The Bystander Effect and the Passive Confederate:
On the Interaction Between Theory and Method

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This paper integrates theoretical and methodological evaluations of the effect of group size on helping. Bystander theory includes a reward–cost model for understanding the general helping context and a more specific designation of three psychological processes that produce the bystander effect. The three processes include: diffusion of responsibility, audience inhibition, and social influence. The present analysis identifies incompatibilities between the general model and the three processes and incompatibilities between the three processes and the definition of the bystander effect. Implications of these problems in the theory extend to the passive confederate design, one of the two major methods used in bystander research. This method is an attempt to test the bystander effect by manipulating social influence. But, because of a previously unrecognized disjunction between social influence and the bystander effect, we conclude that passive confederate studies do not actually test the bystander effect.

The bystander effect (Latané and Darley, 1970; Latané and Nida, 1981), the negative effect of group size on helping, has achieved a level of consensual acceptance and external recognition accorded to few other psychological constructs. In 1973, the American Association for the Advancement of Science recognized the bystander effect's contribution to science and applauded its development of innovative methodologies (AAAS, 1973). Historian Roger R. Hock (1999, p. vii) observed that the bystander effect is among the most important constructs in the field, and Morton Hunt (1993, pp. 418–419) called it "one of the best-established hypotheses of social psychology."

The bystander effect is thought to be one of those rare discoveries that is powerful, well-replicated, counterintuitive, and socially relevant. Latané and his colleagues attribute its success to a sound theoretical framework and the

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use of realistic experimental simulations (Latané and Nida, 1981). This research has employed simulated emergencies that cover an impressive range of helping predicaments, including falls, seizures, smoke filling a room, requests to help a child, requests for money, crashes, fainting, explosions, fire alarms, asthma attacks, electric shock, theft, correcting misinformation, and electrical blackouts. Latané, Nida, and Wilson (1981, p. 309) concluded,

> There is little doubt that an individual's likelihood of giving help decreases as the number of other bystanders also witnessing an emergency increases. The evidence for this group size effect is vast [and] remarkably consistent.

Certainly, there would appear to be few areas within social psychology with this level of both social impact and empirical support.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the theory underlying the bystander effect and show how theoretical ambiguities have combined to produce a method bias. Specifically, we will point out how a disjunction between explanatory and descriptive components of the theory has led to the use of a research method that is incapable of testing the bystander effect. This review deals exclusively with the passive confederate methodology, which accounts for about one-third of bystander research and has provided some of its strongest and most consistent support.

Bystander Theory

What, exactly, is the bystander effect? Its most central formal definition states that "the presence of other people serves to inhibit the impulse to help" (Latané and Darley, 1970, p. 38). Similarly, it is often described as "the social inhibition of helping" (Latané and Nida, 1981, p. 308). In this context, the presence of other people includes the belief that one is with others. Note that these definitions deal with the presence of others, not with the requirement that others behave in any particular way.

Latané and his colleagues (Latané and Darley, 1970; Latané and Nida, 1981; Latané, Nida, and Wilson, 1981) have employed both a general, reward–cost model of helping situations and a specific theory for explaining the bystander effect. Within the general model, they note that observers of an emergency typically encounter an avoidance–avoidance conflict, wherein the costs run high but the rewards do not. When helping does occur it is often because the costs of not helping outweigh the costs of helping. According to the theory, the costs of not helping include empathic distress, embarrassment, shame, guilt, and the knowledge that one did not fulfill a social responsibility. The costs of helping include the expenditure of time and effort, the possibility of physical danger, and potential legal complica-

tions. In contrast to these substantial costs, the reward for helping might be little more than a hurried "thank you." Bystander theorists have also postulated a decision tree: for help to occur, a bystander must notice the event, interpret it as an emergency, decide that it is his or her personal responsibility to offer aid, select the type of help to be given, and carry out the intervention.

Three Psychological Processes

Within the specific theory, researchers hypothesize the operation of three explanatory processes: diffusion of responsibility, audience inhibition, and social influence. Below, these processes are defined, evaluated, and examined with regard to their linkage to the theory as a whole.

Diffusion of Responsibility

Bystander theory assumes that, because of the numerous costs of helping and minimal likely rewards, most people do not look forward to witnessing an emergency. Instead, such situations are approached out of a sense of duty, as reflected in the costs of not helping. Latané and his colleagues argue that the knowledge that others are present and available to help allows one to diffuse the responsibility for helping among all members of the group, effectively shifting some of the responsibility for helping onto others. The presence of others allows individuals to share the costs of not helping and this reduced individual cost results in a decreased sense of personal responsibility for helping, thus lessening the impulse to help.

