

STOP AND STARE: UNDERSTANDING BY STANDER EFFECT IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

A contemporary study conducted in contexts of Amsterdam, Cape Town, and Lancaster suggests that the Bystander Effect is a myth, especially when it comes to street disputes. However, the pervasiveness of the same in other countries, in various circumstances such as sexual and domestic violence in India, and health emergencies in China concerning foreigners (Langfitt, 2014), have proven that the Bystander Effect continues to prevail. Irrespective of the global advancements in technology which should lower factors of ambiguity in emergencies, the Bystander Effect continues to show its effects. This paper begins with introducing what the Bystander Effect is, and how theory was first recognised. It then moves onto providing a brief background to the factors that influence the theory, and then discussing the same with respect to cases of sexual and domestic abuse in the context of India. Lastly, it concludes the paper with suggesting psychological tools to combat the theory's effects and create spaces of intervention.

Introduction

Imagine the scenario of a murder taking place in an apartment. The walls of the building are thin, and at the moment, the building is fully occupied by residents. The killer simply goes up to the second floor where their victim lives, and barges into their home. The assassination is nothing but a secret – the shrieks of the victim are brutally loud, and the struggle between the victim and the killer is witnessed by the neighbours through their windows. All the residents see the murderer leave the building, staring at each other through their windows, but the killer successfully manages to leave without any resistance. How did the assassin successfully carry out their task? This question could be explained by the socio-psychological theory of Bystander Effect – the notion that when there are more people present witnessing a crime, the less inclined individuals within that group are to help (The bystander effect, n.d.).

This theory of Bystander Effect was sparked after the murder of twenty-eight-year-old Kitty Genovese in New York City outside her apartment building in 1968. Social psychologists, John

Darley and Bibb Latané, on discussing the murder which had at least thirty-eight witnesses, and took more than half an hour to execute, inferred that none of the residents helped the victim because “as the number of people who are present in an emergency situation increases, the less likely it is that any single individual will help someone in need” (Cieciura, 2016).

To confirm the above hypothesis, the two researchers conducted a study among a group of seventy-two participants where the true objective and method of the study were not revealed to the participants. The participants were seated in rooms within groups or pairs of different numbers of people. While filling the questionnaire for the ‘study’ that was used to lure the participants in, one of the subject’s, who was planted in by the researchers, suffered a fit. At the end of the study, it was revealed that eighty-five percent of the participants who thought that they alone knew of the condition of the patient, reported the seizure immediately (Darley and Latané, 1968). Whereas, when the participants thought that four other by-standers knew of the victim’s condition, only thirty-one percent of them reported the seizure (Darley and Latané, 1968).

Contemporary studies such as the one conducted by Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard disprove the Bystander Effect – where a total of two-hundred-and-nineteen disputes were recorded on a security camera, and “in almost every single case, bystanders intervened to calm the situation” (Lindegaard, 2019). However, this inference does not negate the studies conducted earlier, and the theory’s relevance in contemporary cases today as well. Therefore, this essay will aim to investigate the relevance of the Bystander Effect in relation to the Visakhapatnam rape that took place in 2017, and the COVID-19 lockdown in the county. This research will essentially aid in proving the relevance of the Bystander Effect in contemporary cases, even with the rapid rise of technology. Digital media has revolutionised communication, and irrespective of this remodeling with which perpetrators can be held accountable for their crimes, the Bystander Effect haunts society.

Background

Kitty Genovese’s murder which caused the New York City to establish the ‘911’ direct response system, was described by the media as the “alienation and dehumanization of city dwellers” and evidence of “moral decay” (Web Archive, 2013). However, when scholars began studying the reasons behind the behaviour of the bystanders, it was revealed that this is because of a number of reasons such as cultural differences (Langfit, 2014), the assumption that another bystander must be dealing with the situation (Darley and Latané, 1968), how cohesive the group is (Rutkowski et al, 1983), and familiarity with the environment within which the crime is taking place (Latané and Darley, 1970).

One of the major reasons behind the pervasiveness of the Bystander Effect is the level of ambiguity on part of the bystanders in the emergency. This ambiguity can be “strengthened or weakened by the degree of consensus between bystanders” (Harada, 1985, p. 178), essentially the relationship among the bystanders. In a situation where the overall ambiguity is low, bystanders are more likely to provide help. Whereas, in a situation where the level of ambiguity is high, the contrary is true.

According to a study that compared how pairs of friends versus pairs of strangers reacted to an emergency, it was revealed that “pairs of friends were less inhibited from intervening than were strangers and helped significantly faster” (Latané and Rodin, 1969, p. 189). This study reveals that when there exists a relationship among the bystanders, the level of ambiguity in the given situation is low, and therefore, help is provided much faster. Again, the contrary is true when the bystanders are strangers to one another. According to the scholars who conducted this study, a bystander when alone, is influenced by their experiences, their desires, and what they observe. However, “if other people are present, he will be guided by their apparent reactions in formulating his own impressions” (Latané and Rodin, 1969, p. 199). This is evident of the fact that when pairs of friends are bystanders, there is less ambiguity in one to recognise each other’s reactions, whereas when there is a pair of strangers, the individual bystanders will take a longer time to recognise the reactions of their pair, thereby increasing the ambiguity in the given situation. There is therefore an interdisciplinary relationship between the notions of ambiguity and group cohesiveness which explain how bystanders react.

