

HEALTH AND HUMAN SCIENCES

The Bystander Effect: Societal and Academic Implications of a Neglected Sexuality

Student researchers:

Abigael Johnson and Dana Tomeh, Seniors

On March 13, 1964, 28-year-old Kitty Genovese was attacked twice before dying in a stairwell half an hour after the assault had begun. Reports of the murder claimed that of the 38 witnesses, not one had intervened or even contacted the authorities. Psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané used this infamous crime as the basis for their bystander effect theory—a phenomenon in which individuals do not offer any means of help to a victim if there are other witnesses present.

The bystander effect is a foundational principle in social psychological research. It is one of the first theories taught to any newcomer to the field. It has had a widespread influence on not just the discipline of psychology, but in all of the social sciences, humanities, law, and even the occasional biological journal. This can be quantitatively demonstrated through a search of the term on EBSCO, which yields 13,235 results. What these articles have failed to comment on, however, is a primary factor that could have deterred any actual witnesses from intervening—Kitty Genovese was a lesbian.

1964 was a dangerous time to be gay. Homosexuality was listed as a mental disorder until 1973, making it taboo in social and psychological circles. In addition, as per the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, homosexuality was illegal in the United States. These factors, rendering homosexuality both a sickness and a crime, implied risk to any sympathizers to Genovese's situation.

Her neighbors were aware of her sexuality, so it is understandable that they might have been reluctant to chance the stigma and legal implications of association with a homosexual.

The inaction of Genovese's neighbors was attributed to the bystander effect, but this attribution completely disregarded the socio-legal repercussions of associating with a homosexual at this time in history. Therefore, the premise of the initial results from Darley and Latané was based on an incomplete narrative. While this oversight does not negate the usefulness of the theory, it calls into question the effect that this confounding variable could have had on the strength of these results. After all, it is the strength of Darley and Latané's findings that brought their theory into the spotlight, making it widely studied and applied.

Even though the study was successfully replicated many times, subsequent reproductions could have been affected by confirmation bias such that the effects of sociocultural factors, like sexuality, may not have been investigated. Further studies have shown that the influence of the bystander effect can either be mediated or exacerbated by situational factors, such as Genovese's sexuality. However, the fact that the Darley and Latané study did not consider her sexuality as a contributing factor means that the strength of the bystander effect could be overestimated in both this initial study and all following related research.

Research advisor Julia Chester writes: "This analysis of the bystander effect theory raises important ethical issues and emphasizes caution in the interpretation and application of research associated with this theory. I am impressed that the authors shine a light on this issue."