

Impact of Age on the Bystander Effect

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of age on the bystander effect, a psychological phenomenon in which individuals are less likely to help a person in need if other people are present in the area. Inspired by the infamous Catherine “Kitty” Genovese and reinforced through John Darley and Bibb Latané, This research examines whether young children in the first grade exhibit the bystander effect differently compared to adolescents in tenth grade and how. To test the hypothesis: the bystander effect will not be as prevalent in the first graders as it will in the tenth graders, the experimenter used a controlled experiment involving a staged spill scenario. The study measured the likelihood and speed of intervention from participants in both age groups. Contrary to the hypothesis, results indicated that the tenth graders were more likely to help compared to the first graders. Specifically, first graders exhibited a zero-percent helping rate, while tenth graders displayed an eighty-percent helping rate. Potential justifications for these findings include differences in generation and social development, along with the effects of recent societal changes caused by Covid-19 on younger individuals. A need for further research into the developmental aspects of the bystander effect is highlighted and the study encourages educational interventions to address this phenomenon for the younger generations.

Introduction

On March 14, 1964, a young woman named Catherine Genovese was brutally murdered in front of her apartment complex in Kew Gardens, Queens, New York. The twenty-eight year-old, nicknamed Kitty by nearly everyone in her neighborhood, was returning home from her job as manager of a bar when a man suddenly approached her with a knife and attacked her. Lights around the neighborhood lit up following her harrowing screams where she cried repeatedly, “oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me! Please help me!” (Gansberg, 1974). The sudden radiance of her neighbors’ bedroom lights prompted the murderer to flee the scene quickly, but he would then return two additional times to “finish off” Genovese. For over half an hour, thirty-eight law-abiding citizens and acquaintances of Genovese stood-by and watched as the killer barbarically stabbed her across three distinct attacks. During this time, not one person called the police; only after Genovese passed away did one witness finally decide to phone the authorities around three in the morning. The police emphasized how simple yet significant it would have been for a neighbor to quickly call the police. When the neighbors were interviewed about why they did not make any effort to call the police or intervene, they replied with responses like: “I didn’t want to get involved” or “I don’t know” (Gansberg, 1964). The collective lack of action from these thirty-eight neighbors puzzled authorities and psychologists, prompting journalists Martin Gansberg and A. M. Rosenthal. Gansberg (1964) to write an article exclusively focusing on the actions of the bystanders. The devastating case of Kitty Genovese brought light onto this unknown social psychological phenomenon that is now referred to as the bystander effect.

The bystander effect is a psychological phenomenon in which individuals are less likely to help someone in need if other people are present in the area (Cherry, 2020). This occurrence can be attributed to a multitude of reasons, specifically, a diffusion of responsibility. This concept is based upon the notion that a bystander would not help someone in need if there are other people present because they are under the assumption that somebody else will take on

the responsibility instead (Britannica, 2019). However, research in the extant literature demonstrates how social norms and shared standards of acceptable behavior by groups has significant influence in instigating the effect as well.

Literature Review

The story of Kitty Genovese became the journalistic sensation of the decade. Words such as “apathy,” “Indifference,” and “dehumanization” were cried out by the people and newspapers (Latané & Darley, 1969). It was not until 1969 when Bibb Latané and John Darley, two American social psychologists, were left inspired and curious by Kitty Genovese and decided to take matters into their own hands on the mystery case. They conducted a series of four experiments, each utilizing a different emergency situation to investigate if the amount of bystanders influences the actions of the participants. The results of Darley and Latané’s study found that the greater the number of bystanders present, the less inclined people feel to offer help to the person in need. Their analysis of the results attributed this outcome to the fact that “a bystander who is alone bears all the responsibility for mishandling the situation”; however, “if others are present, they share the responsibility” (Latané & Darley, 1969). The results of their trials ultimately led to Latané and Darley’s founding of the term: diffusion of responsibility.

Social Norms in Children and Teenagers

Social norms create a script, or set of unwritten rules, that define socially acceptable attitudes and behaviors within a group or community of people (Collins, 2017). Adolescence is widely viewed as a significant period for the emergence of said norms (Pinho et al., 2021). During this developmental period, personal decisions are impacted by surrounding social norms and attempts to conform to their peers. As young children grow into teenagers, the sense of belonging trumps many other needs and is shaped by many factors within a teenager’s life.

