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Watching, Not Helping: The Danger of the Bystander Effect

By Assoc. Prof. Dr. Carolyn Soo Kum Yoke

These days, it is not hard to imagine a scenario where someone is crying for help, but no one steps forward except to take out their cameras to video shoot the situation and post it on social media before leaving the scene. This unsettling reality is a classical psychological phenomenon known as **the bystander effect**.

How did it originate?

Honestly, could it have originated with social media and people so self-absorbed with sharing the incident on social media rather than lending a helping hand?

Digging and researching helped uncover how *the bystander effect* surfaced. In 1964, an American woman was viciously attacked and sexually assaulted for over half an hour, while over 38 people saw the attack and did nothing. This incident led to research on why people fail to offer help in emergencies, and the situation was later coined as **the bystander effect** (Blagg, n.d.).

Why don't people react?

I ask myself this question, "Why don't people react by helping?", but I guess most people don't really want to get involved because they don't want to trouble themselves. So, is it true we live in a cold-hearted, self-centred society?

Psychologists categorised the phenomenon into three mechanisms. First, **diffusion of responsibility**. People feel less accountable in a crowd and assume that someone else will act. Second, **pluralistic ignorance**. When other people do not react, the situation must be less serious. This assumption makes a person feel less obligated or even less guilty to lend a helping hand. Thirdly, **evaluation apprehension**. Some people fear what others will say if they offer help. They fear

being judged or making mistakes, and so they refrain from giving help.



The danger of such behaviour

The danger is that the outcomes can be tragic. Imagine you are pleading for help, and everyone is staring at you or taking pictures, or ignoring you. Blagg (n.d.) noted that the absence of intervention could result in lost lives. This culture of silence, passivity, and normalising of the situation could traumatise situations like bullying, harassment, and violent acts for the victims. Inaction can perpetuate cycles of harm. Thus, the bystander effect is a dangerous social dynamic with profound consequences.

Conclusion

The dangers of adopting a bystander effect culture are real. Positive actions should be taken, such as awareness campaigns, practising the first-mover effect (where one person steps in and others follow), learning to foster empathy, and encouraging intervention. This is a psychological wake-up call. It is our moral responsibility and what makes us human! What we should do is act on ***the Five-Step Decision Model***:

1. Notice the event
2. Interpret it as an emergency
3. Accept personal responsibility
4. Decide how to help
5. Act

Albert Einstein once said, “*The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything.*”

Reference

Blagg, R. D. (n.d.). *Bystander effect*. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. Retrieved August 25, 2025, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/bystander-effect>

