Bystander intervention: The effect of ambiguity of the helping situation and the interpersonal relationship between bystanders

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The effect of situational ambiguity on helping behavior was examined in relation to interpersonal relationship between bystanders in the field and laboratory settings. In Experiment I, 279 males and females waiting for buses either alone, with a stranger, or with an acquaintance witnessed a person looking for the appropriate bus stop for his destination. In the high ambiguity situation, he expressed a look of distress, but in the low ambiguity situation expressed distress openly by asking a passerby around him. In Experiment II, 120 undergraduates either alone, with a stranger, or with an acquaintance witnessed a person dropping his contact lens. There was another unresponsive subjects who seemingly knew the victim well (low ambiguity condition) or did not know him at all (high ambiguity condition). In both experiments, the effect of ambiguity on helping was most pronounced in the two-acquaintance condition. Subjects in the presence of an acquaintance were more helpful in the low ambiguity situation than were the subjects in the high ambiguity situation. These findings were interpreted in terms of the informational and the normative social influences of small-group processes.

Key words: helping behavior, ambiguity, interpersonal relationship between bystanders, informational and normative social influences.

A number of investigations have shown that individuals faced with an emergency situation are more likely to help when alone than when in the presence of others (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1968; Latané & Rodin, 1969; Schwartz & Clausen, 1970). Latané and Darley (1970) proposed three possible explanations to account for the inhibitory effect of the presence of others on helping. The first explanation is "audience inhibition." If the situation is not actually an emergency situation, the individual who intervenes may be evaluated negatively by others for his misinterpretation of the situation. This aversive foresight of negative evaluation inhibits helping. The second explanation is "social influence." To perceive inaction of others makes the bystander interpret the situation as less critical and makes him believe that inaction is the expected pattern of behavior. The last one is "diffusion of responsibility." To recognize that others are available to help reduces the cost of nonintervention and thus inhibits helping.

In a review of researches following Latané and Darley (1970)'s study, Latané (Latané & Nida, 1981) concluded that social inhibition of helping is a remarkably consistent phenomenon, while he identified some conditions under which the effect can be weakened or eliminated: ambiguity of helping situation, characteristics of other bystanders (familiarity and similarity), and amount and kinds of communication among bystanders. These are not direct conditions which restrict social inhibition of helping, but are important variables which pose a question to the inhibitory effect of social influence on helping behavior.

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It has been found that the following conditions did not lead to inhibiting effects on helping: observation of startle responses of others (Darley, Teger, & Lewis, 1973), positive definition of the stimulus and the appropriate behavior to it (Staub, 1974), and visibility of the victim (Piliavin, Piliavin, & Rodin, 1975; Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969). The characteristics common to all above conditions are to reduce ambiguity of the situation. Clark and Word (1972, 1974) found that the bystander effect does not occur in the low ambiguity condition.

The decision to help or not to help as influenced by ambiguity of the helping situation may be strengthened or weakened by the degree of consensus between bystanders. And, this degree of consensus may in turn be determined by the interpersonal relationship between bystanders. Latané and Rodin (1969) found that pairs of friends displayed social inhibition as compared with single individuals, but intervened significantly faster than did pairs of strangers. Smith, Symthe, and Lien (1972) found that the subjects exposed to a nonreactive bystander similar to themselves in attitudes were less likely to help than the subjects exposed to a nonreactive dissimilar bystander. Harada (1980) found that helping was facilitated more in a two-person face-to-face situation as compared with one-person situation. If the degree of consensus to help is strong enough, people would be more helpful when in the presence of others than when alone.

From above considerations, the following predictions can be made. Ambiguity caused by an unstructured situation would lead to the situation clarification and the consensus formation about behavioral appropriateness through exchange of cues between bystanders. When ambiguity is high, withholding of help will be regarded as proper social behavior within an acquaintance group, while when ambiguity is low, offering help would be regarded as appropriate. When ambiguity is high, the norm of privacy or noninvolvement (Clark & Word, 1974), shared between acquaintances, is expected to make people withhold assistance to the victim. When ambiguity is low, on the other hand, the social responsibility norm is expected to facilitate helping behavior. The increase in ambiguity would also inhibit helping in stranger groups, but this inhibiting effect of ambiguity would not be so pronounced as in acquaintances. This is because the pressure to conform to the privacy-noninvolvement norm shared between acquaintances is expected to be stronger than the pressure to conform to the non-helping caused by diffusion of responsibility between strangers, as suggested by many studies that found the relationship between group cohesiveness and conformity (e.g., Schachter, 1951). As for the likelihood of helping in the stranger/low ambiguity condition, low ambiguity is likely to cancel the negative effect of social influence between bystanders.