We find the argument for diffusion of responsibility credible, but we would maintain that this argument is incomplete and logically disconnected from the bystander effect. As such, the diffusion construct in its current form does not actually lead to the prediction that the impulse to help would be reduced in the presence of others. Our disagreement with bystander theory stems from the distinction between an overall explanation for a phenomenon, which should provide the basis for a prediction, and a post hoc reason for explaining the failure of a phenomenon to appear. This pattern will be seen in all three of the hypothesized psychological processes of bystander theory.

Diffusion of responsibility is appropriately derived from the cost analysis of the general model. But the way that diffusion of responsibility has been applied fails to recognize that, within bystander theory, there are two relevant costs: the cost of not helping and the cost of helping. Just as we would expect the presence of others to reduce the average anticipated individual cost of not helping and thus result in a diffusion of responsibility, we would also expect the presence of others to reduce the average anticipated individ-

ual cost of helping. If both costs were comparably reduced, there would be no basis for predicting that the presence of others would lead to a reduction in the impulse to help. It is not clear that the presence of others would automatically reduce the cost of not helping more than it reduces the cost of helping. For example, the presence of others would reduce the expected expenditure of time and effort in helping and it would reduce the risk of physical danger. In situations where such costs are salient, as in emergencies involving physical assault, a reward–cost analysis may, in fact, lead to an enhanced rather than an inhibited impulse to help when other observers are present.

As the bystander effect includes both the costs of helping and not helping, focusing only on the reduction in the costs of not helping seems unjustified. What bystander theory can legitimately do, in situations where help is not offered, is lead to the hypothesis, post hoc, that one reason for the failure to help may have been diffusion of responsibility.

Audience Inhibition

Latané and his colleagues note that people often feel ashamed and embarrassed when they violate rules of public behavior. If an event is misperceived and thought to be an emergency when it is not, or if a foolish or inadequate intervention is initiated, an individual who is in the presence of others risks a loss of face and may experience feelings of shame and embarrassment. Thus audience inhibition occurs when others inhibit helping because individuals fear that their behavior may be seen by others and evaluated negatively.

The central idea of audience inhibition, that the costs of helping include anticipated feelings of shame and embarrassment, is sound. But the same authors (Latané, Nida, and Wilson, 1981) who put forward this explanation of the bystander effect also identify shame and embarrassment as costs of not helping. According to bystander theory, such costs would increase the probability of helping. Thus audience inhibition could support either helping or not helping, depending on the situation.

As bystander theory now stands, the term, audience inhibition, is ambiguous. Presumably it refers to the inhibition of helping, but the larger, reward–cost context of the theory suggests that fear of negative evaluation from the audience can inhibit either helping or nonhelping. In addition, the phrase, audience inhibition, rather than being a cause of the bystander effect, is actually a restatement of the effect. It may be clearer to call this explanatory construct "anticipated audience evaluation." As with diffusion of responsibility, although the predictive and explanatory utilities of audience inhibition are compromised, this construct does have value for making sense of failures to help, after the fact. If an observer fails to render aid in a situation where help

is needed, one reason for this may be that the observer feared that his or her helping attempt would be perceived by others and regarded as foolish or inadequate.

Within our culture, the norm to be socially appropriate may be stronger than the norm to help others in need. If this assumption were made explicit, however, bystander theory would be extended beyond the mere social inhibition of helping to a wider critique of cultural values, a position that bystander authors have argued (Latané and Darley, 1970, p. 4) is unnecessary and misguided. Such an extension might include cultural boundary conditions, such as alienation, apathy, or narcissism as characteristics of societies in which we would expect to observe the bystander effect. Although bystander authors preferred a more parsimonious explanation based only on the number of observers, without reference to cultural values or norms, such an explanation does not appear to be adequate.

Social Influence

Bystander authors argue that helping situations are often ambiguous: Is help actually needed? And if so, what type of action is called for? When such questions arise, people may observe others' reactions to help interpret the situation and guide their behavior. If an observer appears to notice a potential emergency, for example, a person lying prostrate in a doorway, but the observer remains passive and unconcerned, one might infer that there is no reason to intervene. The observer is modeling inaction and one may imitate that inaction thinking that passivity is the socially appropriate response in this situation. In addition, as a secondary theme, bystander authors (Latané and Darley, 1970, p. 40) suggest that, in the United States, there is a social norm to appear calm and unperturbed in public. If each person in a group tries to appear calm during an ambiguous potential emergency, and at the same time looks to others in the group to help define the situation, each may be misled into thinking that help is not needed. Thus social influence occurs when a person sees the behavior of others and, from this, concludes that helping is not necessary or appropriate in this situation.

