

Munich scientists study bystander effect

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A Munich, Germany, study indicates the larger the group watching someone in trouble in a public place, the less likely anyone will offer to help.

The situation is called bystander effect, and now research at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich suggests even when accompanied by another person, individuals are more likely to intervene if the situation is dangerous or violent.

Researchers told study participants they were going to monitor interaction between a man and a woman who had never met. In fact, those two people were actors, and after a few minutes the interaction became violent.

The researchers varied the degree of apparent danger by altering the relative sizes of the actors. In some experiments a second observer, who had been instructed not to respond to the situation, accompanied the recruits.

In situations of low danger, 50 percent of observers tried to help the victim if they were watching alone, but this dropped to 6 percent when a bystander was present. In situations of high danger, 44 percent tried to help when alone, but so did 40 percent of those accompanied by a bystander.

Lead author Peter Fischer's findings appear in the European Journal of Social Psychology.

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