As mentioned, social conformity begins around age twelve (Dean, 2021); however, many psychologists de-test this claim. In the 1950s, Solomon Asch, a Polish-American Gestalt psychologist and pioneer in social psychology, conducted an experiment to test conformity in white males aged from 17 to 25. Participants were put in a group, shown a group of lines of varying lengths, and were asked to identify the longest. However, only one participant was being tested, as the others who went before the tested participant were instructed to choose an incorrect line. The majority of the time, the participants conformed to the other three members claiming a shorter line was the longest despite having the factual evidence in front of them. This experiment clearly displayed the power of conformity and the hold it has on young generations.

However, a limitation of the Asch Conformity study is the time period in which it was conducted. The study was performed in the 1950s which extends over seventy years. Times have changed significantly since then, especially with the invention of social media and the increasing number of users everyday. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey of nearly 750, thirteen to seventeen year-olds found that forty-five percent are online almost constantly and ninety-seven percent use a social media platform, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Social media acts as a source of information for all age groups, and therefore “information shared on social media creates a common norm and enhances social coordination as individuals are more readily accept the information if they believe others have as well” (Arias, 2019). Additionally, the availability of social media will lead to an increase in conformity by the desire to appear successful and to be accepted by everyone surrounding them (Abbariki, 2018).

Social Norms and Conformity in The Bystander Effect

Bystanders must possess the skills to intervene and decide to act, and may fail to do so due to skills deficit or audience inhibition (Latané & Darley, 1970). For the effect to occur, there must either be an identified audience inhibition, or

that bystanders are less likely to intervene if they are afraid of looking foolish in front of others- a possible social norm presence to conform to the majority and not stand out (Collins, 2017).

Kelly Collins is a PhD student in the department of psychology at DePaul University and in her own research, “The Impact of Social Norms on Bystander Behavior to Prevent Campus Sexual Violence,” she examined relationship violence on college campuses and a Social Norms Theory, a theoretical model developed by Alan Berkowitz and Wesley Perkins (1986). These two researchers developed the model after examining conformity norms on alcohol use among students, to understand the relationship between individual behavior and social norms (LaMorte, 2022). Justification of this theory would be understanding that “behaviors are shaped by anticipation of positive or negative reactions from other members in a given group” (Collins, 2017), including those involved with bystander intervention.

Where an individual is from plays a large role on their likelihood of intervention. This places an emphasis on cultural norms where in some cultures or communities, there may be a stronger emphasis on collective responsibility and community welfare. On the contrary, individualistic cultures may prioritize self autonomy and reliance, leading to a reduced sense of responsibility (Young, 1927). This emphasizes the environment in which someone lives and the impact on the bystander effect. Individuals from urban environments with higher population densities are more prone to participate in a diffusion of responsibility, since they feel less accountable in large crowds compared to those in smaller-rural communities (Takooshian 1977). This demonstrates another reason for the phenomenon, suggesting that individuals continue to follow the social norms set in their home environments when encountering a person in need.

Gap in The Research

Pre-existing research in the body of knowledge links the amount of bystanders with the likelihood of an individual helping. Previously conducted experiments only practiced on participants past a certain age, typically well into adulthood. Abiding to social norms and conformity is a large practice in teenagers and adults, considering social conformity generally begins after the age of twelve (Dean, 2021). Corroborating upon these ideas, Cass R. Sunstein, the current Robert Walmsley University Professor at Harvard, delineates how these social norms encourage risk taking behavior, but also indifferent behavior in an emergency situation. These discrepancies in the presence of social conformity in younger vs. older age groups left curiosities as to if there would be a significant difference in the presence of the bystander effect when exercised on young children versus adults. The purpose of this study is to address the gap regarding the unresearched young children age group and their exhibition of the bystander effect influenced by surrounding social norms. Due to limitations and resource constraints, access to an adult sample group was not feasible; therefore, adolescents are to take their place in the current study. Thus, to address this gap in the body of knowledge, my research question remains: Is bystander intervention in a helping situation more prevalent in young children (first grade) than in adolescents (tenth grade) in Long Island school districts? I hypothesize that bystander intervention will be more likely in first grade, meaning that it will take less time for them to intervene and offer assistance than it will for the tenth graders. The rationale behind my hypothesis is the groups’ differing levels of conformity to social norms. Young children tend to be more flamboyant and unaffected by the feeling of embarrassment because social norms do not impact young children the same way they do teenagers, who are notorious for their fears of standing out.

