

# Bystander intervention in a mild need situation

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This experiment tested the effects of sex of victim, sex of bystander, and the victim's verbal or nonverbal request for help upon bystander intervention. Results showed no sex differences in helping among bystanders, and the overall rate of helping was low. However, a female victim who verbally requested help was helped significantly more than a female victim who nonverbally requested help. This result did not occur for a male victim.

Several years ago, a young woman was stabbed to death in a residential section of New York City. The incident received little publication until the *New York Times* uncovered another side to the case: at least 38 witnesses had observed the attack, but none came out to assist her, and not a single person lifted the telephone to call the police.

Since the murder of Kitty Genovese, several social psychologists have focused their attention on bystander intervention. Studies have found variable behavior on the part of bystanders. For example, bystanders will sometimes derogate the character of the victim instead of feeling compassion (Berscheid & Walster, 1967; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Furthermore, Darley & Latané (1968) have argued that there is a "diffusion of responsibility" among bystanders who believe others had witnessed the event which may lead to a low rate of helping.

While it is true that humans behave in socially responsible ways in many areas of daily life, there is also evidence that they will sometimes shirk responsibility when helping behavior is required. Latané and Rodin (1969) noted that, in a situation which lends itself to many interpretations, a bystander may be led, perhaps unconsciously, to choose the interpretation which does not require any overt action on his part.

In contrast to the general pattern of no intervention, some recent studies have found higher rates of bystander intervention. Piliavin, Rodin, and Piliavin (1969) simulated either a drunken or an ill victim who appeared to have collapsed on a New York subway train. After allowing time for spontaneous helping to occur, models, under various conditions, helped the victim to a sitting position. The investigators found that the apparently ill victim was then helped more frequently than the apparently drunken victim. Other findings showed that males helped more than females under both conditions.

Beckman (1972) found that victims' verbal feedback of a greater or lesser emergency will affect the subject's own definition of the situation and

subsequently his helping behavior. Another study also indicated that a victim's feedback increases bystander intervention. According to Tilker (1970), when the victim communicated maximum feedback regarding his condition, the bystander was most likely to react in a socially responsible manner and attempt to alter the course of events. Latané and Rodin (1969) had previously found evidence which supported the need for victim feedback. Their findings also suggested that assistance from a group of bystanders was more likely to occur if the group members had experienced prior interaction.

Most of the work on victimization has been done in a laboratory situation. It is commonly argued that the ideal research strategy is to move back and forth between the laboratory setting with its advantage of greater control and the field setting with its advantage of greater reality. The present study was designed to provide more information from the field setting.

Most findings concerning helping behavior have shown that help was given in a tragic or dramatic situation. According to Isen and Levin (1972), emotional states affect a person's helpfulness. Obviously, the subject's perception of the strength of the emergency situation influences his emotional state and also his helping behavior. The present study used a mild need situation in order to study helping behavior in a less dramatic context. The present study attempted to test a hypothesis stated by Hornstein, Fisch, and Holmes (1968, p. 223) that "Contrary to popular newspaper and magazine opinion, unselfish helping behavior between strangers is commonplace. Helping the young and elderly to cross streets, guiding the blind, giving directions and pushing a stalled car are all examples." The effects of a mild need situation upon helping behavior seems most typical of everyday life. Therefore, results from an experiment using a mild need situation should be more generalizable to everyday life.

The present study was also designed to examine more closely the variable of victim's feedback. The victim communicated to the bystander a verbal request for help or gave off nonverbal cues of distress and anxiety in conjunction with the behavior of looking for a lost object. It was of interest to see

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whether this variable, either alone, or in combination with sex of victim and bystander might differentially affect helping rates.

## METHOD

### Procedure

Two young women and two young men from Kent State University, Ashtabula Campus, Ashtabula, Ohio, served as victims in need of help. They were all approximately the same age, 20-24 years, and were neatly dressed. For each experimental situation, the experimenters expressed one of two behaviors. The victim picked out a subject (bystander) and either verbally asked for assistance in helping to locate his or her lost contact lens, or gave off nonverbal cues of anxiety and distress while making eye contact with the bystander and then looked around the ground for the lost object. Both the verbal and nonverbal behaviors were designed to elicit helping behavior from the bystanders. The verbal request was termed the verbal approach condition while the nonverbal request for help was labeled the nonverbal approach condition.

