

INHIBITION OF HELPING BEHAVIOR BY A SIMILAR OR DISSIMILAR NONREACTIVE FELLOW BYSTANDER¹

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Male subjects observed a female experimenter suffering apparent physical distress under one of three conditions: (a) alone, (b) in the presence of a nonreactive confederate supposedly similar to themselves in attitudes, or (c) in the presence of a dissimilar nonreactive confederate. On the basis of Festinger's social comparison theory, it was predicted that subjects exposed to the similar nonreactive fellow bystander would be less likely to intervene to help the "lady in distress" than would be the case when subjects were exposed to a dissimilar nonreactive other. The results strongly supported this prediction. Only 5% of the subjects in the similar fellow bystander condition intervened, compared with an intervention rate of 35% in the dissimilar other condition. In the alone condition, 65% of the subjects intervened to help the victim. Subjects in the dissimilar other condition who failed to intervene showed a significant increase in both emitted and expected attraction in relation to the nonreactive fellow bystander.

A good deal of recent empirical attention has focused on social and situational factors influencing emergency intervention behavior. A repeatedly demonstrated finding in laboratory studies has been that the presence of fellow bystanders in an emergency has an inhibitory effect on helping behavior (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Rodin, 1969). A particularly strong inhibitory effect on emergency intervention behavior is found to occur when the fellow bystander reacts to the situation in a passively unconcerned manner. Latané and Rodin (1969) found that 70% of subjects who were alone intervened to help a woman heard to fall and cry out in pain in an adjoining room. Introduction of a second bystander into the situation reduced the probability of intervention to 40%. When the fellow bystander was a confederate instructed to appear passively unconcerned, the percentage of subjects who intervened showed a dramatic drop to only 7%.

A number of explanatory concepts have been invoked to account for the inhibiting

effects of fellow bystanders on helping behaviors. It has been suggested, for example, that the presence of other bystanders results in a "diffusion of responsibility," so that the individual no longer bears 100% of the responsibility for acting, as would be the case if he were alone (Darley & Latané, 1968). However, this principle would not account for the difference in probability of intervention found between the two-subject condition and that involving the nonreactive confederate, since in each instance two bystanders were present.

A second line of explanation emphasizes social factors which influence the bystander's interpretation of the situation. Latané and Darley (1970) pointed out that many emergencies are, particularly in their initial phases, somewhat ambiguous. In interpreting the situation, the bystander is influenced by the interactions and interdependence of (a) cues emanating from the situation; (b) his own cognitions and emotional reactions; and (c) the apparent reactions of others who may be present with which the individual may compare his own reactions. In situations involving some degree of ambiguity, the perceived reactions of others may play an important part in determining how the situation is interpreted. Likewise, social comparison processes may influence the labels which the individual attaches to his emotional responses (Schachter, 1959, 1964). Apparent lack of

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concern on the part of other bystanders may, as a result of social comparison, reduce the observer's certainty that the situation is a serious emergency and thereby reduce the probability of intervening.

The most explicit theory of social comparison processes has been advanced by Festinger (1954). Although Festinger restricted his theory to the comparison of attitudes and abilities, subsequent research has indicated that individuals may compare themselves with others on a variety of dimensions. An important postulate of Festinger's theory states that the tendency to engage in social comparison increases as a function of perceived similarity. A number of investigations have lent empirical support to Festinger's similarity hypothesis (Bandura & Whalen, 1966; Hornstein, Fisch, & Holmes, 1968). The present investigation was designed to explore this aspect of social comparison theory in relation to bystander intervention.

In the present study, male subjects observed a female experimenter suffering apparent physical distress under one of three conditions: (a) alone; (b) in the presence of a nonreactive fellow bystander supposedly similar to themselves in attitudes; or (c) in the presence of a "dissimilar" nonreactive other. The primary dependent variable was whether or not the subject intervened to help the "lady in distress" and, if so, the latency of the helping behavior. On the basis of the hypothesis that similarity enhances social comparison tendencies, it was predicted that inhibition of helping behavior would be greater under conditions of exposure to a similar nonreactive fellow bystander than would be the case when the subject was exposed to a dissimilar nonreactive other. In the fellow bystander conditions, it was also possible to assess changes in emitted attraction toward the stranger and expected attraction from the stranger following the emergency as a function of intervention or nonintervention.