Method

Research Design

My research is examining the presence of the bystander effect in two distinct age groups. Because the bystander effect is a well tested and renowned phenomenon accredited to documented research like John Darley and Bibb Latané’s famous trials in Bystander Apathy, I am continuing with my research under the impression that the bystander effect phenomenon has already been proven and established. Therefore, I developed my research design to specifically test

if the age of the participant impacts the likeness of the bystander effect's presence. I conducted the same experiment on two sample groups, with first graders representing the nonconforming children and tenth graders serving as the adolescent/conforming group. After collecting the data from each experiment, I compared the results by evaluating their differences in reaction time and interventive actions taken by the participants. By following this design, the only independent variable being studied is age, since everything else is kept consistent to produce the most accurate results.

Participants

This experiment was conducted on first grade students (aged 6-7 years old), and tenth grade students (15-16 years old) in a public school district located in a middle-upper-class, suburban area in Long Island, NY, that serves grades kindergarten through twelfth. A sample size of thirty students was pre-determined prior to data-collection, based upon typical sample sizes in the field. Fifteen of these recruited students were enrolled in an Elementary School in the district, and fifteen were enrolled in the High School. At each institution, participants gathered in three groups of four (experimental), and three groups of one (control). Each group condition consisted of two girls and two boys, and the solo condition was randomized based on accessibility.

Setup and Materials

At the Elementary School, the experiment was conducted in the school cafeteria while at the High School, the experiment was conducted in a classroom. The group of four participants were pulled out of their classroom to a separate room, then were sat at a table with two students sitting on one side and two on the other. I sat at a desk in front of the table facing them, allowing myself into each of the participants' point of view. A roll of paper towels was placed in the center of the table, equidistant from each of the participants. All students were then provided with plentiful arts and crafts supplies such as colored pencils, crayons, and markers along with blank pictures of cartoon animals to color in. A plastic tumbler from Starbucks was placed on the edge of my desk, appearing as my drinking water, with the lid unscrewed in preparation to be spilled. The experiment setup and materials were held constant amongst all groups.



Figure 1. Photograph of setup for the experiment

Procedure

The research method utilized in the present experiment is derived from the study “Young Children Show the Bystander Effect in Helping Situations,” developed by Maria Plötner, research associate at the Leipzig Research Center in the department of clinical child and adolescent psychology and a team of researchers. Plötner began the experiment by noticing a small puddle of water in the center of the room, then cleaning it with paper towels. She then left the paper towels there, telling the participants “in case something needs to be wiped up later.” Participants were then given colored pencils and asked to start coloring while the experimenter painted a cardboard wall. Next to the experimenter was a cup full of water to clean the brushes, as most painters use. After approximately thirty seconds, the experimenter knocked over the cup full of water. She pretended not to notice, as if it was done by accident, and proceeded to time the reactions of the participants. If the participants had not helped by the fifteen second mark, she would say: “my cup has fallen over”. After forty-five seconds of no intervention she would say: “I need something to wipe it up”. After sixty seconds she would say: “I need the paper towels there”. Following seventy-five seconds of no intervention the experimenter would ask directly: “Could somebody give me the paper towels there?” By ninety seconds if the participants still had not gotten up to help, the experimenter would get up and retrieve the paper towels herself.

Accommodating this methodology to the study at hand, consent forms presenting a deceiving study were distributed to all participants and their guardians. The forms claimed the study was to examine a “decline in color creativity through age”, to ensure the collected data would be unbiased and naturally occurring. On the day of the experiment, each group was individually brought to the cafeteria where the tables and supplies were already set up and ready for them. Prior to starting the experiment, participants were thanked for their participation and instructed that they will be coloring for ten minutes to the best of their ability. A timer for ten minutes was then set for the participants to start and finish their coloring. Five minutes into the timer, I subtly pushed the Starbucks tumbler filled with water off my desk, and began timing and covertly observing the participants’ reaction. Throughout this act I pretended to be completely unaware of the accident, failing to notice the rowdy sound of the cup hitting the floor and resulting puddle of water. All participants noticed the spillage, flinching at the sound. If the participants had not said anything after a minute passed, I pretended to reach for my drink, and notice the spill. I exchanged rhetorical exclamations such as “where is my cup?” and “when did it fall?”. If the participants failed to act by seventy-five seconds, I said “I need paper towels to clean this up”. At the ninety second mark I asked “could someone hand me the paper towels.” If the participants alerted me about the spill before the sixty second mark, I would ask for the paper towels and the experiment would be over. The experiment was conducted three times in groups of four, then three additional times in groups of one at each school, resulting in a total of six trials in each age group and twelve cumulative trials to extract data from.



