

Self-categorization and bystander non-intervention: Two experimental studies

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### Abstract

This paper outlines a new approach to the study of bystander intervention. Using insights derived from self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), we explore the social category relations amongst those present in the context of physical violence. The paper describes two experiments which manipulate the social category relations between (i) bystander and fellow bystanders and (ii) bystander and victim. Analysis indicates that fellow bystanders are only influential when they are in-group rather than out-group members. Furthermore, bystanders are more likely to help victims who are described as in-group as opposed to out-group members. Overall, the findings suggest an important role for a self-categorization perspective in developing strategies to promote bystander intervention.

## Self-categorization and bystander non-intervention: Two experimental studies.

The brutal rape and murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 has a key place in the folklore of social psychology. In an attempt to explain why 38 witnesses failed to help her, social psychologists have devoted considerable attention to the question of why people fail to intervene in such situations. Studies have pointed to the importance of victim characteristics (e.g. race; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977), bystander characteristics (e.g. gender; Schwartz & Clausen, 1974), characteristics of other bystanders (e.g. perceived competence; Bickman, 1971) and characteristics of the situation (e.g. perceived severity of emergency; Geer & Jarmecky, 1973).

The single most consistent finding, however, has been in relation to the variable of group size, specifically the number of bystanders perceived to be present at an emergency situation. Numerous studies have demonstrated that “an individual’s likelihood of giving help decreases as the number of other bystanders also witnessing an emergency increases” (Latané, Nida & Wilson, 1981, p. 309). Much of this work has been interpreted in the context of the original and most influential model of bystander intervention, Latané and Darley’s (1970) decision-making model. This model involves a sequence of decisions that must be made before intervention takes place. Latané and Darley then proposed three social psychological processes - social influence, audience inhibition and diffusion of responsibility - to explain how the presence of other bystanders can influence this decision sequence at various stages, tipping the scales toward non-intervention.

In the last major review of this literature, Latané and Nida (1982) argued that the bystander effect is one of the most well-established and replicated findings in social psychology. At the same time, however, they point out that,

to our knowledge, the research has not contributed to the development of practical strategies for increasing bystander intervention .... none of us has been able to mobilize the increasing store of social psychological understanding accumulated over the last decade to ensure that future Kitty Genoveses will receive help. (p. 322).

This pessimism about the utility of bystander theory has led to a gradual decline in research work in the area. Over the last two decades there has been little progress in the field.

In this paper we will argue that one of the reasons for the failure to translate bystander research into practical strategies can be traced to a key assumption of Latané and Darley's work. We argue that, while Latané and Darley were right to stress the importance of other bystanders in helping situations, they did not go far enough. Latané and Darley examine the influence of others purely in terms of number, the number of other bystanders present. We argue, following recent developments in the theory of group processes (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) for the importance of exploring the social category relations between all those present in the emergency situation. In other words, we suggest that intervention is determined not only by how many others are present but by who those others are believed to be.

This move towards exploring bystander intervention in terms of social category relations has been foreshadowed by recent work on helping from Dovidio, Gaertner, Validzic, Matoka, Johnson and Frazier (1997) and Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce and Neuberg (1997). While neither of these papers deals directly with intervention, both discuss the importance of a

group level analysis of helping. Dovidio et al. (1991), drawing on Tajfel and Turner (1979), argue for the importance of the concept of 'we-ness' (defined as "a sense of connectedness or a categorization of another person as a member of one's own group" (p. 102)) in their model of helping. They propose that the categorization of a person as an in-group rather than an out-group member establishes very different interpersonal relationships. This emphasis on the importance of shared identities is echoed by Cialdini et al. (1997). They argue for the importance of a self-other overlap in helping behavior. They describe a concept of 'oneness', a sense of shared, merged or interconnected identities, which is central to helping. While Cialdini et al. operationalize 'oneness' in terms of personal identity, they go on to suggest that this kind of concept might extend to shared social as well as personal identities.