If a bystander remains passive, the theory of social influence assumes that this would induce others not to help. But, by the same process of social influence, if a bystander does initiate a helping response, one would expect this to increase the probability of others helping, as has been found (Staub, 1974). Because of this, social influence can not be used to predict a failure to help until we know what the behavior of other witnesses will be.

Social influence is both conceptually and empirically incompatible with the bystander effect. Conceptually, the bystander effect depends on the presence of others, not on whether others make one type of response rather than

another. And the bystander effect states that the presence of others inhibits helping, not that it sometimes inhibits and other times facilitates helping.

Empirically, a meta-analysis of bystander research (Latané and Nida, 1981) indicates that, in half of the helping situations that have been studied, at least one member in a naïve group of witnesses spontaneously offers help. This finding indicates that, overall, social influence operates in a way that is incompatible with the bystander effect. In fact, the empirical evidence indicates that social influence would be as likely to invalidate as to support the bystander effect.

In sum, the bystander effect has been explained through a description of the general context for helping situations and the operation of three hypothesized psychological processes. The reward–cost and decision elements of the context seem reasonable. But, although they apply to both lone and multiple observer situations, they have no specific application to the difference between these situations, and this difference is what defines the bystander effect. In addition, they do not appear to be specific enough to make consensual predictions in actual helping situations. For example, any behavior can be "explained" in terms of a cost–benefit analysis: in each situation, the behavior with the more favorable net benefit is predicted to occur. This may be true in some sense, but the value of this explanation will depend almost entirely on which rewards and costs the theory deems relevant and on how they are to be measured. This part of the theory has not been adequately developed.

The three explanatory processes are more specific, but the logic which might link them to the rest of the theory and to the definition of the bystander effect are in question. In particular, these processes do not deal evenhandedly with both the costs of helping and the costs of not helping, even though the general model identifies both costs as relevant. In particular, diffusion of responsibility deals only with the reduced cost of not helping when in a group, while ignoring the corresponding reduced cost of helping. Audience inhibition deals only with the social cost of helping while ignoring the social cost of not helping. And social influence deals only with the modeling of not helping while ignoring the modeling of helping.

Thus these three mechanisms cannot provide either a conceptual basis for predicting a bystander effect or a general explanation of this effect. If the diffusion in costs of helping, the anticipated negative social evaluations for not helping, and the modeling of helping were taken into account, it is not clear what bystander theory would predict. As the theory now stands, it presents a reasonable set of hypotheses for explaining a failure to help, after the fact, but not an adequate general explanation of the effects of other observers on the impulse to help.

The post hoc nature of bystander theory may be difficult to appreciate, partly because there appears to be a general perception that bystander theory "pertains" only to group situations in which no one helps. This characterization of the theory is encouraged by key terms, such as "bystander," "diffusion of responsibility," and "audience inhibition," each of which presupposes not helping. If the theory only deals with failures to help, then omitting the diffusion in costs of helping, omitting anticipated negative evaluations for not helping, and omitting the modeling of helping might not be problematic. In fact, interpreting the theory as applying only to group situations in which no one helps is precisely what would relegate it to post hoc utility only. Certainly, bystander authors were claiming much more than this for their theory.

The heart of bystander theory states that helping by a given individual is more likely in a lone observer situation than in a group. Thus the theory deals with both helping and not helping, with both alone and group situations. It is designed to predict when helping will be more or less likely to occur. It could be said that, if not helping actually occurs, the rewards and costs of helping become irrelevant. Similarly, if helping actually occurs, the rewards and costs of not helping become irrelevant. But the central issue for the theory is identifying, ahead of time, the determinants of the decision of whether to help or not to help. This will presumably be controlled by anticipated rewards and costs for both helping and not helping, and the evaluation of these anticipated outcomes would occur before the helping decision is made. Thus the theory is designed to have predictive utility with regard to helping behavior. Its main purpose is not to provide potential reasons for why an individual did not help, after it is known that help was not given.

