

Good Samaritanism – Good Samaritanism: An underground phenomenon?

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Piliavin, I.M., Rodin, J. & Piliavin, J.A. (1969)



Introduction / Background

This study of helping behaviour was triggered by a real life event. In March 1964 a young woman called Kitty Genovese was fatally stabbed in the New York City. What was remarkable about this was that there were 38 witnesses who did nothing until it was too late. The killer first attacked Kitty as she made her way home at 3 a.m. after work. Kitty screamed and lights went on in surrounding apartments, but no one did anything but call out. The killer attacked twice more, finally killing Kitty in her doorway. Why did no one help? Psychologists suggested that the problem was **diffusion of responsibility**. No one helps because everyone thinks someone else will do it, and the more people there are present, the less responsibility each person feels and therefore the less likely help is to be forthcoming. This has also been called the **bystander effect**.

Research aim: To find out whether diffusion of responsibility does apply in all situations, and what other factors might influence **helping behaviour?** Piliavin et al, set out to test the hypothesis that 'People who are responsible for their own plight receive less help'.

The Field Experiment:

Participants

The experiment was conducted on a New York subway over a 2 month period. The participants were all those passengers who happened to be on the train (between 59th street and 125th street) on weekdays between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., a total of nearly 4500 men and women. There were slightly more White people than Blacks, and on average there were 43 people in a compartment on any one trial. Each trial lasted 7 ½ minutes. On each trial, a team of 4 students boarded the train separately. Two girls acted as observers, one boy was a confederate (role-model) and the other acted as a victim. There were four different teams, with a Black 'victim' in one of the teams.

Procedure

There were two experimental conditions used to test the hypothesis that 'People who are responsible for their own plight receive less help'.

- The 'drunk' condition: The victim smells of alcohol and carries a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag .
- The cane condition: The victim appears sober and carries a cane.

Seventy seconds after the train pulls out of the station, the male victim staggers and collapses. If no help is offered the role-model steps in to help after either 70 seconds or 150 seconds. The point of this was to see if a 'model' (someone offering help) affected the behaviour of other passengers.

The observers recorded how long it took for help to be forthcoming, as well as information about the race, gender, and location of all the passengers in the compartment and of all those who offered help. The observers also noted any comments overheard as well as eliciting comments from people sitting nearby.

Results:

The cane victim received spontaneous help 95% of the time (62/65 trials) whereas the drunk victim was spontaneously helped 50% of the time (19/38 trials).

The cane victim was helped on average within 5 seconds, whereas the drunk victim was helped after 109 seconds. Only 24% of drunk victims were helped before the role-model stepped in and 'encouraged' others to help, whereas 91% of the cane victims were helped before the role-model stepped in.

Black victims received less help less quickly especially in the drunk condition. Neither race, (Black or White), was more helpful, but there was a slight 'same race' effect, Whites were slightly more likely to help the 'White victim' than the 'Black victim'.

In terms of numbers of bystanders, the more passengers who were in the immediate vicinity of the victim the more likely help was to be given, thus there was no evidence of 'diffusion of responsibility'.

In terms of gender, 80% of the first helpers were males.

Conclusions

Piliavin *et al.* proposed a **two factor model** (or theory) to explain why people help or do not help.

Factor 1:

An emergency situation creates a sense of empathy (arousal) in a bystander. This empathic arousal is increased if one feels a sense of identity with the victim, or if one is physically close to the victim, and it becomes increasingly heightened the longer the emergency continues.

The arousal can be reduced by helping (directly or indirectly). It can also be reduced by going away or finding some way of rationalising why you can't help.

Factor 2:

Helping behaviour is determined by a cost-reward calculation:

	Helping	Not helping
Cost	e.g. effort, embarrassment, disgusting experience, possible physical harm	e.g. self blame, or the perception of blame from others
Reward	e.g. praise from self, victim and others	e.g. continuation of other activities, safety

This model suggests that the situation of the victim, rather than the characteristics of the helper, determines whether we will help.

