

BYSTANDER "APATHY"

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From: *American Scientist*, Vol. 57, No. 2, Summer, 1969

Exercises: J. Geffen

05-6

1. On a March night in 1964, in Kew Gardens, Queens, Kitty Genovese was set upon by a maniac as she came home from work at 3 a.m. Thirty-eight of her neighbors came to their windows when she cried out in terror. None came to her assistance. Her assailant took over half an hour to murder her, but no one
5 even as much as called the police.
2. The story became the journalistic sensation of the decade. "Apathy," cried the newspapers. "Indifference," said columnists and commentators. "Moral callousness," "dehumanization," "loss of concern for our fellow man," added preachers, professors and other sermonizers.
- 10 3. Although it is true that witnesses to emergencies often do nothing to save the victims, "apathy," "indifference," and "unconcern" are not accurate descriptions of their reactions. The thirty-eight witnesses to Kitty Genovese's murder did not merely glance at the scene and turn away. Instead, they continued to stare out their windows – caught, fascinated, distressed, but
15 unwilling to act. Their behavior was not helpful, but neither was it indifferent or apathetic. It was like crowd behavior in many emergencies – car accidents, drownings, fires, and attempted suicides. All attract substantial numbers of people who watch in helpless fascination.
4. In such situations, there are strong forces that urge people to act,
20 including sympathy for the victim and various social norms concerning people's obligation to help each other. However, strong counterforces also exist. The basic characteristic of an emergency is that it involves threat or harm, certainly to the victim and possibly to those who try to help him. A second characteristic of emergencies is that they are highly unusual events, different from the normal
25 course of life and also from each other. For this reason, people have little personal experience with handling them. In addition, little secondhand wisdom on the subject is available. One might get through a formal dinner party by using manners gleaned from old Fred Astaire movies, but it is difficult to cope with a genuine emergency by relying on "Charge!" "Women and children first!"
30 and "Quick, get lots of hot water and towels!". Third, emergencies are sudden and unforeseen, and they require instant action. The bystander has no opportunity to plan in advance or to consider his alternatives in a leisurely

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fashion. Faced with a situation that offers at least some risks and few positive rewards, unable to rely on past experience or learning, and denied the time for
35 planning and careful consideration, the bystander to an emergency is in an unenviable position. It is perhaps surprising that anyone should intervene at all.

5. Approaching the matter from a different angle, one can ask what has to go on in the mind of a bystander before he acts. Suppose an emergency is actually taking place. A middle-aged man, walking down the street, has a heart attack.
40 He stops short, clutches his chest and staggers to the nearest building wall, where he slowly slumps to the sidewalk in a sitting position. Before coming to the man's assistance, a passerby must make a series of decisions that can be schematized as follows:

- (i) He must notice that something is happening.
- 45 (ii) He must interpret the event, deciding that something is clearly and urgently wrong. (Perhaps the man slumped on the sidewalk is a drunk who neither wants nor can use help.)
- (iii) He must assume personal responsibility for giving assistance. (Perhaps help is already on the way; perhaps someone else in the crowd is a doctor
50 and will come forward.)
- (iv) He must decide how to help. (Should he himself go to the man, or should he call a doctor or the police? What are the first-aid rules? Where is the nearest telephone?)

6. In the course of making these decisions, an individual bystander is likely
55 to be considerably influenced by the decisions he perceives other bystanders to be making. If all the other onlookers seem to regard an event as non-serious and the proper behavior as non-intervention, perhaps they are right. One must ask, of course, why the group would remain inactive in the face of an emergency. One reason is that each bystander, while he watches the reactions of the others,
60 is aware that the others are also watching him. In our society, men are supposed to remain poised and collected under stress and women are supposed to leave the handling of crises to men. It is not hard to see how a group of people, trying to follow these rules and simultaneously watching the behavior of others for cues, might be led (or misled) to define the situation as less critical than each
65 would if alone. In addition, the presence of other people may affect a person's assessment of the costs and rewards of non-intervention. When only one bystander is present, it is clear that only he can act or fail to act. When there is a group, responsibility is diffused over all its members.

7. Let us examine some experiments that bear on these two points: the
70 interpretation of a situation as an emergency and the decision to undertake
personal responsibility for handling it. Our theory is that both are more likely
when a bystander is alone than when he is part of a group.

INTERPRETING THE EVENT

Experiment 1: Where There's Smoke, There's (Sometimes) Fire

75 8. In this experiment, fifty-eight Columbia students (all men) agreed to
submit to an interview about "some of the problems involved in life at an urban
university." While they waited to be called for the interview, they filled out a
preliminary questionnaire in a small waiting room. Some subjects waited alone;
other waited with two confederates of the experimenter; still others waited with
80 two subjects who, like themselves, had no knowledge of the real purpose of the
experiment.