The Passive Confederate Methodology

Latané and Nida (1981) conducted a meta-analysis of the bystander literature and concluded that research employing the passive confederate methodology provided strong support for the bystander effect. In this method, subjects who are presented with a helping situation while alone are compared to other subjects presented with that situation in the presence of a confederate. The passive confederate methodology amounts to a direct implementation of the social influence component of the explanatory model. For this design, subjects in the group condition witness a pseudo-emergency in the presence of one or more confederates. These confederates are trained to demonstrate their awareness of the emergency to the subject by, for example, looking up at the first sign of smoke or the sound of a crash. After demonstrating awareness of the problem, they shrug their shoulders and go back to their initial task. If the actual subject makes an inquiry, the confederate replies "I don't know" and resumes work on the initial task (Latané and Darley, 1970).

Passive confederates are "passive" in the narrow sense that they do not initiate a helping response. In fact, however, this term is misleading. These individuals are trained to use active, nonverbal means to inhibit helping. In actual helping situations a witness is not constrained to refuse help. Moreover, even if the witness fails to help, he or she may engage in behaviors that could increase the likelihood of helping by others. For example, bystanders could show continued interest in the cues that help might be needed, they could show concern for the potential victim, they could make eye contact with other bystanders, and they could ask other bystanders if they heard or saw something out of the ordinary. These would not be unusual behaviors for bystanders, even if they chose not to help.

Moreover, by initially not interacting with subjects while completing their "pre-emergency" task, as they are trained to do, and by returning to this task after showing an awareness of cues indicative of an emergency, these trained confederates are interpreting the importance of this task for the subjects. They are implicitly informing subjects that completing the first part of the experiment is more important than investigating cues that help might be needed. Thus the pre-emergency task competes with making a helping response, and the additional demand pressure to complete the initial task is not present in the alone condition. This means that the inhibition of helping as a result of the confederate-enhanced demand to complete the pre-emergency task is confounded with the group-alone manipulation, preventing a clear interpretation of the findings with respect to the bystander effect.

By using passive confederate designs, bystander authors have equated the presence of a passive, inhibitory confederate to the "presence of other people" referred to in the formal definition of the bystander effect. But this equation does not hold. In actual helping situations, other people are not programmed to emit exclusively inhibitory cues. Although passive confederates are bystanders, not all bystanders are passive with regard to helping, nor are all bystanders who don't help as actively inhibitory as those in passive confederate designs.

Without question, bystander research has demonstrated that helping is inhibited in the presence of witnesses who show that they are aware of the situation but choose not to help. This, however, is not the bystander effect. In reality, passive confederate studies amount to a limited extension of modeling effects, which had already been well-documented (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963) when bystander research was initiated.

The passive confederate methodology confuses the modeling of nonhelping with the bystander effect. This method tests the effects of negative social influence, but since social influence itself is incompatible with the bystander effect, this method cannot test the bystander effect. In other words, this method amounts to a test of negative social influence while ignoring the

effects of positive social influence. It provides an illustration of how negative social influence can inhibit helping, but it does not provide a fair test of the bystander effect. The result is that passive confederate studies will systematically overestimate the bystander effect by an unknown and possibly substantial amount, especially since social influence should predict enhanced helping (i.e., a reverse bystander effect) for the empirically estimated 50% of helping situations where other witnesses do help (Latané and Nida, 1981).

In sum, there is a disjunction between this method and the meaning of the bystander effect. A method that would be expected to systematically overestimate an effect cannot be used to test for the existence or magnitude of that effect. We conclude that studies employing the passive confederate methodology do not test and therefore can not support the bystander effect.

This is not a claim that the bystander effect is invalid, but it does suggest that this effect is probably not as strong or robust as previously assumed. The challenge for bystander theory is to reconcile the reward–cost model with the theory's specific explanatory mechanisms and to reconcile the specific mechanisms with the definition of the bystander effect.

Within a broader perspective, the bystander literature provides a striking example of how methodogical decisions do not operate independently of theory. Consider the impact of social influence. Once social influence was accepted as an explanatory mechanism, despite its lack of fit with the definition of the bystander effect, the passive confederate methodology appeared to provide a test of the bystander effect. Moreover, note the fit between the name of the experimental construct and the passive confederate design. The term "bystander" implies passivity or inaction. Historically, situations where individuals stand by and fail to render aid are the phenomena this construct was designed to explain. Thus it seems natural to think of testing the bystander effect by means of an experimental condition in which a confederate stands by and fails to give aid. The result is a mismatch between theory and method. One who is constrained to "stand by" fits the label of the bystander effect, but it does not allow a testing of the bystander effect's stated intent.

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