

Piliavin et al (1969)

Good Samaritanism: An underground phenomenon?

Background

In this study Piliavin, Rodin and Piliavin carried out a field experiment to investigate helping behaviour towards different types of victims.

Piliavin et al. note in their study that social psychologists became particularly interested in the behaviour of bystanders following the case of the brutal murder of Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964. The murder attracted interest from psychologists because according to the press not one person out of the 40 people, who witnessed the attack lasting over half an hour, tried to help or contacted the police.

Many laboratory studies were carried out by social psychologists to test bystander apathy. That is, the phenomenon of when observers of an emergency situation do not intervene. Importantly social psychologists looked for the cause of bystander behaviour not in the type of people who do or do not help but in the situational factors which influence helping behaviour.

The early laboratory experiments into bystander apathy consisted of candid camera/trigger happy style scenarios where people were placed in situations such as a smoke filled room to investigate if people would sound the alarm or not. (e.g. Latane and Darley 1968). These experiments usually consisted of one participant and a number of confederates. One of the findings of such laboratory experiments was that people did demonstrate diffusion of responsibility. That is they were less likely to help as the number of bystanders increased.

However Piliavin et al. recognised that these laboratory experiments lacked ecological validity in that they did not demonstrate how people would react in a realistic situation. They therefore planned to investigate helping behaviour using a field experiment where they could observe behaviour as it is in the real everyday world.

Aim

The aim of the study was to investigate factors affecting helping behaviour.

The factors they were interested included

- (i) The type of victim (drunk or ill)
- (ii) The race of the victim (black or white)
- (iii) The speed of helping
- (iv) The frequency of helping
- (v) The race of the helper.

Importantly the field experiment also investigated the impact of the presence of a model (someone who offers help first), as well as the relationship between the size of the group and frequency of helping.

Method/ Procedure

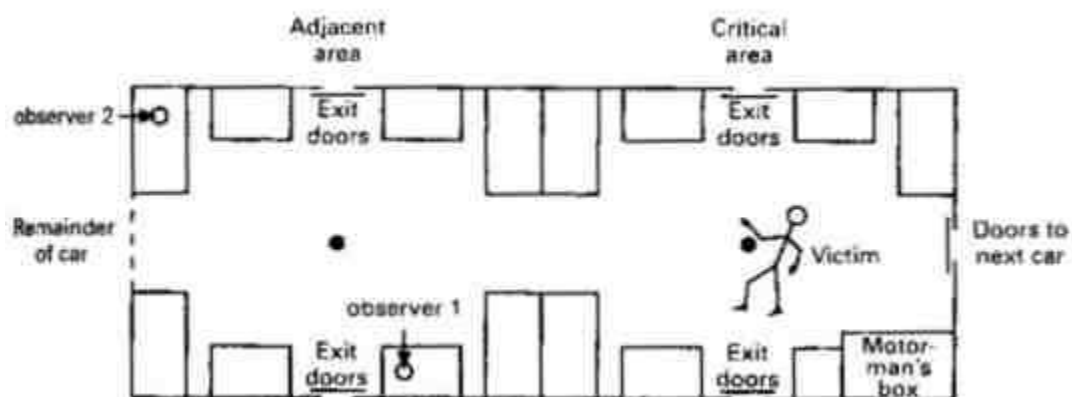
The method used was a type of field experiment using participant observation.

The participants were approximately 4450 men and women travelling on a particular stretch of the New York underground system between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. on weekdays during the period of April 15th to June 26th, 1968. The average racial composition of the passengers on the train, which travelled through Harlem to the Bronx, was 45% black and 55% white. The average number of people in the train carriage was 43, and the average number of people in the critical area where the incident was staged was 8.5.

Two particular trains were selected for the study. The trains were chosen because they did not make any stops between 59th Street and 125th Street. This means that for about 7.5 minutes the participants were a captive audience to the emergency. Therefore a single trial was a non-stop, 7.5-minute journey in either direction.

