3. THE DIFFUSION OF RESPONSIBILITY AND BYSTANDER INTERVENTION AND APATHY: COMMONSENSE AND EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Bystander intervention is a term used to refer to whether individuals help in emergencies, and when they do not, it is known as bystander apathy.

Diffusion of responsibility (and blame) occurs when, at an emergency situation in front of many people, "each individual feels less responsible for taking action than they would if they were the only person available to help" (Burr 2007 p163). In other words, the more people present, the less likely an individual is to help. This is contrary to commonsense.

In New York city in 1964, Kitty Genovese was murdered by Winston Mosely in the early hours of the morning. What made this case memorable was that thirty-eight witnesses heard or saw part of the event, but nobody came to help her or even called the police (Rosenthal 1964) [2].

This produced a mass response in the New York newspapers of the time as to the reason for bystander apathy. "Preachers, professors, and news commentators sought the reasons for such apparently conscienceless and inhumane lack of intervention. Their conclusions ranged from 'moral decay', to 'dehumanisation produced by the urban evironment', to 'alienation', 'anomie', and 'existential despair'" (Darley and Latanē 1968).

The many suggestions for the lack of aid to Kitty Genovese are "commonsense explanations" not based on any evidence or theory, while experimental psychology is different to that (table 3.1). Legge (1975) made the distinction between formal ("professional", scientific) and informal ("amateur", non-scientific) psychology.

Psychology has often been criticised for being no more than "glorified commonsense". Gross (1992) wryly observed:

[2] Manning et al (2007) argued that there is no evidence for three key features of the Kitty Genovese that commonly appear in social psychology textbooks: that there were 38 witnesses, that the witnesses all watched the attack, and that the witnesses did not intervene.

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COMMONSENSE EXPLANATIONS	EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY
- Unsystematic set of ideas.	- Organised theories of behaviour.
- Hard to check because ideas change suddenly or are inconsistent.	- Theories can be tested by experiments and so is evidence-based.
- Many commonsense explanations contradict themselves. For example, the proverb, "many hands make light work" is contradicted by the saying, "too many cooks spoil the broth".	- Theories that contradict can be compared by experiments to establish which is correct. If this cannot be established, then experiments can show in what situation each theory holds true.
- Usually based on personal experiences and observations.	- Uses data from many sources/methods and individuals as one individual's experiences are limited.
- Subjective and bias based on an individual's prejudices and distortions.	- Experiments attempt to remove subjectivity and bias with rigorous controls to gain objective results.
- Can be hard to change and individuals will hold beliefs despite contrary evidence.	- Theories that are falsified are adapted or disregarded.
- Tends to support the norms and values of the time.	- Can be counter-intuitive and produce contrary findings to commonsense.

Table 3.1 - Key differences between commonsense explanations of behaviour and experimental psychology.

> A common reaction among psychology students, when discussing the findings of some piece of research, is to say "But we knew that already" implying that "It's only common sense". Alternatively, they might say "But that's not what we normally understand by such-and-such", implying that the research is in some way wrong. So it seems that psychology is often in a "Catch-22" position - either it merely confirms common sense or it contradicts it, in which case psychology seems to be the less credible (p19).

3.2. DARLEY AND LATANÉ (1968)

Darley and Latanē (1968), after reading of the murder of Kitty Genovese, set up an experiment to test the diffusion of responsibility.

They used fifty-nine female and thirteen male psychology students at New York University. The participants were placed individually in a small room with a microphone and a pair of headphones. They were led to believe that other individuals were in similar rooms

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only in contact by the microphone. The task was to discuss the experiences of adjusting to New York city and university life. In fact, the participant was listening to a pre-recording of others talking.

Darley and Latanē created an emergency by the speaker in another room apparently seeming to have an epileptic seizure. The researchers varied the number of people that the participant believed also heard the fit as either two (victim and participant), three or six. The make-up of the supposed groups was varied as female or male. The decision to help by the participants was recorded as to whether they left their room in search of other people within six minutes of the fit.

Significantly more participants responded to help, and quicker, in the two-group condition than the other conditions (table 3.2).

The make-up of the supposed group did not influence the decision to help (ie: no gender differences).

CONDITION	PARTICIPANTS RESPONDING TO HELP (%)	MEAN RESPONSE TIME (secs)
2 person	85	52
3 person	62	93
6 person	31	166

(After Darley and Latanē 1968)

Table 3.2 - Summary of results from Darley and Latanē (1968).

Darley and Latanē explained the behaviour of helping or not in terms of an avoidance-avoidance conflict. A conflict between concern "not to make fools of themselves by overreacting, not to ruin the ongoing experiment by leaving their intercom, and not to destroy the anonymous nature of the situation which the experimenter had earlier stressed as important" and "the guilt and shame they would feel if they did not help the person in distress". In the two-person condition, the latter aspect is more important and individuals help. In the larger group conditions, the cost of not helping is less, and the conflict remains which inhibits the motivation to help.

3.2.1. Evaluation

1. Ethics of the study

All but two of the participants were surprised to find out after the experiment that the epileptic seizure was simulated. The responses of the participants were

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recorded on the microphone and showed genuine concern, like "My God, he's having a fit" or "Oh God, what should I do?". Participants whether they helped or not showed signs of nervousness including trembling hands and sweating palms.

This study, then, caused the participants distress as well as deceiving them. In a post-experimental questionnaire, participants were positive about their experiences of the experiment.

2. Situational basis to bystander intervention and apathy

This study along with others by Latanē and Darley (eg: 1970) showed that the decision to help in an emergency is influenced by situational factors, like the presence of other people. It challenged the "commonsense explanations" for the failure to help Kitty Genovese that included "moral decay", "depersonalised by living in the cold society" or personality variables like "psychopaths".

Darley and Latanē (1968) concluded:

> The explanation of bystander apathy may lie more in the bystander's response to other observers than in presumed personality deficiencies of "apathetic" individuals. Although this realisation may force use to face the guilt-provoking possibility that we too might fail to intervene, it also suggests that individuals are not, of necessity, "non-interveners" because of their personalities (p383).

3. Experimental situation

Studying bystander intervention and apathy in a laboratory experiment has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include control of incident variables that may "contaminate" the results, and the ability to establish cause and effect. But the main disadvantage is that the study is artificial and it is not a real-life event.

In particular, Cherry (1995) argued that this research in relation to Kitty Genovese's murder was "stripped of its original gendered parts, that is, an attack on a woman was no longer an essential component in the laboratory exploration of what the event meant". In other words, Kitty Genovese was attacked in a society at a time when little was done to stop violence against women. In fact, one of the onlookers admitted not wanting to get involved because they thought it was a "lover's quarrel" (Rasenberg 2004). Laboratory experiments cannot capture this "social embededness".

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The experiment with its concern with "a dispassionate detachment from the research material and from individual participants; instead of producing 'objectivity' it is argued that scientific language and experimental procedure serves only to mask the values and assumptive world of the researcher" (Burr 2007 p186).

3.4. REFERENCES

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