While both of these papers suggest the need to move beyond analyses of intra-individual and interpersonal processes, they do so at different levels of engagement with research on group processes and by using different conceptual tools. The aim of our paper is to build on this work by suggesting a developed theoretical frame for addressing the importance of group processes in bystander intervention research. The theoretical framework we propose is derived from self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987). According to SCT, the psychological basis for group behavior is the categorization of self with others and a depersonalization in perception where one's unique characteristics fade from awareness and one defines oneself in terms of stereotypical group characteristics. Depersonalization leads to a perceived similarity of needs, goals and motives, a mutual and shared perception by in-group members of their interests as interchangeable. A central feature of SCT is the dynamic responsiveness of the self-concept to social interactive contexts (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Change in contextual factors (the situation and the interactants) is likely to elicit change in self-categorizations.

Perceiving the self as part of 'we' or 'us' as opposed to 'I' and 'me' in the intervention context has important implications for the behavior of bystanders. In this paper we begin to examine these implications by investigating how the social categorical relations among the key interactants in a situation involving a violent attack can influence likelihood of intervention. In the first of two experiments reported in this paper, we focused on categorical relations between bystander and fellow bystanders. While there have been some studies to suggest that interpersonal similarity or friendship among bystanders can reduce the social inhibition effect, few address the impact of relationships at the intergroup level. One study by Teger and Henderson (1971, cited in Latané & Nida, 1981), suggested that male bystanders were more likely to be influenced by the behavior of fellow bystanders when they were male rather than female. SCT holds that the way in which individuals categorize themselves in a particular context determines their perceptions of social norms. A study by Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg and Turner (1990) demonstrated that, in Sherif's (1936) autokinetic paradigm, the impact of confederates on the formation of a norm decreases as their membership of a different category is made more salient to participants. They also used the Asch (1956) conformity paradigm to show that surveillance effectively exerts normative pressure if done by an in-group but not by an out-group. We hypothesized that, in an ambiguous intervention situation, bystanders will be influenced by other bystanders only if they share a common category. In other words, the presence of other bystanders will only inhibit intervention if those bystanders are perceived to be in-group members and they demonstrate an unwillingness to intervene. The presence of other bystanders will facilitate intervention if they are perceived to be in-group members who demonstrate a willingness to intervene. If bystanders are perceived to be out-group members then their expressed intention (to intervene or not) will not influence rates of intervention.

In the second experiment, we investigated the effect of categorical relations between bystander and victim. Data generated from various theoretical perspectives have shown that recognition of common group membership can increase helping. Hornstein and his colleagues (Flippen, Hornstein, Siegal & Weitzman, 1996; Hornstein, 1972, 1976; Hornstein, Masor, Sole & Heilman, 1971; Sole, Marton & Hornstein, 1975) have shown that pedestrians are more likely to return a 'lost letter' if the owner is believed to be a member of the same community or share similar attitudes. Using the minimal group paradigm, Dovidio et al. (1997) found evidence of in-group bias in helping. Students were more likely to offer help to a student in need when she was believed to be an in-group member. SCT posits that social categorization, perceiving self and others as prototypical of the self-category, tends to increase levels of intragroup co-operation (Turner et al., 1987). Furthermore, Stapel, Reicher and Spears (1994) have drawn on SCT to show that categorical relations affect whether we see things as personally relevant or threatening. They argue that, when a victim is seen as an in-group rather than an out-group member, individuals are more likely to consider that the same fate might befall them. For our second experiment therefore, we hypothesised that a bystander is more likely to intervene if the victim in an intervention situation is an in-group rather than an out-group member.

### Experiment 1

The first experiment explores the social category relations among bystanders who witness a violent scene. Using a paradigm in which groups of people are asked to watch a video depicting street violence, we predict that fellow bystanders will influence likelihood of intervention when they are in-group rather than out-group members.