METHOD

Subjects and Experimental Design

The subjects were 60 male undergraduate psychology students at the University of Washington. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of three

experimental conditions, each containing 20 subjects: (a) alone; (b) similar fellow bystander; and (c) dissimilar fellow bystander.

Procedure

Fellow bystander conditions. Subjects were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in an experiment on interpersonal judgment and impression formation. When the subject arrived, he was greeted by the female experimenter and was taken to the experimental facilities. These consisted of two adjoining rooms. Subjects in the fellow bystander conditions were told that the experiment was concerned with the extent to which people can utilize various types of information about another in forming impressions of him. In a fatigued and preoccupied manner, the experimenter told the subject that he and another subject, who had already arrived and was seated in the adjoining room, would be asked to make judgments about each other (a) after knowing only each other's attitudes on a number of contemporary issues and (b) after having the opportunity to see and interact with each other. Subjects were then asked to complete a 12-item attitude questionnaire dealing with such topics as marijuana legalization, abortion, belief in God, etc. After entering the adjoining room, ostensibly to give the questionnaire to the "other subject" (actually a confederate), the experimenter returned and waited until the subject completed the attitude scale. The subject was told that he and the other subject would exchange questionnaires and make the first series of judgments about each other. Taking the subject's questionnaire, the experimenter entered the adjoining room and asked the confederate if he was finished. The confederate replied that he was nearly finished. The confederate was given the subject's attitude responses and generated attitudinal responses which were either similar or dissimilar to the subject's on each of the 12 topics. The confederate randomly assigned the subject to the similar or dissimilar condition at this time in order to prevent the experimenter from having knowledge of the subject's experimental condition. The experimenter returned to the subject with the bogus questionnaire and asked the subject to read the other subject's responses carefully and then to complete two interpersonal judgment scales that required 7-point ratings of intelligence, knowledge of current events, personal feelings toward the other, and desire to have the other as a roommate. The last two items were summed to provide a measure of attraction ranging from 2 to 14. The subject was asked to complete one interpersonal judgment scale in terms of his impressions of the other person and the other in terms of how he thought the other subject would rate him. At this point, the experimenter asked the subject: "Doesn't it seem warm in here to you?" She then asked both the subject and confederate if they would mind if she were to open a window. None of the subjects objected, and she did so. When the subject finished completing the interpersonal judgment scales, the

experimenter told him that he and the other person would now meet, but that they were not to converse with one another. The confederate was then brought into the experimental room and was seated at a desk facing the subject. The subject and the confederate were told that they would be given an autobiographical questionnaire to fill out, after which they would be asked to complete the second set of interpersonal ratings. As the experimenter brought the autobiographical forms to the desk, she moved slowly and rubbed her forehead. After handing the forms to the subject and the confederate, the experimenter turned away, put her hand over her face, lowered her head, and groaned softly. She staggered slowly into the adjoining room where, out of subject's and confederate's line of vision, she bumped into a filing cabinet and collapsed into a chair. During each subsequent 10-15-second interval, the experimenter emitted a gasping sound. The entire episode lasted 3 minutes.

The confederate retained a nonreactive demeanor throughout the episode: He looked up after the experimenter groaned, calmly watched her stagger into the adjoining room, and then returned to filling out his questionnaire in a seemingly unconcerned manner. If the subject tried to converse with him, the confederate shrugged his shoulders and continued working.

If the subject intervened physically by entering the adjoining room, the experimenter assured him that she would be all right and asked him to open another window. If the subject did not intervene or did so verbally (e.g., by calling to the experimenter and asking if she needed help), the experimenter replied that she was all right and remained in the adjoining room for the duration of the 3-minute interval. She then entered the experimental room, asked the subject and the confederate to complete the second interpersonal judgment scale, and excused herself from the room in order to "get a drink of water."