The location of the experiment was purposely selected in an attempt to choose a broad cross-section of subjects. The location was a large indoor shopping mall located in Mentor, Ohio, an eastside suburb of Cleveland. The data was collected on four consecutive Wednesdays in February, 1973, from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m.

### Subjects

The subjects (also referred to as bystanders) were men and women shoppers in the mall. Shoppers were sampled under the restrictions that they were alone and unoccupied while walking to and from a store. An attempt was made to pick bystanders of various ages. Bystanders were also selected according to their sex. The experimental manipulations which the bystanders experienced were randomly selected for each subject. The final sample consisted of 192 shoppers divided equally into two groups of males and females.

### Experimental Design

The study used a 2 by 2 by 2 factorial design in which the independent variables were the sex of the victim, the sex of the bystander, and the verbal request or nonverbal request for help. The dependent variable was helping behavior. Bystander behavior was coded into two categories: (a) nonhelp—this included nonverbal ignoring or negative verbal reactions, and (b) positive help—the bystanders offered to help find the contact lens or, in the nonverbal approach condition, asked if they could be of any assistance.

## RESULTS

The independent variables' effects upon helping are discussed in the following order: nonverbal approach vs. verbal approach, male victim vs. female victim, and male bystander vs. female bystander. After the presentation of each main effect, the interaction effects will be discussed. The proportions of helping and nonhelping behavior are reported in Table 1.

More helping behavior took place in the verbal approach condition than in the nonverbal approach condition ( $\chi^2 = 7.18$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This result suggests that verbally asking for help increases bystander's helping behavior. A person verbally requesting help has a 14% better chance of obtaining help than a person nonverbally requesting help.

When sex of victim was examined, female victims were helped more than were male victims. The

Table 1  
Proportion of Bystanders Helping or Not Helping

	Verbal Approach		Nonverbal Approach					
	Female Victim	Male Victim	Female Victim	Male Victim				
	M.B.	F.B.	M.B.	F.B.	M.B.	F.B.	M.B.	F.B.
Help	58	62	29	33	33	38	25	29
No Help	42	38	71	67	67	62	75	71

Chi-square was highly significant ( $\chi^2 = 7.12$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Sex of bystander did not show any significant difference in the degree of female or male helping behavior ( $\chi^2 = .32$ ,  $df = 1$ ).

The interaction Approach Conditions by Sex of Victim was not significant ( $\chi^2 = 2.20$ ,  $df = 1$ ). However, in an analysis of the data for female victims only, female victims were helped significantly more in the verbal approach condition than in the nonverbal approach condition ( $\chi^2 = 5.98$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ). None of the other interaction effects approached significance.

## DISCUSSION

In the present investigation, there were no significant sex differences among bystanders in amount of helping behavior. There were sex differences concerning the victim and the victim's method of seeking help. When the female victim made a verbal request for help, about 60% of the subjects helped her; but only about one-third helped her when no request was made. A lady in distress is likely to get help—particularly if she asks for it. For males, however, only about one-third of the bystanders helped, regardless of whether or not he requested help. This result is, perhaps, the most important finding of the study.

The findings concerning a victim's nonverbal or verbal request for help indicate that a victim's verbal request for help increases the victim's chance of receiving help. However, as noted above, this effect occurs primarily because of the higher helping rate for female victims in the request condition.

The most general finding of the present study is that the proportion of people helping overall was lower (38.4%) than the proportion not helping (61.6%). The data cast doubt on the assumption of Hornstein et al. (1968) that unselfish behavior between strangers is commonplace. It should be noted that most studies have examined the effects of a tragic or dramatic situation on helping behavior, while normal everyday experiences have been studied very little. The present study was an attempt to study bystander intervention in such a mundane, everyday situation.

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(Received for publication September 10, 1975.)