It determined that when a lone individual observed smoke leaking from under a door, 75% of those studied reported the smoke. In groups of three, however, reporting incidences dropped to 38%. If in that group two people encouraged the third person to do nothing, reporting of the smoke dropped to 10 %. Often the problem is that we don't know if we are really witnessing an emergency or not. For example, if we see a guy collapsed on the floor, we might waver between two conclusions: Did he just have a heart attack or did he pass out because he'd been drinking too much? So, bystanders may appear to be “apathetic” more because of uncertainty than insensitivity. And if they are uncertain, then they often don't help because they don't know if they're responsible to do so. Everybody else observing the event is likely to be looking for social evidence, too. Because most people prefer to appear poised and levelheaded when in the presence of others, they are likely to search for that evidence with brief glances at those around them. Therefore, everyone sees everyone else looking unflustered and failing to act. When people clearly know their responsibilities in a recognized and obvious emergency, however, they are remarkably quick to respond.