The Journal of Social Psychology, 2013, *153*(1), 1–5

REPLICATIONS AND REFINEMENTS

The Positive Bystander Effect: Passive Bystanders Increase Helping in Situations With High Expected Negative Consequences for the Helper

PETER FISCHER
University of Regensburg

TOBIAS GREITEMEYER
University of Innsbruck

ABSTRACT. The present field study investigated the interplay between the presence of a passive bystander (not present versus present) in a simulated bike theft and expected negative consequences (low versus high) in predicting intervention behavior when no physical victim is present. It was found that an additional bystander increases individual intervention in situations where the expected negative consequences for the helper in case of intervention were high (i.e., when the bike thief looks fierce) compared to situations where the expected negative consequences for the helper were low (i.e., when the bike thief does not look fierce). In contrast, no such effect for high vs. low expected negative consequences was observed when no additional bystander observed the critical situation. The results are discussed in light of previous laboratory findings on expected negative consequences and bystander intervention.

Keywords: bystander effect, field experiment, negative consequences, social inhibition, theft

ABUNDANT EVIDENCE PROVIDES SUPPORT for the notion that the presence of passive bystanders reduces the probability that people will intervene in emergencies (Latané & Nida, 1981). This so-called bystander effect has been

Address correspondence to Peter Fischer, University of Regensburg, Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, Universitätsstr. 31, 93053 Regensburg, Germany; peter.fischer@psychologie.uni-regensburg.de (e-mail).

found across a variety of experimental situations, such as simulated asthma attacks (Harris & Robinson, 1973) and car breakdowns (Hurley & Allen, 1974). Although the bystander effect is a robust phenomenon, there is emerging evidence that bystanders do not always have negative effects on individuals' willingness to help. For example, in experimental studies, Fischer, Greitemeyer, Pollozek, and Frey (2006) and Schwartz and Gottlieb (1976) have shown that the bystander effect does not occur in dangerous situations where bystanders face potential negative consequences in case of intervention. A meta-analytic review (Fischer et al., 2011) showed that additional bystanders can even increase helping responses in dangerous situations with increased expected negative consequences for the helper. The most plausible explanations for this counterintuitive finding is that dangerous situations (e.g., someone is assaulted by a perpetrator) are recognized more clearly (Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969). In addition, dangerous situations may be resolved more effectively and safely by a group rather than by a single bystander. Since most previous studies on bystander intervention in dangerous situations have been conducted in the experimental lab, we tried to replicate this "positive bystander effect" in a naturalistic field setting.

Method

Participants and Design

We observed the interventions vs. non-intervention behavior of $N = 2791$ citizens of a major German city at a subway station. Individuals' intervention behavior was observed in overall 120 sequences of 5 minutes each. Thus, in each sequence on average 25 participants potentially witnessed the bike theft. All data were collected between 11:00 am and 3:00 pm. The study consisted of a 2 (*passive bystander present*: yes versus no) $\times$ 2 (*expected negative consequences*: low versus high) between subjects design. The dependent variable was whether people intervened or not (yes versus no). One sequence in which the police unexpectedly intervened was excluded from further analyses, leaving 119 sequences for the final analysis.

Materials and Procedure

We chained up a mountain bike at a subway station. Our perpetrator had a metal saw and tried to open the bike chain. To manipulate expected negative consequences, the perpetrator either looked fierce (i.e., torn jeans, military-look jeans, street wear) or did not look fierce (i.e., black suit and tie; fancy dress; for a similar successful manipulation of expected negative consequences, see Fischer et al., 2006; Greitemeyer, Fischer, Kastenmüller, & Frey, 2006). We also discussed the manipulation of expected negative consequences within an experimental practical group of about 15 students. All students expected the perpetrator with the ruptured jeans and military look (by face value) to evoke higher levels of expected negative

consequences than the perpetrator with the suite and fancy dress. To manipulate the presence of a passive bystander, we varied whether a passive bystander (confederate) stood right next to the perpetrator and passively observed the sawing action (bystander present) or not (no bystander present). Two hidden observers observed this scene. One observer observed whether a passer-by intervened or not. The other observer counted the number of people passing by. We observed this scene in 120 different sequences; each sequence lasted 5 minutes. For each sequence, an additional observer counted the number of passers-by; overall, we observed the behavior of 2791 passersby. After each 5 minutes, we renewed the experimental scene and again observed whether someone intervened or not. After each 15 sequences, we changed the whole experimental situation—that is, whether a bystander was present or not, whether the perpetrator signaled high vs. low expected negative consequences, and whether the perpetrator was male or female. Each time a passer-by intervened in the scene he or she was approached by the two observers and informed that this was an experimental setting. Then, the intervening passer-by was informed about the experimental hypotheses and fully debriefed. It was assured that intervening passer-by did not leave with any negative emotions. The present study was approved by a regular university ethics committee.[1] We also informed the local police about this study. No negative reactions of passers-by to the experimental scene were observed.