The purpose of the present experiments is to investigate the effect of ambiguity of the situation on helping in relation to the interpersonal relationship between bystanders. In Experiment I, ambiguity variable* was manipulated by controlling the behavioral context, and in Experiment II, it was introduced by manipulating the information about the interpersonal relationship.

Experiment I

Method

Subjects and design. Subjects were 279 males and females, ranging from 10 to 60 years of age. Either single subjects, two

* Staub (1978) has proposed two sources of ambiguity in a given situation: ambiguity concerning the stimulus to help and ambiguity about how to provide help. In addition, however, lack of information on whether offering aid in the context is appropriate or not may be a factor that influences the individuals' interpretation of the situation.
acquaintances, or two nonacquaintances were faced with a helping situation, which varied in ambiguity (high vs. low).

Procedure. People waiting for buses served as subjects. The experimenter asked his friend (a confederate) whether the bus stop was correct for his destination. The confederate made uncertain but wrong replies, such as, "Yes, I think so, but ...", and then he went away, saying good-bye to the experimenter. In the low ambiguity condition, the experimenter asked a passerby (another confederate) whether it was correct or not. He also gave an uncertain but wrong reply. In the high ambiguity condition, the experimenter expressed a look of distress by looking at a bus route map on a bulletin board and mumbling to himself, without further asking people around him. The subject's response of telling the correct bus stop to the experimenter was defined as helping. If no help was offered within two minutes, the experimenter asked the subjects for the correct bus stop. The subjects who did not know the correct bus stop were eliminated from the following analysis. In the condition in which the subjects were two, whether they were acquaintances or strangers was checked by observing their interactions: Whether they came up to the bus stop together, whether they had a conversation with each other while waiting for the bus, and so on. This check was done by an independent observer.

Results

The frequency of helping in each condition is presented in Table 1. The data were transformed by the inverse sine transformation method. An analysis of variance revealed a significant effect of ambiguity and a significant interaction effect of ambiguity and interpersonal relationship ($\chi^2=38.20$, $df=1$, $p<.001$; $\chi^2=6.95$, $df=2$, $p<.05$). Sub-analyses revealed that in the low ambiguity condition, there was a significant difference between the alone and the two-acquaintance conditions ($\chi^2=3.92$, $df=1$, $p<.05$). The frequency of helping was greater in the low ambiguity condition than in the high ambiguity condition, and in the low ambiguity condition more helping was observed in the two-acquaintance condition than in the alone condition. In addition, in both high and low ambiguity conditions, differences in the rate of helping between the two-nonacquaintance and alone conditions were small and nonsignificant ($\chi^2=2.21$, $df=1$, n.s.; $\chi^2=0.39$, $df=1$, n.s.). In the high ambiguity condition, the difference between the proportion of helping in the two-acquaintance condition (7.7%) and that in the alone condition (28.6%) was not significant ($\chi^2=2.26$, $df=1$, n.s.).

Discussion

Helping behavior occurred more frequently in the low ambiguity condition
than in the high ambiguity condition. Again, in the present study, it was demonstrated that the situational ambiguity concerning the stimulus to help is the critical factor in determining the occurrence of helping behavior. One explanation of this result may come from Staub’s (1978) idea that the threat or upset derived from being exposed to unclear events results in a bystander’s motivated misperception. In terms of the ambiguity manipulation in this experiment, there can be another explanation. Berkowitz and Daniels (1963) found that a distressed person’s dependency promoted the norm of social responsibility to help. Ashton and Severy (1976) found that victim’s distress made people perceive the situation as a helping situation. In the present study, the victim in the low ambiguity condition asked people around him help. His dependency and the appearance of distress allowed the subjects to perceive more easily the victim’s readiness to accept help.