Following completion of the second set of interpersonal judgment scale forms, the experiment was terminated. In order to make some determination of the credibility of the "emergency," and the subject's interpretation of the situation, the confederate left the room with the subject and, as they left the building, questioned the subject regarding his interpretation and reactions to the experimental situation.

Alone condition. Subjects in the alone condition were told that the purpose of the experiment was to determine how well people can make judgments about others purely on the basis of knowledge of attitudes. The subject was given a previously completed attitude questionnaire and asked to complete the interpersonal judgment scale. The experimenter made the same comments regarding the stuffiness of the room and the possibility of opening another window. Following the completion of the interpersonal judgment scale, the subject was given the autobiographical questionnaire and was exposed to the same "emergency" as were the subjects in the fellow bystander conditions. The subjects' responses were observed and scored by the confederate through a peephole in the wall.

Measures of Intervention

Three classes of responses were scored: (a) physical intervention involving going to the adjoining room to offer help; (b) verbal intervention (e.g., calling out to the experimenter from the experimental room); and (c) nonintervention. Latency of intervention, defined as the time interval between the experimenter's moan after handing the subject the autobiographical questionnaire and the subject's verbal or physical intervention, was measured by means of a concealed stop watch operated by the confederate.

After the completion of the experiment, all subjects were sent a two-page summary of the purpose and results of the experiment. The subjects were invited to contact the senior author if they wished to discuss the experiment.

RESULTS

Check on Manipulation

The confederate's postexperimental questioning of the subjects indicated that fewer than 10% of the bystanders expressed suspicion that the experimenter might be feigning distress. The subjects who expressed suspicion were spread quite evenly over the experimental conditions.

Intervention Behavior

The proportion of subjects offering help to the distressed experimenter differed significantly across experimental conditions ($\chi^2 = 15.82$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). Sixty-five percent of the subjects in the alone condition intervened, a figure comparable with those obtained in single bystander conditions in earlier studies. Of major interest in the present study, however, were the percentages of subjects in the two fellow bystander conditions who intervened. The proportion of interveners in the dissimilar other condition was 35%, compared with only 5% in the similar other condition. The latter group differed significantly in frequency of intervention from both the dissimilar other ($z = 2.37$, $p < .01$) and alone ($z = 3.98$, $p < .001$) groups. The difference in the percentage of interveners in the dissimilar other and alone groups closely approached significance ($z = 1.90$, $p < .06$).

Neither latency nor mode of intervention response differed significantly between alone and fellow bystander conditions. The mean response latency among interveners in the alone condition was 12.85 seconds, with a median of 8.42 seconds, compared with a

mean and median of 11.62 seconds and 7.97 seconds, respectively, for interveners in the fellow bystander conditions. In the alone condition, 62% of the interventions involved physical, rather than merely verbal, attempts to help the victim, compared with a 75% physical intervention rate in the fellow bystander conditions.

Attraction Responses toward the Nonreactive Confederate

The mean precrisis and postcrisis attraction ratings of the nonreactive confederate as a function of similarity condition and response to the emergency are presented in Table 1. Subjects in the similar other condition showed greater attraction toward the stranger both before ($F = 8.79$, $df = 1/38$, $p < .01$) and following the emergency ($F = 6.84$, $df = 1/38$, $p < .05$). Of major interest were pre-post changes in the ratings. In the dissimilar condition, noninterveners showed a significant increase in attraction toward the confederate ($t = 2.69$, $df = 12$, $p < .05$), while interveners in that condition exhibited no change in attraction ratings. On the other hand, noninterveners in the similar condition showed no significant change in attraction toward the confederate. The difference in non-interveners' attraction change scores in the two similarity conditions was significant ($t = 2.47$, $df = 30$, $p < .01$).