## Method

### Participants

The sample comprised 32 undergraduate students (23 females and 11 males) who were enrolled in various courses at Lancaster University. Male and female students were assigned, by block, to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (group: in-group or out-group) X 2 (intervention: intervention or non-intervention) design.

### Procedure

Participants attended the experiment in groups of two. On arrival at the laboratory, they were told that they were to participate in a study of attitudes to street incidents with two other people (confederates; 1 male and 1 female) who were waiting in the experimental room. Participants were asked to sit next to the two confederates so that all sat in a row, facing a television and video recorder. The confederates introduced themselves either as Lancaster university students (in-group condition) or students from Morecambe college, a local further education college (out-group condition). The group was asked then to watch a piece of footage captured on a local closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera after which they would be asked for their views. The video clip, lasting approximately three minutes, depicted an attack on a male actor by two others, one male and one female actor. To render the stimulus material ambiguous and similar to that captured by a CCTV camera, the action was shot in black and white, from a high angle and long range and slightly out of focus. Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they would intervene to help. Confederates responded first in all conditions, indicating that they either would intervene (intervention condition) or would not intervene (non-intervention condition).

After watching the footage, participants completed a questionnaire which assessed (a) the perceived severity of the incident, (b) their emotional response to the situation and (c) their likelihood to intervene in a similar real-life incident. Perceived severity was assessed using a three-item scale. Participants were asked to indicate how serious and how violent they perceived the incident to be, as well as how much danger they considered the victim to be in. The scale ranged from “not at all” (1) to “extremely” (7). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for this sample was .80. The emotional response measure was composed of 12 adjectives describing different emotional states, e.g. angry, frustrated, dismayed. Participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “extremely” (7) how much of each emotion they experienced while watching the footage. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the 12 items was .86. Likelihood to intervene in a similar real-life situation was assessed using a one-item measure, again using a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all likely” (1) to “extremely likely” (7).

### Results and discussion

Table 1 shows means and standard deviations for the four experimental conditions. A two-way (group by intervention) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of intervention ( $F(1, 28) = 11.75, p < .01$ ) and a significant group by intervention interaction ( $F(1, 28) = 7.76, p < .01$ ). As shown in Figure 1, intervention was maximized in the in-group intervention condition ( $M = 5.71$ ) and minimized in the in-group non-intervention condition ( $M = 2.60$ ) while the out-group intervention and out-group non-intervention conditions did not differ significantly ( $M_s = 3.57$  and  $3.25$  respectively). Analysis of simple effects revealed a significant difference between those in the intervention in-group and intervention out-group conditions while the difference between the non-intervention in-group and non-intervention out-group conditions was not significant.

## TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

These effects held even when differences in perceived severity and emotional response were controlled for. There were significant effects of both covariates, perceived severity and emotional response ( $F(1, 27) = 23.53, p < .001$  and  $F(1, 27) = 11.02, p < .01$  respectively). These variables, however, did not appear to mediate the group by intervention interaction.

The results, thus, suggest that the stated intention of other bystanders in relation to helping in an ambiguous situation only influenced respondents' decision to intervene when those bystanders shared common category membership. Responses did not appear to be affected when the source of influence derived from out-group members. These findings are consistent with those of Abrams et al. (1990), who showed that social comparison to reduce uncertainty depends on perceiving the source of influence as belonging to one's own category.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that those variables traditionally used to explain differences in levels of intervention - perceived severity of the situation (e.g. Geer & Jarnecky, 1973) and emotional arousal (e.g. Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972) - did not appear to mediate the link between category membership and intervention to help.

## Experiment 2

The second experiment examines the social category relations between bystanders and victim. Using a similar video presentation, but manipulating the relationship between those watching the video and the victim in the video, we predict that people will be more likely to intervene when the victim is presented as an in-group rather than an out-group member.

## Method

### Participants

Seventy-five female and 17 male undergraduate psychology students at Lancaster University participated. Participants were assigned randomly to one of two experimental conditions (in-group victim or out-group victim) with an approximately equal number of males and females in both conditions.