9. Soon after the subjects began working on the questionnaires, a stream of
whitish smoke began to puff into the room through a wall vent at irregular
intervals. The experiment lasted until a subject left the room to report the
85 smoke or, if he did not, for six minutes after he first noticed it. The question
was, what effect would the presence of other people have on the likelihood that
a subject would report the smoke and on his speed in doing so?

10. The typical subject who was alone in the waiting room behaved very
reasonably. Shortly after the smoke appeared, he glanced up from the
90 questionnaire, noticed the smoke, looked startled, and went through a brief
period of indecision. Soon he went to the vent and investigated. He hesitated
again, then finally walked out of the room and calmly reported the smoke to the
experimenter. Eighteen of the twenty-four people tested alone reported the
smoke, most of them within two minutes of noticing it.

95 11. The behavior of subjects who went through the experiment with two
confederates of the experimenter (who had been told to act indifferent to the
"emergency" – to stare at the smoke, shrug and return to their questionnaires)
was dramatically different. Of the ten subjects in this group, only one ever
reported the smoke – 10 percent, as compared to 75 percent of the subjects who
100 worked alone. The other nine stayed in the room, worked doggedly on their
questionnaires and waved the fumes away. In the third group, which consisted
of twenty-four students working in threes, only three subjects reported the
smoke within the six-minute experimental period, and two of them waited more
than four minutes to do so.

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105 12. Interviewed later, all the subjects who did not report the smoke said they
had rejected the idea that it came from a fire. They hit upon an astonishing
variety of other explanations, all of which assumed the smoke not to be
dangerous. Many thought it was steam or air-conditioning vapor; several
thought it was smog purposely pumped in to simulate an urban environment;
110 two (from different groups) actually thought it was "truth gas" filtered into the
room to induce them to answer the questionnaire accurately. Predictably, a few
decided that "it must be some sort of experiment" and stoically endured the
discomfort rather than over-react. Despite the obviously inhibiting effects of
other bystanders, the subjects almost invariably claimed that they had paid little
115 or no attention to the reactions of others in the room.

Experiment 2: A Lady in Distress

13. Our second experiment was designed to see whether the inhibiting effects
of a group also operate when the danger is not to the bystander himself, as in
the smoke-filled room, but to another person. We also added a new variable:
120 some bystanders were strangers; others knew each other.

14. The subjects, again Columbia undergraduates, waited in a room alone,
with a friend, or with a stranger to participate (they thought) in a market
research study. As they waited, they heard the attractive young woman who had
guided them to the testing room climb onto a chair in the next room, then fall
125 and apparently injure herself. There was a loud crash and a scream (from a tape
recorder) as the chair supposedly collapsed. "Oh, my God, my foot... I... can't
move... it. Oh...my ankle," the woman moaned for about a minute longer, but
the cries got more subdued and controlled. Finally she muttered something
about getting outside, knocked over the chair as she pulled herself up, and
130 thumped to the door, closing it behind her as she left. The incident took just
over two minutes in all.

15. Of the students who heard the accident while alone in the waiting room,
70 percent offered to help the victim before she left the room. By contrast,
there were responses from only 7 percent of the subjects who waited with a
135 passive confederate of the experimenter and 13 percent of those who waited
with another subject they did not know. When friends waited together, at least
one person intervened in 70 percent of the pairs. Although this percentage is the
same as that for subjects who waited alone, the response rate for pairs is
actually lower than that for single individuals. Allowing for the fact that twice
140 as many people are free to act when pairs are involved, there would have to be

a response from at least one person in 91 percent of the pairs to equal a response from 70 percent of the subjects who were alone.

16. The groups ranked the same on speed as they did on response rate. Subjects who were alone acted fastest; then pairs of friends, then pairs of
145 strangers. Subjects whose partners had been told to act passive responded most slowly of all.

17. When those who did not intervene were interviewed later, most of them said they were not sure what had happened but had decided it was not too serious. Some said they thought other people would or could help, and three
150 said they did not want to embarrass the victim. None of them felt they had behaved callously or immorally. Their behavior was generally consistent with their interpretation of the situation, and they almost uniformly maintained that, in a "real" emergency, they would be among the first to help. Interestingly enough, the subjects whom the results showed to have been most influenced by
155 the presence of another person, those paired with passive confederates of the experimenter, were those least aware of or willing to admit to having been influenced. Asked to rate the influence of their partners, 14 percent of the subjects with passive confederates, 30 percent of the paired strangers, and 70 percent of the paired friends, checked "moderate" or more.

160 18. How can we account for the fact that strangers inhibit intervention more than friends? It may be that people are less afraid of possible embarrassment in front of friends and also that friends are less likely than strangers to misinterpret each other's behavior. When strangers overheard the accident, they seemed noticeably concerned but confused. They often glanced furtively at
165 each other, apparently anxious to discover the other's reaction yet unwilling to betray their own concern. Friends, on the other hand, seemed better able to convey their concern non-verbally, and they were also more inclined to discuss the incident and arrive at a mutual plan of action.