Attraction Responses Expected from the Confederate

The precrisis and postcrisis interpersonal judgment scales completed by the subject as he felt the "other subject" would rate him were intended to provide data on interpersonal expectancies aroused in the situation. The attraction expectancy data, also shown in Table 1, paralleled the attraction ratings given to the confederate, with the subjects in the similar other condition expecting higher ratings from the confederate both prior to ($F = 13.91$, $df = 1/38$, $p < .01$) and following the emergency ($F = 8.24$, $df = 1/38$, $p < .01$). Analyses of the pre-post changes in expected attraction disclosed only one significant change. The noninterveners in the dissimilar other condition exhibited a significant increase in expected attraction from the nonreactive confederate ($t = 3.48$, $df = 12$,

TABLE 1

PRECRISIS AND POSTCRISIS EMITTED AND EXPECTED ATTRACTION RATINGS AS A FUNCTION OF SIMILARITY-DISSIMILARITY AND INTERVENTION-NONINTERVENTION

Group	Emitted		Expected	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Similar intervener	12	9	11	9
Similar noninterveners	11.58	11.16	10.58	10.21
Dissimilar interveners	8.29	8.29	6.00	7.28
Dissimilar noninterveners	8.23	9.54 ^a	6.92	8.62 ^a

Note.— $n = 1, 19, 7$, and 13 in the similar intervener, similar nonintervener, dissimilar intervener, and dissimilar nonintervener groups, respectively.

^a Indicates a statistically significant postcrisis change ($p < .05$).

$p < .01$). On the other hand, the noninterveners in the similar condition showed no significant change in expected attraction following the emergency. This difference in changes in expected attraction by noninterveners in the two similarity conditions was significant ($t = 3.54$, $df = 30$, $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study are consistent with previous research findings that demonstrate the inhibiting effects of nonreactive fellow bystanders on helping behavior. While 65% of the subjects in the alone condition intervened, the average intervention rate across the fellow bystander conditions was only 20%. Further, and of more specific interest, our results indicate that emergency intervention behavior can be strongly influenced by degree of perceived similarity to a nonreactive fellow bystander. This finding is consistent with predictions derived from Festinger's theory of social comparison processes. On the assumption that social comparison processes affect intervention behaviors, and on the basis of previous evidence that perceived similarity enhances social comparison, it was predicted that a similar nonreactive fellow bystander would exert a greater inhibitory effect on intervention behavior than would a fellow bystander seen as dissimilar. In line with this prediction, 35% of the subjects in the dissimilar other condition intervened to assist the lady in distress, compared with only 5% of the subjects in the similar condition.

Behavioral observations of the subjects clearly indicated the uncertainty evoked by the crisis situation and their active scanning for cues to aid them in deciding what to do. Most subjects registered initial alarm and confusion; typically, they then directed their attention to the confederate, who was calmly completing his questionnaire. After viewing his apparent lack of concern for what was occurring, many subjects exhibited a noticeable decrease in their own apparent level of concern and uncertainty. Others continued to appear alarmed and tended to alternate their focus of attention between the confederate and the sounds emanating from the adjoining room. Several subjects exhibited clear indications of alternating and conflicting response tendencies (e.g., half-rising from their chairs as if to offer help, then sitting back down after casting a glance at the confederate).

The postexperimental questioning of the subjects by the confederate indicated quite different interpretations of the situation by the interveners and noninterveners. The comments of the interveners indicated that they had viewed the event as an emergency calling for help, while the latter group expressed less certainty as to what had occurred and how serious the plight of the experimenter had been. While these observations are consistent with the social comparison framework emphasized here, it should be pointed out that they do not provide unequivocal evidence that intervention or nonintervention behaviors were necessarily mediated by the interpretations expressed by the subjects after the experiment. A tenable alternative explanation is that the subjects' interpretations of the situation resulted from their perceptions of their own behavior (Bem, 1967). This issue is, of course, germane to most studies which seek to assess mediating variables having the status of private events on the basis of post-behavioral questioning of the subject. An assessment of the subject's interpretation within the crisis situation (such as by having the confederate ask the subject what he thinks is happening) could also present problems of interpretation in a situation such as that existing in the present study. For example, when exactly does the "response" of nonintervention occur during the 3-minute

period? Likewise, in the present study, such a query would have been inconsistent with the confederate's required demeanor of unconcern.