### Procedure

The experiment was introduced to all participants as a study investigating differences in responses to crime among different groups in Lancaster. As in Experiment 1, participants were asked then to watch a piece of footage captured on a local CCTV camera after which they would be asked for their views. In the in-group victim condition, participants ( $n = 48$ ) were told also that the footage would feature an attack by a young man from Lancaster on a student from Lancaster university. In the out-group condition, participants ( $n = 44$ ) were told that the footage would feature an attack by a young man from Lancaster on a young man, also from Lancaster. The video clip was different to that featured in Experiment 1; it lasted three and a half minutes and depicted a fight between two male actors. After watching the footage, all participants completed a questionnaire containing the same measures used in Experiment 1, i.e. perceived severity ( $\alpha = .88$ ), emotional response ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and likelihood to intervene in a similar real-life situation.

### Results and discussion

Table 2 shows means and standard deviations for the three measures, likelihood to intervene, perceived severity and emotional response. A one-way ANOVA was used to determine differences in likelihood to intervene between the in-group victim and out-group victim

condition. Results indicated that participants in the in-group victim condition were significantly more likely to intervene than participants in the out-group victim condition,  $F(1, 90) = 78.33, p < .001$ . Similar to the results from Experiment 1, this effect held when differences in perceived severity and emotional response were controlled for. Unlike the previous experiment, however, there were no effects of either covariate, perceived severity ( $F(1, 89) = 1.77, p > .05$ ) or emotional response ( $F(1, 89) = 0.67, p > .05$ ).

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

This finding suggests that a bystander is more likely to intervene when the victim of a violent attack is perceived to belong to the same group and adds to the existing evidence of in-group bias in helping (e.g. Dovidio et al., 1997).

#### General discussion

The results of these studies indicate that bystander behavior is influenced by the categorical relationships among the key interactants in an intervention situation. The way in which bystanders categorize not only fellow bystanders but also victims of violence seems to determine their response to a violent incident. Moreover, these differences in social category status (in-group/out-group) do not appear to be mediated by levels of emotional arousal or the perceived severity of the situation.

These findings, we suggest, show that research on bystander behavior can benefit from revisiting the way in which the social context of intervention is theorized in bystander research. The traditional bystander intervention paradigm tends to focus on the individual bystander's decision-making process and how this is affected by the perceived presence of

other bystanders. Social context is defined only in terms of the number of fellow bystanders present. This approach does not consider the individual's capacity for collective behavior. The SCT model shows that, under specific conditions, individuals behave in terms of shared in-group membership rather than personal individual characteristics. The same conditions may result in the individual bystander being less concerned with establishing how many others are present than with identifying who they are in relation to the social in-group/out-group. Furthermore, analysis of the social context of intervention must consider categorical relations between bystander and victim in addition to relations between bystander and fellow bystanders. Bystander behavior will be a function of these components and their interrelationships.

While the experiments in this paper suggest the importance of social category relations, they also raise a number of questions which a self-categorization approach will need to address. Firstly, the experiments do not examine the precise mechanisms whereby social category membership influences bystander intervention. Traditional mediating variables, including levels of affective arousal (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972) and perceived severity of the emergency (e.g. Geer & Jarmelky, 1973), do not appear to mediate differences between in-group and out-group conditions. A more comprehensive test of the SCT approach needs to be developed to identify the processes underlying the effects of social category relationships. A close reading of SCT suggests that mediating variables such as awareness of common fate, perceived similarity and collective responsibility would need to be examined in this work.

