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PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Social psychologists are interested in understanding the determinants of prosocial behavior, or behaviors that benefit other individuals or groups of people, called **helping behavior** and **altruism**. Altruism is a form of helping behavior in which the person's intent is to benefit someone else at some cost to himself or herself. Helping behavior includes altruistic motivations, but also includes behaviors that may be motivated by egoism or selfishness.

Bystander Intervention

The most celebrated line of research in the area of helping behavior is the work of **John Darley** and **Bibb Latané** on **bystander intervention**. Darley and Latané's research can be traced to a single event. In March of 1964 in Kew Gardens, New York, a woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death in three separate attacks by the same man. Because she resisted, the killing took more than a half-hour. Thirty-eight people were identified as having

witnessed the attack and having heard her scream for help. Twice, their apartment lights threatened away the would-be killer. Twice, he returned. None of the witnesses intervened, or even called the police. After the killing there was talk of the dehumanization of people and what was initially termed "bystanders' apathy." Mention was made of a new kind of creature, *Homo urbanus*, a city dweller whose only interest is in himself. The apathy of the bystanders was blamed on their personality flaws.

Several days after the killing, Darley and Latané developed a very different interpretation. The bystanders, they thought, were not monsters. They were not even apathetic. Rather, they were engaged in the normal problem-solving process—trying to figure out what was going on and what to do about it. Unfortunately, their problem-solving process, which included evaluation of deterrents, led to not helping. However, it was interpreted that anyone in any emergency might decide not to help, largely because of two situational factors, **social influence** and **diffusion of responsibility** (and diffusion of responsibility was the most significant factor at Kew Gardens that night).

Latané and Darley decided to test for social influence factors by staging emergencies in laboratory settings, since many emergencies are ambiguous (smoke does not necessarily mean fire). Bystanders must first define the situation—a person's judgment will be influenced by past experiences, desires, what the person actually sees, and the influence of other people present (social influence). Indeed, the presence of others may lead to the interpretation of an event as a nonemergency.

Latané and Darley tested for the social influence process in bystander intervention by studying the behavior of students who witnessed an ambiguous event. The students thought that they were taking part in an interview on urban environments. While they were completing a questionnaire, an acrid white smoke was piped into the room. The situation was ambiguous. The smoke could have come from a fire, or it could have been steam from a radiator. Subjects experienced one of two conditions: the subject was either alone or with two confederates. The confederates were trained to notice the smoke, ensure that the subject saw them notice, and then return to the questionnaire. Latané and Darley hypothesized that the two nonresponsive confederates would inhibit the response of the subject. They would influence the subject to define the smoke as a nonemergency. This hypothesis was confirmed. In post-experimental interviews, those who did not respond said that they thought it was not a fire. This concept is known as **pluralistic ignorance**: leading others to a definition of an event as a nonemergency.

The second process Latané and Darley studied was diffusion of responsibility. Once an individual interprets that a situation constitutes an emergency, the person has to decide whether or not to help. If there is only one bystander at an emergency, the bystander knows that the responsibility for assisting falls on his or her shoulders. That individual has one hundred percent of the responsibility to help, will receive one hundred percent of the blame, and will feel one hundred percent of the guilt for not helping. If others are present, however, then the responsibility, blame, and guilt can be shared. As the person weighs the costs and rewards of helping and attempts to resolve the conflict between helping and not helping, the fact that others are in a position to help may sway the person toward not helping.

Latané and Darley conducted another classic experiment to test for the diffusion of responsibility factor in an experiment that would not be affected by the social influence process. The researchers led the subjects in the experiment to believe that they were participating in a discussion on college life. A subject was placed alone in a booth and told that the discussion would take place by intercom. Each person was allowed two minutes to speak. During those two minutes, only the microphone of the person speaking would be turned on. So it was not a discussion in the interactive sense. The test subject was not aware that he or she was the only live participant and that no one was actually listening to him speak. The other speeches were prerecorded. The subjects believed that there were one, two, or five other participants. One of the prerecorded participants spoke about a tendency toward epileptic seizures. Later he pretended to have a seizure (prerecorded, of course). The emergency, then, was not ambiguous and the subject could not tell how other "bystanders" were reacting.

Since subjects were not aware of anyone else's reaction in this experiment, the social influence process was not a factor. Darley and Latané found that when subjects thought that they were the only ones listening, one hundred percent reported the seizure. When subjects thought that two others were listening, 85 percent reported the seizure. When subjects thought that four others were listening, the seizure was reported only 62 percent of the time. The results supported the diffusion of responsibility hypothesis. The more people present, the less the likelihood that any individual will offer help.

Empathy and Helping Behavior

Empathy is the ability to vicariously experience the emotions of another, and it is thought by some social psychologists to be a strong influence on helping behavior. **Batson's empathy-altruism** model is one explanation for the relationship between empathy and helping behavior. According to this model, when faced with situations in which others may need help, people might feel distress (mental pain or anguish), and/or they might feel empathy. According to the model, both of these states are important, since either can determine helping behavior. (Some social psychologists disagree fundamentally, and, instead, believe that helping behavior occurs only when there is some benefit to the individual offering help.)

Batson's model was tested in a series of experiments in which subjects witnessing a person in distress are given a choice to either help or not help that person. (In this context, distress can also include physical pain.) In a typical experiment, subjects watched a closed-circuit television displaying a person needing help (e.g., appearing to receive painful electric shocks). Some of the subjects were given a choice to leave after the first two electric shocks (the easy-escape condition), and others were asked to stay to witness ten electric shocks (the difficult-escape condition). After the second shock, all of the subjects completed a questionnaire that measured the degree to which they felt distress and empathy for the person experiencing the shocks. The subjects were then told that the person being shocked also experienced traumatic shocks as a child, and they were given the opportunity to take that person's place to receive the remaining eight shocks. Subjects in the easy-escape condition who reported more distress

than empathy, tended to leave rather than help. Subjects who reported more empathy than distress were more likely to help regardless of whether they were in the easy- or the difficult-escape conditions.

AGGRESSIVE AND ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

The **frustration-aggression hypothesis** is one possible explanation social psychologists have found for aggressive behavior. According to this perspective, when people are frustrated, they act aggressively. In fact, researchers have found that the strength of the frustration experienced is correlated with the level of aggression observed.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura's social learning theory is perhaps the most influential theory on aggression that is also focused on social context. Bandura's theory holds that aggression is learned through **modeling** (direct observation), or through **reinforcement** (covered in detail in the chapter on learning and ethology). In his famous study on the effect of modeling, Bandura had two groups of young children aged 3–5 observe either an adult playing with tinker toys or an adult committing aggressive acts on an inflated rubber "Bobo" doll. In the next phase of the experiment, each child was made to feel frustrated and then left alone in a room full of toys, including the rubber doll. Children who had observed the aggressive model were more likely to behave aggressively toward the doll, similarly to the adult, than the children who had not observed the aggressive model. In some cases, the children copied the aggression on the rubber doll blow for blow. Bandura also believed that aggressive behavior is selectively reinforced—that people act aggressively because they expect some sort of reward (material benefit, social approval, attention) for doing so.

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