Crisis intervention behavior is undoubtedly affected by a complex of interacting determinants. In addition to social comparison processes, such factors as modeling effects exerted by other bystanders, the reward-cost matrix existing in the situation, the relationship between the observer and the victim, individual difference variables such as personality characteristics, and aspects of the relationship between fellow bystanders are all likely to influence whether or not intervention occurs. The attraction data collected before and after the crisis permit some assessment of this aspect of the relationship between the fellow bystanders. First, we find that subjects in the similar condition were more highly attracted to the confederate and expected more liking from him—a finding consistent with the results of numerous studies on the similarity-attraction relationship (Byrne, 1971; Ettinger, Nowicki, & Nelson, 1970). One aspect of the reward-cost matrix existing in a crisis situation where fellow bystanders are present may well be the potential loss of others' esteem resulting from inappropriate intervention. In this vein, it may be that noninterveners in the similar other condition behaved in a manner similar to the confederate partly in order to maintain the existing high level of dyadic attraction. It is perhaps noteworthy in this respect that the one subject in this condition who intervened showed a relatively large decrease in both emitted and expected attraction, while the noninterveners maintained their high levels of emitted and expected attraction following the crisis. In the dissimilar other condition, on the other hand, the interveners showed no decrease in emitted or expected attraction. However, the noninterveners in this condition showed a significant increase in both emitted and expected attraction following the emergency. This pattern of results is open to at least two possible interpretations. If one focuses on the expected attraction data, a plausible interpretation is that at high levels of attraction, adherence to a perceived behavioral norm (in this case, nonintervention) serves to maintain that level of attraction, while at lower attraction levels, behavioral similarity is intended

to increase the level of attraction. The emitted attraction data, on the other hand, indicate that behavioral similarity increases attraction toward others at low attraction levels. These data are in some ways reminiscent of previous empirical results supporting an averaging model of impression formation (Anderson, 1968). If behavioral similarity is conceptualized as a perceived positive trait in another, an averaging model would lead one to predict no change in attraction toward the confederate among similar noninterveners (similarity maintained) or dissimilar interveners (dissimilarity maintained). On the other hand, the model would predict a decrease in attraction by the similar intervener (dissimilarity introduced) and an increase in attraction among the dissimilar noninterveners (similarity introduced). While it is admittedly hazardous to draw firm conclusions when one cell contains only one subject, the general pattern of obtained results seems at least tentatively consistent with these predictions. However, whether the emitted or the expected attraction data are "primary," in the sense of one being the cause of the other, is unclear in the present case since people tend to like those whom they perceive as liking them and to perceive those whom they like as liking them (Byrne, 1971). In the present study, a correlation of .72 was found between emitted and expected precrisis attraction scores. A correlation of .61 was found on the postcrisis attraction measures. An empirical question that has received little attention concerns factors which can affect the relationship between emitted and expected attraction. The correlations yielded by the present investigation are lower than the correlation of .82 previously reported by Ettinger et al. (1970).

One other aspect of the similarity data is worth noting. In the present study, the greatest inhibition of helping behavior occurred in the presence of a similar nonreactive fellow bystander. The Latané and Rodin (1969) study found that of all their two-person conditions, intervention was *most* likely to occur if the bystanders were friends. It has often been demonstrated that friends tend to be more similar in attitudes than randomly chosen dyads (Byrne, 1971). A major factor determining how similarity will

affect intervention behavior may well be the behavior exhibited by the similar fellow bystander. It seems reasonable to assume that friends are less likely to mask their true feelings of alarm in a crisis situation because of their existing relationship of trust. Under conditions where another exhibits alarm, social comparison theory would predict that similarity would increase the probability that the observer would interpret the situation as an emergency and therefore intervene. An experiment designed to test this prediction would appear to be a logical extension of the present study.

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