Secondly, we are aware that our experiments, unlike the early experiments that ingeniously measured actual bystander behavior, are based on self-report measures. While experiments employing behavioral measures are difficult in the context of violence, it is a challenge that

needs to be met. At the same time, the bystander paradigm provides the opportunity for research using a range of methodologies. For example, Hopkins and Reicher (1996) argue that an experimental methodology has limitations in that it pre-defines the nature of the social context and the dimensions along which people are to be judged and, therefore, casts the individual as a passive observer, powerless to advance alternative constructions. Other methodologies - interviews eliciting people's own accounts of bystander intervention, for example - are required to do justice to the individual's ability to construct and reconstruct the social context of bystander intervention.

Thirdly, there remains a category relationship which is important for explanations of bystander behaviour during a violent episode and which has yet to be addressed. We have explored the bystander-bystander and the bystander-victim relationship, but have not considered the bystander-perpetrator relationship. This absence does not characterize our work alone. In fact, the bystander-perpetrator relationship has been virtually ignored in the entire helping literature. Part of the explanation for this can be traced to Cherry's (1994) observation that, despite the nature of the original Kitty Genovese incident, subsequent experimental analogues neglected two key factors: the violence and the gender relationship. Research focussed instead on helping in the context of environmental or medical emergencies. In those kinds of intervention situations there is usually no perpetrator present. Our theoretical approach raises the importance of all category relationships in the context of intervention. However, making predictions about how the bystander-perpetrator relationship will affect intervention is not straightforward. On the one hand, SCT argues that social categorization involves in-group favoritism and perceptions of the evaluative superiority of the in-group over the out-group. Bystanders who witness in-group members acting aggressively may therefore be more likely to consider those actions to be justified, than when

the same acts are carried out by outgroup members. This might lead to less likelihood of intervention. On the other hand, work by Stott and his colleagues would suggest that responses to violence perpetrated by in-group members will depend on group norms around violence as well as the intergroup context (Stott, Hutchinson and Drury., in press; Stott & Reicher, 1998). It may be that, rather in the manner of the ‘black sheep effect’ (Marques, 1990) bystanders would be more likely to intervene if perpetrators are seen as in-group members whose actions are damaging the reputation of the group as a whole. Clearly, future work on the bystander-perpetrator relationship will need to separate out the effects of identity salience, group norms and intergroup context in predicting the likelihood of intervention. Moreover, a comprehensive analysis of the intervention situation would need to address the entire matrix of social category relationships involving bystander, perpetrator and victim.

In conclusion, the aim of this paper has been to reinvigorate the search for new initiatives in promoting bystander intervention. We argue that, by developing the analysis of social category relations between all those present in the context of violence, new insights into the behavior of bystanders emerge. While it is still too early to specify the nature of such intervention initiatives, the self-categorization approach appears promising. Ultimately, it may be possible to locate the Latané and Darley model of the individual bystander’s decision-making process within SCT’s broader intergroup analysis of the intervention context. Integrating the two frameworks will serve to deepen our understanding of and thus strengthen our predictions about bystander behavior. Perhaps, more importantly, this increased knowledge will translate into practical strategies to promote bystander intervention, thereby “ensuring that future Kitty Genoveses will receive help” (Latané & Nida, 1981, p. 322).

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the Four Experimental Conditions.

	Likelihood to intervene	Perceived severity	Emotional response
In-group/intervention (n = 7)			
M	5.71	5.86	4.57
SD	0.95	1.32	1.19
In-group/non-intervention (n = 10)			
M	2.60	3.47	2.64
SD	1.43	1.27	1.29
Out-group/intervention (n = 7)			
M	3.57	6.05	4.63
SD	1.62	0.78	0.57
Out-group/non-intervention (n = 8)			
M	3.25	4.00	3.28
SD	1.49	1.82	1.61

Note: Scores range from 1 (minimum) to 7 (maximum) on all scales.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for In-group and Out-group Victim Conditions.

	Likelihood to intervene	Perceived severity	Emotional response
In-group condition (n = 48)			
M	5.40	4.75	4.50
SD	1.03	0.95	0.98
Out-group condition (n = 44)			
M	3.14	4.36	4.28
SD	1.41	1.11	1.06