Experiment 3: The Case of the Stolen Beer

170 19. Perhaps, we thought, there are circumstances under which people are more likely to intervene when others are present than when they are alone. For instance, when there is a criminal, the presence of potentially risk-sharing allies might make intervention more likely.

20. To test this possibility, two Columbia undergraduates staged a series of
175 "robberies." During a two-week period in 1968, they "stole" a case of beer from the Nu-Way Beverage Center in Suffern, New York, a total of ninety-six

times. The proprietor was always out of the room when the robbery took place but returned shortly thereafter. Half the time the robbery occurred while one customer was in the store; half the time there were two witnesses.

180 21. Of the single witnesses, 65 percent reported the theft to the proprietor. From this one would predict (adjusting for the fact that a pair includes two people) that at least one person in 87 percent of the pairs would mention the robbery. Only 56 percent of the pairs did.

185 22. In three very different situations, then, the same effect has been observed. People are less likely to take a socially responsible action if other people are present than if they are alone. The effect holds whether the situation involves general danger, the victim of an accident, or a criminal against whom a group could unite. The results also support the argument advanced earlier to account for the inhibiting effect of a group. Bystanders tend to be led by other
190 bystanders to interpret the situation as less serious than they would if alone, and to hesitate to take action because they do not believe a dangerous situation really exists.

ASSUMING THE RESPONSIBILITY

195 23. But what happens when a person does know, perhaps because a victim makes it very clear, that an emergency exists? In that case, the observer must still decide whether he himself should intervene. The decision will presumably be based on an assessment of the costs and rewards of action and inaction.

200 24. The presence of other people can alter the costs and rewards of intervention chiefly by reducing the cost to any one person of not acting. A bystander who is alone bears all the responsibility for mishandling the situation. If he fails to act, he is the one who feels all the guilt and gets all the blame. If others are present, they share the responsibility. If, as in the Genovese case, the members of a group cannot watch each other closely, each person also has the option of assuming that "somebody else must be doing something."

205 Experiment 4: "I Need Help"

210 25. In this experiment, we needed to create a clear-cut emergency in which each observer was prevented from communicating with any other observers he believed to be present. We recruited about one hundred introductory psychology students from New York University to take part in an unspecified experiment required for the courts. (Although all the subjects were women, a variation of the basic experiment run with subjects of both sexes showed no sex differences in the rate or speed of responses. Coping with emergencies is often

thought to be the duty of men, especially when women are present, but this study showed no evidence that this is the case.)

215 26. Each subject was ushered into a room of her own and told, over an intercom, that she was to participate in a discussion of the kinds of personal problems faced by normal college students in a high-pressure urban environment. To avoid embarrassing anyone, the experimenter continued, the subjects would converse over the intercom instead of face-to-face, and the
220 experimenter would not listen to the discussion itself but only get the students' reaction to it later on, by questionnaire.

27. The plan for the discussion was that each person would talk in turn for two minutes, presenting her problems to the group. Next, each person in turn would comment on what others had said, and finally there would be a free
225 discussion. A mechanical device regulated the discussion, switching on only one microphone at a time.

28. The discussion started with the future "victim" speaking first. He said he found it difficult to get adjusted to New York and to his studies. Very hesitantly and with obvious embarrassment, he mentioned that he was prone to
230 seizures, particularly when studying hard or taking exams. The other people, including the one real subject, took their turns and discussed similar problems (minus the proneness to seizures). The subject talked last in the series, after the last prerecorded voice.

29. When it was again the victim's turn to talk, he made a few relatively calm
235 comments, and then, growing increasingly loud and incoherent, he went on to beg for help.

30. Some subjects were led to believe that the victim was the only other person taking part in the discussion. Others thought the group consisted of three people (the subject, the victim and one other person); others thought there were
240 six in the group. In some of the three-person groups, the two subjects were friends; in others they were strangers. We thought that knowing the victim might also affect a person's tendency to help, so we arranged for some subjects from six-person groups to encounter a student posing as the future victim in the hall, where they chatted for about a minute before the experiment began.

245 31. All the subjects who reported the emergency did so within three minutes after the victim's seizure began. Of those who thought they alone knew of the victim's plight, 85 percent reported it before the victim had stopped pleading for help and the remaining 15 percent did so shortly thereafter. Of the subjects who

250 thought they were part of a six-person group, only 62 percent ever reported the trouble.

32. Subjects who thought the discussion group consisted of themselves, the victim and a friend responded significantly faster than those who thought the third member of the group was a stranger. In fact, they responded with about the same speed as subjects who believed that they alone knew of the emergency, suggesting that responsibility does not diffuse across friends.