On each trial, a team of four students, (two males and two females), boarded the train using different doors. Four different teams, whose members always worked together, collected data for 103 trials. Each team varied the location of the experimental compartment from trial to trial. The female confederates sat outside the critical area and recorded data as unobtrusively as possible during the journey, while the male model and victim remained standing. The victim always stood next to a pole in the centre of the critical area (See Figure 1). As the train passed the first station (approximately 70 seconds after departing), the victim staggered forward and collapsed. Until receiving help, he remained motionless on the floor, looking at the ceiling. If he received no help by the time the train slowed to a stop, the model helped him to his feet. At the stop, the team got off and waited separately until other passengers had left the station before proceeding to another platform to board a train going in the opposite direction for the next trial. Six to eight trials were run on any given day and all trials on a given day were in the same 'victim condition'.

Figure 1: Layout of adjacent and critical areas of subway car



The four victims (one from each team) were males, aged between 26 and 35, three white, one black, all identically dressed in Eisenhower jackets, old slacks and no tie. On 38 trials the

victims smelled of alcohol and carried a bottle of alcohol wrapped in a brown bag (drunk condition), while on the remaining 65 trials they appeared sober and carried a black cane (cane condition). In all other aspects, victims behaved identically in the two conditions, and each victim participated in drunk and cane trials. (There were more cane than drunk trials because one of the teams of students did not like playing the drunk victim.)

The models (white males aged 24 to 29) were all casually, but not identically, dressed. There were four different model conditions used across both drunk and cane victim conditions:

Critical area - early: the model would stand in the critical area and wait until passing the fourth station before he helped the victim (approximately 70 seconds after the collapse).

Critical area - late: the model would stand in the critical area and wait until passing the sixth station before he helped the victim (approximately 150 seconds after the collapse).

Adjacent area - early: the model would stand in the adjacent area and waited until passing the fourth station before he helped the victim.

Adjacent area - late: the model would stand in the adjacent area and waited until passing the sixth station before he helped the victim.

When the model intervened, he helped the victim to a sitting position and stayed with him for the remainder of the trial. A number of observations were recorded. The observers noted the total number of passengers who came to the victim's assistance, plus their race, sex and location. The observers also noted the race, sex and location of every passenger, seated or standing, in the critical and adjacent areas. A second observer also noted how long it took for help to arrive. The observers also recorded comments made by nearby passengers and also tried to elicit comments from a passenger sitting next to them.

Results/Findings

Helping behaviour was very high and much higher than earlier laboratory studies. Therefore it was not possible to investigate the effects of the models helping because on the majority of the trials the victims were helped before the model acted.

The cane victim received spontaneous help on 62 out of the 65 trials, and the drunk victim received spontaneous help on 19 out of 38 trials.

On 60% of the 81 trials where spontaneous help was given, more than one person offered help. Once one person had started to help, there were no differences for different victim conditions (black/white, cane/drunk) on the number of extra helpers that appeared. The race of the victims made no significant difference to helping behaviour, but there was a slight tendency for same race helping in the drunken condition.

It was found that 90% of helpers were male. Although there were more men present, this percentage was statistically significant. It was also found that 64% of the helpers were white; this was what would be expected based on the racial distribution of the carriage.

Diffusion of responsibility was not evident. The diffusion of responsibility hypothesis predicts that helping behaviour would decrease as the number of bystanders increases. In fact the field experiment found that the quickest help came from the largest groups. However, in the earlier laboratory experiments there was only one participant and the other bystanders were confederates.

Nobody left the carriage during the incident (mainly because the train was moving), on 21 of the 103 trials a total of 34 people left the critical area, particularly when the victim appeared to be drunk.

More comments were obtained on drunk than cane trials and most of these were obtained when no one helped until after 70 seconds; this could be due to the discomfort passengers felt in sitting inactive in the presence of the victim, perhaps hoping that others would confirm that inaction was appropriate.

The following comments came from women passengers: "It is for men to help him", "I wish I could help him – I'm not strong enough", "I never saw this kind of thing before - I don't know where to look", "You feel so bad that you don't know what to do".

Evaluation Points

- Generalisation of the sample
- Reliability
- Ecological Validity
- Real life applications
- Ethics
- Situational/ Individual debate