It was predicted that, compared to the alone condition, in the two-acquaintance condition the helping behavior would be facilitated or inhibited in accordance with the degree of ambiguity of the helping situation. This prediction was partially supported. In the low ambiguity condition, the victim was helped more often in the two acquaintance condition than in the alone condition. In the high ambiguity condition there was not social inhibition on helping. For this finding the following interpretations are possible: (a) In the two-acquaintance condition, in which bystanders were in a face-to-face situation, the effect of social inhibition was restricted; and (b) in the alone condition, the degree of ambiguity was very high and there was no social cue of other bystanders, so the occurrence of helping was inhibited.

Neither in the high nor in the low ambiguity condition, did the probability of helping of the nonacquaintances differ from that in the alone condition. This finding suggests that the occurrence of helping in the two-nonacquaintance condition is not facilitated or inhibited, compared to the likelihood of helping in the alone condition. It appears that perceiving the victim appreciate help, rather than the consensus for helping between bystanders, determines the occurrence of helping.

Experiment II

Shotland and Straw (1976) found that subjects witnessing a fight between a married couple intervened less frequently than subjects who witnessed a fight between strangers. Furthermore, it was revealed that subjects in the married-couple condition hesitated to take any action because they were not sure if their help was wanted. It is conceivable that the perception of a close relationship between a victim and a bystander who does not help the victim would function as situational cue that tells any help is not appropriate in the social context.

Experiment II replicates Experiment I in a laboratory setting, controlling in particular the independent variable of interpersonal relationship between subjects. The situational ambiguity was manipulated by setting the interpersonal relationship between a victim and an unresponsive bystander either close or not.

Method

Subjects and design. Subjects were 120 female college students. They volunteered for the study during their regular class period. Either single subjects, two acquaintances, or two nonacquaintances were faced with a helping situation, which varied in ambiguity (high vs. low).

Procedure. Subjects, either alone or in pair, were led into an experimental room. There was already a woman (confederate) wearing the same uniform as the naive subjects wore, in order to be seen as their fellow subject. In all experimental conditions, the confederate was to retain a non-reactive demeanor in the helping situa-
The manipulation of the situational ambiguity was carried out by either having subjects perceive the interpersonal relationship between the passive unresponsive bystander and the experimenter (future victim) to be a close one or not. In the low ambiguity condition, the experimenter talked to the bystander, “Oh! You are a student of this college, aren’t you? Is your brother fine?” In the high ambiguity condition, this conversation was omitted. In the stage of explaining the purpose of the experiment, the experimenter spoke to himself, “I have sore eyes,” and began to take off his contact lens. Then he feigned to drop that small object. In the present study, the index of helping was determined by the giving aid to the experimenter to find his contact lens. When two minutes had passed without any help, or at the time when some help was offered by the subjects, the experimenter terminated the helping session by saying that he had found his contact lens. Then he took the subjects to another room supposedly to administer a personality test.

In this room the subjects were debriefed and asked to answer several questions. The subjects assigned to the two-acquaintance group had been recruited from the same classroom, while the subjects to the two-nonacquaintance group had been from different classrooms. The questionnaire used to measure the interpersonal relationship between two persons with respect to its cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects contained three items (Imagawa & Iwabuchi, 1981). Each item was answered on a 7-point scale. The questions were (a) “Do you know your partner well? ”; (b) “How much time do you spend with your partner?” and (c) “To what extent are you in friendly relationship with your partner?” Finally the subjects filled out a questionnaire concerning their thoughts and feelings during the helping session: hesitation in offering help, perception of hesitation of others (the naive subject and the confederate), desire to know intention of others, evaluation apprehension from others about their helping or nonhelping, perception of victim’s distress and dependency, and perception of interpersonal relationship between victim and confederate. Each item was answered on a 5-point scale.

**Results**

To assess the adequacy of subjects assignment to the two-acquaintance group or to the two-nonacquaintance group, a t-test was conducted on responses to the interpersonal relationship items. The sum of three scores for each subjects was used for the test. As expected, a significant difference was obtained ($t(96)=3.82$, $p<.0005$). Subjects assigned to the acquaintance group reported closer relationship with their partner ($M_s=17.62$ vs. $5.63$).