255 33. Subjects who had met the victim were faster to report his distress than other subjects from six-person groups. Some said later that they had actually pictured him in the grip of the seizure; no one who had not met the victim said this. apparently the ability to visualize a specific distressed individual increases
260 the likelihood of helping him.

34. Whether or not they intervened, subjects did believe the fit was genuine and serious. "My God, he's having a fit," many said to themselves (and we overheard via their microphones). Others gasped or simply said "Oh." One subject said to herself, "It's just my kind of luck, something has to happen to me!". Several spoke aloud of their confusion: "Oh, God, what should I do?"

265 35. Those who failed to report the emergency showed few signs of the apathy and indifference thought to characterize unresponsive bystanders. When the experimenter came into the room to end the experiment, subjects who had not responded often asked about the victim: "Is he being taken care of?" "He's all right, isn't he?" Many showed physical signs of nervousness, such as trembling hands and sweating palms. They seemed somewhat more emotionally aroused than did the subjects who reported the situation, who did so rather uncertainly, but without panic.

270 36. It is not our impression that the nonresponders had decided not to act; rather, they were still in a state of indecision. This distinction may be academic for a victim, since he gets no help in either case, but it is an extremely important one for understanding the causes of inaction. The fit created a conflict of the avoidance-avoidance type. On the one hand, subjects wanted to avoid the guilt and shame they would feel if they did not help the person in
280 distress. On the other hand, they wanted to avoid making fools of themselves by overreaching, ruining the experiment by leaving their intercoms, and destroying the anonymous nature of the situation, which the experimenter had said was important. Subjects who thought they alone could help were able to resolve the conflict quickly. For those who thought other bystanders were

285 present, however, the cost of not helping was reduced and the conflict was
harder to resolve. As their emotional behavior showed, they did not choose not
to respond; instead, they were still vacillating between two negative alternatives
when the experiment ended.

290 37. As in the earlier experiments, we asked all subjects whether the presence
or absence of other bystanders had entered their minds while they listened to
the victim. We asked the question every way we knew how: subtly, directly,
tactfully, rudely. The answer was always the same. The subjects had been
aware of the presence of other bystanders, but they did not think it had
influenced them in any way. Once again, this denial was in contradiction to the
295 findings of the experiment.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS?

300 38. In these four experiments, bystanders in groups were less likely to
intervene in an emergency than if they were alone. The behavior of the other
bystanders and the relationships among them seem to be important. A stranger
who has been "programmed" not to react is the most inhibiting; a neutral
stranger next; and a friend the least. We have suggested two reasons for
inaction by a group: the apparent lack of concern on the part of others may lead
each person to interpret the situation as less serious than he would otherwise,
and the presence of others may diffuse the responsibility for coping or not
305 coping with the situation. In a particular emergency, both processes could
operate, although the diffusion of responsibility should play a role only to the
extent that social influence is unsuccessful in leading people to downgrade the
seriousness of the event.

310 39. "There's safety in numbers," according to an old adage that modern city
dwellers seem to believe. They shun deserted streets, empty subway cars, and
lonely walks in dark places. While it may be true that a person is less likely to
become a victim if he stays with the crowd, our experiments call into serious
question the belief that he is more likely to receive help if many people are
present. In fact, the opposite seems to be true: the fewer people who are
315 available to take action, the better.

40. Although the results of these studies may shake our faith in "safety in
numbers," they may also help us begin to understand the frightening incidents
in which crowds have heard but not answered a call for help. They suggest that
the immediate social environment is more important in determining a person's
320 reaction to an emergency than such vague cultural or personality concepts as

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"apathy" and "alienation due to urbanization". They also help explain why the failure to intervene seems more common in large cities than in rural areas. When an emergency arises in a large city, a crowd is likely to gather; the members of the crowd are likely to be strangers; and it is likely that none of them will know the victim. These are exactly the conditions that, in our experiments, led to the fewest attempts to help.

Choose the best answer

1. Judging by everyday standards, the victim's neighbours, who witnessed the actual killing, displayed almost inhuman
- a. calm. b. restraint. c. empathy.
d. composure. e. callousness.

Answer the questions below:

2. How, according to the text, do crowds react in many emergencies?

Answer: _____

3. What are the forces that might prevent people from acting in emergency situations? Use your own words.

Answer : _____

Choose the best answer:

4. Paragraph 5 suggests that emergencies present the chance bystander with any number of _____ which must be resolved.
- a. threats. b. opportunities. c. uncertainties. d. conventions.

Answer the following questions:

5. How are norms governing the behaviour of males, or females for that matter, likely to affect the reactions of people witnessing an emergency?

Answer: _____

6. How does the possibility of placing the responsibility on somebody else's shoulders affect individuals?

Answer : _____

7. What is the conclusion to be drawn from the experiments conducted among the students of Columbia University?

Answer : _____