Figure 2. Examples of the participants’ drawings from the experiment

Results

There was a zero-percent helping rate from the participants in first grade and an eighty-percent helping rate from the ones in tenth grade. The results of this study conclude that the bystander effect did not occur. This is attributed to the participants in groups of four being of low assistance, and the participants in solo groups acting in the same manner. To be considered a bystander effect, the participants in the solo groups would have had to be of more assistance than those in groups of four. However, the participants in first grade (6-7 years old) helped less than the participants in tenth grade. Therefore, the results reject my hypothesis as I initially claimed the participants in first grade would have a higher likelihood of offering assistance.

First Grade

All groups apart of this study noticed the cup fall and water spill, evident through visible flinches, recurring glances at the spill, chatter among peers about such, or verbal agreement after I announced the fall. The experimental groups (three groups of four participants) in the first grade were of no assistance during the official experiment. The first of which felt the need to inform each other about the fall, telling each other in hushed whispers that “her water spilled,” but not informing me directly. The second group began to laugh once the cup fell. Giggling with each other and repeating phrases such as “she doesn't notice her cup fell,” and arguing over who would be the one to inform me about the spillage. In the same group, when I reached the ninety second mark and asked “could someone lend me the paper towels,” a young boy grabbed them, and chucked them across the room to me. His female friend screamed his name, then proceeded to get up and pick them up for me. The third group was quiet, seeming as if all were strangers to each other. When the cup fell they acted undisturbed, with only slight glances acknowledging the spill. The same apathetic reaction applies to all the solo control groups, where only one girl giggled after the cup fell.

Tenth Grade

There was a higher helping rate within the participants in tenth grade (15-16 years), however the bystander effect was still not present. The first group of four noticed the fall, however were undisturbed in similar fashion to the first grade participants, besides one male student laughing under his breath. Unexpectedly, once the group exited the room a girl stayed back and asked if I needed help cleaning up which I happily accepted. The second group of four alerted me almost immediately after the cup hit the floor, and passed over the roll of paper towels without necessitating my request. The last group was very noisy and conversational. Once the cup fell they all began to laugh. I heard two students demand in a quiet whisper “don’t tell her”, and one responded with “I want to see her reaction.” For the participants in the solo groups, two of the students demonstrated apathy, and one informed me immediately, handing the roll of paper towels over when asked.

All in all, sixty-seven percent of groups demonstrated interventive help in the 90 second time frame after my cup fell over. No participants from the first grade were of direct assistance, whereas a majority of sophomores were, which opposes my hypothesis. It is vital to highlight that all participants that portrayed any form of assistance (before, during, and after the official experiment) in both age levels were female.

Analysis

Potential Justification of Results

There are numerous potential reasons to attribute the lack of assistance observed from the first grade participants in the experiment. The initial thought of why the first grade children did not assist as expected and were remarkably

unhelpful in comparison to the adolescents in tenth grade was the generational difference. In recent times, it has been a widespread pattern to experience unpleasant interactions with children of the late generation, Generation (Gen) Alpha, as they have grown notorious for their impudent and arrogant behavior. They were born into the digital age, where children have been raised in an ever-changing society filled with developing technology, social media, and few restrictions around screen time. This is conventionally held to be the source for their misbehavior in view of the fact they lacked “the traditional and natural experience of spending their childhood outside with other kids their age” (Duarte 2023). In March of 2020, The Covid-19 pandemic triggered a global lockdown and the world was forced into quarantine. Gen Alpha, especially young children now in first grade, spent the majority of their childhood isolated, missing out on important psychological and social stages of development. This potentially accounts for why the younger generation in this experiment routinely lack expected manners and social awareness needed for the bystander effect to occur.

Moreover, pre-existing relationships amongst one another have a profound impact on a bystander’s possibility to assist, and in all experimental results. As discovered by Darley and Latané, a bystander feels more self-assured to extend support if they are either accompanied by someone close to them, or fond of the person who is in need of help. In the Darley and Latané experiment, A Lady in Distress, Darley and Latané ran multiple conditions including a “Friends vs. Strangers” condition in a helping situation. The friends were proven to be “significantly faster to intervene than pairs of strangers” (Darley & Latané 1969). However, an interesting discovery they found was that friends actually inhibit each other from intervening when compared to a condition where the participants were entirely alone, as demonstrated in my experiment in both age groups. Although none of the first graders offered assistance, among the tenth graders the less talkative groups surprisingly offered more assistance than their more talkative peers. The groups in which it was obvious all participants were friends or comfortable with each other tended to be extra loud, obnoxious, and less polite in comparison to the other groups. This was observable in the last group of the tenth graders where the participants insisted that no one should offer assistance for their own humorous benefit. The opposite effect of this was proven by the singular female in one of the groups that waited until everyone left before providing help. The group was quiet, clearly not the most comfortable. The female participant potentially felt too nervous in front of the group to step out, and so had to wait until she was alone.

