

## ***This Week's Citation Classic***

Darley J M & Latané B. Bystander intervention in emergencies: diffusion of responsibility. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 8:377-83, 1968. [New York Univ. and Columbia Univ., New York, NY]

**When a group of people is confronted with an emergency, a diffusion of responsibility process can interfere with an individual's responsiveness. Not 'getting involved' in an emergency can be more easily rationalized when other potential sources of help are available. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI TM) indicates that this paper has been cited over 160 times since 1968.]**

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"A woman had been stabbed to death. Sadly, this was not a rare event in New York City in the late 1960s. But following a tip from police investigators, New York Times reporters discovered something quite shocking about the incident: the woman had been murdered in the courtyard of her apartment building while 38 of her neighbors watched the incident unfold. None had given assistance, even such low-risk assistance as telephoning the police.

"The outcry over this was enormous. Newspapers were filled with condemnation of the neighbors. Many analysts, including social scientists, contributed instant diagnoses of the source of their inhumanity: some suggested alienation, others apathy, still others dehumanization. Social psychologists, however, tend to be suspicious of analyses of human actions, even shocking or immoral actions, that automatically attribute those actions to some personality deficit or moral deficiency in the actor. Instead, we are much more likely to look at the specifics of the situation to try and determine from the actor's perspective how he analyzes the situation, and how his responses flow from his analysis.

"Discussing the Kitty Cenovese murder, Bibb Latané and I realized that a social-psychological analysis could be made. The analysis suggested several subtle ways in which the presence of a group of witnesses can influence any individual witness, and that those influences frequently work together to produce widespread inaction on the part of the group.

"This paper represents the first of many studies we did on bystander responses to emergencies. It demonstrated experimentally that the presence of others reduced an individual's feelings of personal responsibility in an emergency situation. In another study,<sup>1</sup> we showed that the startling inaction of a bystander to an emergency is often seen by other bystanders to be reflecting a decision that whatever is taking place is not an emergency. This definition is communicated to another bystander, and his inaction communicates it back. A kind of 'anti-panic mob' is formed in which individuals do not respond because they define the situation as no emergency.

"Latané and I went on to do other studies on this topic; many of these studies are reported in our book. *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?*<sup>(2)</sup> winner of the 1968 Socio-Psychological Prize of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Century Psychology Prize for 1968. Other researchers joined in (a recent review indicates over 400 pre-1975 articles'), and a research area came into being. This, of course, is the primary reason the article has been so highly cited. A second reason is that research in this area provides a useful example of the social-psychological analysis of a problem. Thus the article is frequently cited in textbooks as an example of this analysis, and because these studies demonstrate that genuine experimental research can be done on important social topics "

1. Latané B & Darley J M. Group inhibition of bystander intervention in emergencies. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 10:215-21, 1968.
2. ...., *The unresponsive bystander: why doesn't he help?* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts. 1970. 131 p.
3. Lau S & Blake B F. Recent research on helping behavior: an overview and bibliography. *Catalog of selected documents in psychology* 6:69, 1976. Journal Supplement Abstract Service, MS. 1289.