The frequency of helping in each condition is presented in Table 2. The data were transformed by the inverse sine transformation method. An analysis of variance revealed a weak interaction between the ambiguity of helping situation and the interpersonal relationship ($F^2=4.99$, $df=2$, $p<.10$). Only in the two-acquaintance condition helping tended to occur more frequently in the low than the high ambiguity condition.

Three-way analyses of variance with subjects as the third factor (helped or not helped) were carried out on questionnaire
items concerning thoughts and feelings during the helping session. Two questionnaire items, hesitation in offering help and perception of hesitation of another naive subject, could explain the interaction: Their pattern of interaction seemed to be similar to the pattern for helping \((F(2/107)=2.55, \; p<.10\) and \(F(2/103)=2.69, \; p<.10\), respectively). In particular, subjects who helped in the low ambiguity condition tended to express less hesitation than subjects who did not help in the high ambiguity condition \((t(11)=2.07, \; p<.10)\). Though there was not a significant main effect of ambiguity in the questionnaire item of hesitation in offering help, in the item of desire to know intention of the confederate it reached to a significant level \((F(1/108)=4.39, \; p<.05)\).

**Discussion**

As in Experiment I, subjects in the presence of an acquaintance tended to be more helpful in the low ambiguity situation than subjects in the high ambiguity situation. The effect of situational ambiguity was most pronounced when two bystanders were acquainted with each other. Helping behavior may be mediated by the evaluation process of social behavior through observation of others’ reaction to the helping situation, since the degree of hesitation in offering help tended to be less in the subjects who helped in the low ambiguity condition than in the subjects who did not help in the high ambiguity condition.

There was, however, no significant difference in the proportion of helping between the high and low ambiguity situations. The post-experimental questionnaire revealed that subjects in the high ambiguity situation, compared to subjects in the low ambiguity situation, wondered more whether the passive bystander would help or not. Hence, it can be concluded that subjects in the high ambiguity condition were less sure whether helping in that social context was appropriate or not. Then, it may be a question why the effect of ambiguity did not influence the likelihood of helping in the present study. In all cases here subjects were exposed to one unresponsive bystander. This experimental procedure, possibly contributing to reduced helping in all conditions, might have caused the difference between two ambiguity conditions to fail to reach a significant level.

**General Discussion**

The effects of situational ambiguity on helping behavior was examined in relation to interpersonal relationship between bystanders in field and laboratory settings. In both experiments, it was found that the presence of another acquainted bystander had unique and striking effects on helping behavior. When the ambiguity was high, acquaintances tended to withhold helping, and when the ambiguity was low they were likely to help.

These findings might be interpreted in terms of informational and normative influences in small-group processes. Individuals are likely to perceive that their own perception of cues to a helping situation are already insured in its accuracy and appropriateness from acquaintances. Norms shared in acquaintance groups have powerful effects on the group members’ conformity. According to Deutsch and Gerard (1955), the normative social influence on individual judgements was greater among the individuals forming a group than among the individuals who did not compose a group. Through these two processes, the presence of another acquainted person has positive or negative effects in accordance with the extent of ambiguity in the helping situations. Further research should be designed to investigate the relative importance and effects of these group processes on prosocial behavior.

The presence of others in a helping situation would direct and reinforce the social behavior toward the situationally excepted
pattern. Thus, when the situational demand which prescribes help is salient, the presence of others facilitates helping behavior, while the opposite situational demand is salient, the presence of others inhibits helping behavior. In this regard, the motive, suggested by Latané and Darley (1970), to maintain one’s friend’s good opinion by acting helpfully can not explain the positive effect of the presence of friends on helping behavior; it was found in Experiment II that the extent of the evaluation apprehension of the subjects who helped the victim did not vary, no matter who was to evaluate the subject: the confederate, the nonacquainted partner, or the acquainted partner.

In the high ambiguity situation, the predicted inhibition was not observed in the two-acquaintance condition compared to the alone condition. This might be due to the fact that in the acquaintance group helpful norm had been already formed, which prescribed helpful mind to each fellow member and even to strangers. Hence even if the situational ambiguity was high, helping was not inhibited.

The findings obtained from the present studies, however, indicate that acquainted bystanders are not always helpful. When the situational ambiguity is relatively high, they may be more unresponsive than the stranger group. The presence of a person who functions as a supervisor, as in a group-thinking process, may prevent the group from getting into such unresponsiveness. Further research on this point will be needed.

References


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