It is important to point out that all participants in both age levels that provided any form of assistance either before, during, or after the experiment were female. fifty percent of all participants were female and thirty-three percent of the female participants helped. Zero percent of the male participants helped, however they were the only ones to laugh either at me or to themselves when the cup spilled. These findings provide evidence on sympathy being impacted by gender, specifically gender norms and roles. Authors suggest observed gender differences are largely due to stereotypes and cultural expectation, and there is no doubt women are portrayed to be more nurturing and in touch with their feelings (Christov-Moore 2014). Men are expected to have a lower capacity for feelings than women, often unable to express emotion without feedback from society. This is a plausible justification for why females have a higher tendency to help others in need of assistance as seen in my study, because of the gender stereotypes implemented since birth.

Conclusion

Future Research

There are scores of additions future researchers with more accessibility in my study could use to enhance the project and produce more dependable results. I would recommend augmenting the sample size in both age groups, and meticulously verifying the relationships among the participants as well as with the researcher. The results of highest quality will stem from an experiment involving a scenario of urgent need, meaning a situation where the victim faces potential harm or fatality if he or she is not immediately assisted. However, this would be unfeasible as it most likely

would not get approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for causing stress to the participants. A key aspect I would have ideally incorporated into my research design when conducting the experiment would have been to survey the participants after the experiment had finished for insight on their decision-making process in regard to their offer of assistance or lack thereof. Obtaining these responses would provide conclusive reasons for the rationale behind the participant's actions, as well as offer further support for the potential justifications stated earlier to overall present a more robust argument. The reason I refrained from asking the participants these questions in the end stemmed from the intention to prevent potential development of feelings of guilt in the event of non-assistance. I feared asking the participants would leave the impression the unhelpful participants did the wrong thing and have prolonged effects on their emotional well-being. Given that my procedure necessitated deception with initial intention to exclude an ending debrief or disclosing the true nature of the study to the participants afterward, I deemed it appropriate to maintain blindness.

Implications

My research covers an abundance of topics extremely relevant to the real-world including social norms, conformity, helping others, societal pressure, and so forth. The bystander effect is a serious issue and led to the tragic death of Catherine Genovese and countless unfortunate fatalities whose bystanders fell victim to the phenomenon. Through this experiment, I primarily focused on the presence of the effect in very young children, children that were scarcely exposed to the real world and the societal pressures that come with it. Through this, the results would conclude whether the phenomenon developed through growing life experience or if it was already instilled in children; unfortunately, my results support the latter. However, the phenomenon can and should always be taught to all generations beginning from a young age. As a consequence to this early intervention, the world will face less cases parallel to Genovese since it has been hypothesized by researchers that the only way to prevent the phenomenon is to be aware of its existence. Once I concluded my research at the elementary school and emerged with a zero percent helping rate, I suggested to the vice principal of the institution that a lesson be taught to the children about the bystander effect and diffusion of responsibility. Although it is up to the institution to decide whether to do it or not, I believe it would be a step forward in educating the young generation and saving future victims in need of assistance. I found the results of my experiment to be upsetting from the minimal assistance I received, but nonetheless there is now a greater understanding of the new, upcoming generations and there is more research to be done to further deepen this understanding.

Limitations

Since the participants in tenth grade had a higher rate of helpfulness than the ones in first grade, this could have stemmed from a biased standpoint since a few of the older participants knew who the conductor, I, was prior to the experiment. A few participants were even acquainted through school organized clubs and friends. This demonstrates a clear limitation to the study as the average individual would be more likely to help a friend than a complete stranger. As a student researcher, I was limited to one highschool; nevertheless, a sincere effort was made towards choosing participants I did not know.

This experiment involves young children, therefore it was important to maintain high ethicality. However, effort to maintain ethicality introduced new limitations. For example, it made it difficult to produce an effective helping situation. It is oftentimes difficult to determine whether or not a particular situation requires assistance at all. Consequently, before a bystander is likely to take action, they must first define the situation as an emergency, then decide that intervention would be the best course of action. Seeing as how "smoke pouring from a building may signal a fire; on the other hand, it may be simply steam or air conditioner vapor" (Darley&Latané 1996). A cup falling off another person's desk could have been deemed a not dire enough situation by the unhelpful participants to require their

intervention. Thus, it is highly likely that if my cup were to not only spill, but also harm a body in the room during the process, the rate of assistance would have increased.

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