Results

A Logit analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between expected negative consequences, bystander presence, and the dichotomous helping response, $Z = 1.96$, $p = .05$. To disentangle this interaction, we conducted chi-square tests separately for the bystander and non-bystander condition. With regard to the bystander condition, we found significant more helping episodes in the dangerous (39.3%) compared to the non-dangerous condition (9.7%), $\chi^2\,(1) = 7.13$, $p < .008$, Cramer's $V = .35$. In contrast, no difference in the number of helping episodes was observed between the dangerous (24.1%) and non-dangerous (25.8%) condition, $\chi^2\,(1) = 0.02$, $p = .88$, Cramer's $V = .02$.

Discussion

The present field study provided further support for the "positive bystander effect." It has been shown that additional bystanders increase helping intervention in situations where the helper has to expect increased negative consequences in case of intervention. Bystanders do not have such a positive effect in situations where the helper has to expect only low negative consequences in case of intervention. This positive bystander effect may occur because potentially dangerous

situations are recognized more clearly. In addition, in dangerous situations, additional passive bystanders are potential sources of social and physical support and thus decrease the helper's perceived negative consequences in case she/he intervenes. In contrast, in situations with low potential danger, additional bystanders are not necessary to provide social and physical support and thus decrease helping because of the classic known mechanisms (i.e., diffusion of responsibility, evaluation apprehension, and pluralistic ignorance) underlying the bystander effect (Latané & Nida, 1981). Because we did not measure expected provision of social and physical support by the additional bystanders (which we abstained from in order to not alert the participants about the true purpose of the alleged bike theft), a test of the exact psychological mechanism would be an important avenue for future research.

NOTE

1. We are aware that, due to the fact that this is a field experiment, we were not able to get informed consent from the passers-by and were not able to debrief passers-by who did not intervene. However, due to APA regulations it is possible to dispense informed consent in "naturalistic observations (. . .) for which disclosure of responses would not place participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or damage their financial standing, employability, or reputation, and confidentiality is protected" (APA ethical principles, paragraph 8.05). Due to the opinion of our university ethics committee as well as our own judgment, these potential risks were not given in the present study since passers-by only observed a person who tried to open a bike chain.

AUTHOR NOTES

Peter Fischer is affililated with Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, University of Regensburg. **Tobias Greitemeyer** is affiliated with the University of Innsbruck.

REFERENCES

Fischer, P., Greitemeyer, T., Pollozek, F., & Frey, D. (2006). The unresponsive bystander: Are bystanders more responsive in dangerous emergencies? *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *36*, 267–278.

Fischer, P., Krueger, J., Greitemeyer, T., Kastenmüller, A., Vogrincic, C., Frey, D . . . Kainbacher, M. (2011). The bystander-effect: A meta-analytic review on bystander intervention in dangerous and non-dangerous emergencies. *Psychological Bulletin*, *137*, 517–537.

Greitemeyer, T., Fischer, P., Kastenmüller, A., & Frey, D. (2006). Civil courage and helping behaviour: Differences and similarities. *European Psychologist*, *11*, 90–98.

Harris, V. A., & Robinson, C. E. (1973). Bystander intervention: Group size and victim status. *Bulletin of the Psychognomic Society*, *2*, 8–10.

Hurley, D., & Allen, B. P. (1974). The effect of the number of people present in a nonemergency situation. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *92*, 27–29.

Latané, B., & Nida, S. (1981). Ten years of research on group size and helping. *Psychological Bulletin*, *89*, 308–324.

Piliavin, I., Rodin, J., & Piliavin, J. (1969). Good Samaritanism: An underground phenomenon? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *13*, 289–299.
Schwartz, S. H., & Gottlieb, A. (1976). Bystander reactions to a violent theft: Crime in Jerusalem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *34*, 1188–1199.

Received January 10, 2012
Accepted May 23, 2012