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| Taking Responsibility in Provincial Politics |
| Psych 251 – Social Psychology |
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# Media Account

The news event I am going to be examining is about Kathleen Wynne’s long delay and ultimately disingenuous admission of responsibility for the costly cancellation of two power plants (Wolfe, 2013). I will be using the bystander effect (Latané and Darley, 1968), which was in my social psychological analysis to explain Wynne’s actions. This paper will strive to refrain from using political views in its psychological analysis in the interest of objectivity.

Several media outlets hold the position that the provincial government, which was led by Dalton McGuinty at the time, cancelled two power plants in Oakville and Mississauga, in order to gain favour with residents in the nearby communities. The timing of the cancellation was crucial since the provincial election was very near. Many are suspicious that the cancellation served as a political maneuver aimed at securing votes.

Shortly after the cancellations, Dalton McGuinty resigned as Premier of Ontario and Kathleen Wynne became the leader of the Liberal party, and hence, the Premier of Ontario. The rationale for the closure, provided by Wynne, was that the province was acquiescing to the concerns of nearby residents to cancel construction. This explanation is generally regarded as deceitful since the concerns had been present, even before the construction of the plants had begun under McGuinty’s leadership.

An Ontario Auditor General’s report put the cost of the cancellations at 1.1 billion dollars. However, Wynne, who had voted in favour of the cancellation, did not initially take responsibility for the cost when confronted with it. She instead placed the blame on the ‘process’ in place. Although it can easily be surmised, that everyone who casted a vote in favour of the cancellations is directly responsible for the cost incurred.

I will be using the bystander effect as my journal article in explaining why Wynne may have been hesitant initially in accepting responsibility, but accepted full responsibility in the end.

# Social Psychological Analysis

The following connections between Wynne’s group membership and feelings of responsibility are complemented by Diener, Dunn, and Rogers’ experiments (Myers & Spencer, 2001), found in the textbook, on diminished self-awareness. Their experiments reveal that in a group setting when one feels de-individuated, one is less likely to feel restrained by their personal values. When applied to the Wynne, we can say that she moved from a position of de-individuation to individuation when she became premier. This led to her personal values, which can be extended to a sense of responsibility, becoming stronger, leading to a change in attitude about the power plant cancellations.

From the Social Psychology textbook, we can gain important perspective into certain types of group dynamics. In examining groups in general, we see that when there is a seemingly legitimate leader, individuals feel a reduced sense of moral responsibility. This was observed in the Milgram experiment where individuals were manipulated into conducting heinous acts with seemingly minimal coercion. This shows that being in a group gives individuals a liberating effect from personal responsibility. We can take this understanding of liberating group effects to understand how Wynne may have viewed her own personal responsibility when she was not Premier.

Latané and Darley also observed that individuals in group environments hold lesser feelings of personal responsibility for emergencies. This is contrasted by individuals who are alone in a situation, who assume responsibility and take action the majority of the time. This result was theorized to be caused by a diffusion of responsibility among group members (Latané and Darley, 1968).

It is also important to take note of the decision tree theory proposed by Latané and Darley. The person in the situation (known as an actor) must first take notice of the incident. After noticing the incident, the actor must then recognize the situation as requiring action. Next, the actor must then assume responsibility for taking action in the situation. Then the actor must take action in the situation they have assumed responsibility for. If the actor did not take all the above steps, they will not take action in a particular situation. The branch in the decision tree we will be analyzing further is the actor (Wynne) assuming personal responsibility.

When placed in a situation where an actor believed that they were the only one alerted to a nearby emergency, the individual went to seek help 85% of the time. This is clearly indicative of an assumption of responsibility on the part of the actor. This was opposed to the group condition where only 31% of the actors assumed responsibility and took action (Myers & Spencer, 2001). These results will be important in the social psychological analysis of Wynne’s assumption of responsibility in regards to the costly power plant cancellations.

By generalizing this Latané and Darley’s result we can look at Wynne as initially being an actor in a large group (the group of MPP’s which vote for or against provincial bills). At this point the theory that responsibility is diffused when in a group setting would indicate that Wynne would be less likely to take action (admitting fault for her vote in favour of the power plant cancellations). However, upon McGuinty’s resignation from the position of Premier, Wynne became Premier of Ontario. The fact that she held the title of premier meant that she could no longer identify as an average member of parliament. Psychologically, she was not part of the same group, and was now not susceptible to the same diffusion of responsibility. An observer would infer from Latané and Darley’s results that Wynne would be more likely to take responsibility as the premier than she would as an average MPP. This appears to be the case, with Wynne sidestepping responsibility until she was named premier, at which point she accepted full responsibility.

# Analysis

Latané and Darley’s experiments were in the context of bystanders taking action in an emergency. In my analysis I put all of the MPPs, except the Premier, into the role of bystanders when considering the assumption of responsibility for the cancellations. I have also assumed that Latané and Darley’s theorized decision making processes hold true in the non-emergency context in which I have analyzed Wynne. While I do believe that my psychological account is accurate, one must be mindful of how my projected premise relies on the external validity of Latané and Darley’s experiments in this case.

By considering this event in the context of the Bystander effect, I have been able to think critically about how politicians may view themselves as not being personally culpable for decisions they make. For example, while sitting surrounded by fellow party members, who are all voting to carry a bill, a politician would likely feel very little personal responsibility if they voted congruently with their party in favour of the bill. As well they would likely not feel strong personal accountability should the bill yield disastrous results. After all, they could self-justify that it was their party, not themselves who passed the bill.

While considering the social psychological explanation which has been asserted, one must also be mindful of plausible alternate explanations for Wynne’s behaviour. In the political context of the event, we can reasonably speculate an ulterior motive. When in the role of an MPP, Wynne, when she had to self-justify bad policy decisions, could simply shift the blame from herself to McGuinty. However, once Wynne came to be premier, she had to oblige the new role as leader of her party. This would entail that she must assume responsibility for all the actions of her party and government, no matter how much personal involvement she had.

It is likely that Wynne’s previous denials of responsibility contributed to making this an insincere apology in both her and her audience’s minds. The scope of Latané and Darley’s experiments does not explain why she may be insincere and distant in her apology. However, as critical observers, we can speculate that there may have been political rather than personal motives for the apology. The lack of follow up accountability from Wynne serves to reinforce this understanding.

As in most real-world situations, multiple forces were likely acting to influence Wynne’s decisions to accept responsibility. However, the fact that Wynne’s own representation of her personal responsibility changed with the change of her position in the government suggests to me that the key component for her actions were the group influences suggested by Latané and Darley’s bystander effect.

## Works Cited

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