The notion of evading responsibility is another factor explaining the reaction of bystanders in emergency situations. According to the social-psychologists, the bystander in an emergency is also in a conflict – worrying about the rational and irrational consequences of what should happen if one were to intervene (Darley and Latané, 1968). Will they be prone to public embarrassment? Will they be physically harmed? Will the police harass them? There also exists the assumption that if I, as a bystander am not helping, it is because another bystander is (Emeghara, 2020).

Another factor contributing to the bystander effect is the notion of social or cultural norms – the characteristics that dictate the actions and behaviours of individuals from a particular group, even in an emergency. An example of this conformation to socio-cultural norms in an emergency was the rape of a mentally challenged minor in the compartment of a local train in Mumbai, India, with five commuters looking on, doing nothing to stop the situation (Passengers Watch as Drunk Rapes Girl, 2002). While the police, the media, and the public were all appalled by the apathy of the bystanders, psychiatrist Dr Harish Shetty explains that the act of not acting in the emergency can be explained by exploring the Indian psyche, “We are taught from a very young age not to

meddle in others' affairs" (Tate, 2012) – especially when it comes to gendered violence in a substantially patriarchal country such as India. Psychiatrist Dr Rachel Nandi, explaining the bystander effect in the context of domestic violence cases in India, notes that societal norms in the country maintain the notion that domestic violence is a “family issue where others shouldn't interfere” (78% women experienced violence in public places, reports survey, 2021). This prevalence of social and cultural norms ensures that when women are inflicted with violence, bystanders only witness the crime and prefer to not act against their social group.

Discussion

Visakhapatnam Rape Case

Another episode of sexual assault that was committed in broad daylight took place in 2017 in Visakhapatnam. The victim was in her late twenties and was resting on a pavement under a tree near the city's railway station at 2pm, when a man – with a history of alcoholism and drug addiction, and with several criminal records registered against him – raped her. According to reports, the pavement was a busy one and multiple people witnessed the crime, however, they did not intervene (Pandey, 2017). Moreover, an autorickshaw driver stopped to record a video of the crime.

When the onlookers who passed by the active crime scene were confronted by the police, some of them said that they wanted to intervene, however, the rapist made threatening gestures at them which discouraged them from doing so (Pandey, 2017). This is evident of the fact that the bystanders were witnessing an emergency that was high in ambiguity, and in a sense, they were in direct conflict with it. If they dared to intervene, it could possibly be a threat to their safety and lives – and out of this exact fear of ambiguity that erupts from uncertainty, they chose to refrain from interfering.

Even though there was a presence of a surveillance that could easily lead authorities to the criminal – the notion that the crime was being recorded – it neither compelled the bystander himself to help, nor did it stop the rapist from sexually assaulting the woman. Therefore, it is crucial to observe that even with the advancement of technology, when substantial evidence can hold perpetrators accountable, the bystander effect marches on.

COVID-19 Lockdown and Domestic Violence

According to the data collected by the Indian, National Commission for Women, cases of domestic violence “rose sharply from 2,960 in 2019 to 5297 in 2020” (PTI, 2021), and the trend seems to continue. The COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 have resulted in most people

being confined to their homes, which has increased intimate partner violence (Evans et al, 2020) due to victims being locked in with their abusers. While this ten-year hike in cases was only the result of reported crimes, studies suggest that this number could be higher considering marital rape is not constituted as a crime in the country (Bhattacharya, 2020).

For Chennai-based Parvathi (name changed to protect privacy), she would earlier escape her home and run in the lanes of her slum, asking neighbours to intervene when her husband abused her. However, during the imposition of the lockdown, her neighbours called out to her, asking her to stay at home, even when she was being subject to violence (Rukmini, 2020). While here, the level of ambiguity is low among the bystanders, considering they have dealt with similar situations in the past involving the same victim, this time, due to the fear of catching the virus, especially within a month of it being termed a pandemic, the neighbours were reluctant to help her.

Tools to Encourage Bystander Intervention

Even with the evolution of technology, the bystander effect seems to rage on. However, studies suggest that crimes can significantly reduce with the aid of bystander intervention if bystanders report the same to the police (Felson and Pare, 2005). Moreover, the way bystanders behave or act in a situation is a variable that can be influenced by employing appropriate psychological tools.

According to a study conducted in the context of India, it was revealed that bystanders can be influenced to be more empathetic towards cases of domestic violence and other forms of sexual abuse through Social Cognitive Theory, encouraging them to intervene if they were to be overlooking an emergency (Muralidharan & Kim, 2019). As stated before, an individual's actions during an emergency are shaped by their own moral compass, and by the actions of the bystanders around them. Instead of using the alarming statistics of domestic abuse cases to encourage bystanders to intervene, health communication messages can utilise narratives and stories – essentially employing the Social Cognitive Theory to change behaviour through observational learning (Muralidharan & Kim, 2019). The use of stories and narratives can help bystanders empathise with the victims, and therefore, increase intervention in emergencies.

Conclusion

Although studies have attempted to disprove the existence of the bystander effect, especially in the digital age when bystanders can hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes, the existence of cases such as the ones provided above proves that factors such as ambiguity, socio-cultural norms, and group cohesiveness prevail in emergencies. However, with appropriate training and

skills, bystanders can eventually learn how to intervene. People can be taught how to collect evidence with the help of digital media, and with the help of narratives, they can better empathise with victims. This proves that even though the Bystander Effect is real and has tangible consequences, it can be influenced to encourage intervention.

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