

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Another and far more pleasant form of human social interaction is **prosocial behavior**, or socially desirable behavior that benefits others rather than bringing them harm.

13.16 *What is altruism?*

ALTRUISM One form of prosocial behavior that almost always makes people feel good about other people is **altruism**, or helping someone in trouble with no expectation of reward and often without fear of one's own safety. Although no one is surprised by the behavior of a mother who enters a burning house to save her child, some people are often surprised when total strangers step in to help, risking their own lives for people they do not know.

Sociobiologists, scientists who study the evolutionary and genetic bases of social organizations in both animals and humans, see altruistic behavior as a way of preserving one's genetic material, even at the cost of one's own life. This is why the males of certain species of spiders, for example, seem to willingly become "dinner" for the female mates they have just fertilized, ensuring the continuation of their genes through the offspring she will produce (Koh, 1996). It also explains the mother or father who risks life and limb to save a child. But why do people risk their own lives to help total strangers? More importantly, why do people sometimes refuse to help when their own lives are not at risk, as in the case of Kitty Genovese presented in the opening story?

WHY PEOPLE WON'T HELP The opening story about Kitty Genovese's murder shocked most people when reported in the news in March 1964. People were outraged by the apparent indifference and lack of sympathy for the poor woman's plight. Why did those people simply stand by and watch or listen? Social psychologists would explain that the lack of response to Kitty Genovese's screams for help was not due to indifference or a lack of sympathy but instead to the presence of other people. When other people are present at the scene or are assumed to be present, individuals are affected by two basic principles of social psychology: the bystander effect and diffusion of responsibility.

13.17 *What is the bystander effect?*

Bystander Effect The **bystander effect** refers to the finding that the likelihood of a bystander (someone observing an event and close enough to offer help) to help someone in trouble decreases as the number of bystanders increases. If only one person is standing by, that person is far more likely to help than if there is another person, and the addition of each new bystander decreases the possibility of helping behavior even more (Darley & Latané, 1968; Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Latané & Darley, 1969). In the case of Kitty Genovese, there were 38 "bystanders" at the windows of the apartment buildings, and none of them helped.

But why does the number of bystanders matter? **Diffusion of responsibility** is the phenomenon in which a person fails to take responsibility for either action or inaction because of the presence of other people who are seen to share the responsibility (Leary & Forsyth, 1987). Diffusion of responsibility is a form of attribution in which people explain why they acted (or failed to act) as they did because of others. "I was just following orders," "Other people were doing it," and "There were a lot of people there, and I thought one of them would do something" are all examples of statements made in such situations. Kitty Genovese received no help because there were too many potential "helpers," and not one of the people listening to her cries for help took the responsibility to intervene—they thought surely someone else was doing something about it.

For more on the bystander effect, the Classic Studies in Psychology section that follows reviews one of the more famous social psychology experiments.

13.19 *What decisions have to be made before a person will help someone else?*

FIVE DECISION POINTS IN HELPING BEHAVIOR In all of the experiments reported in the preceding section, there were people who did try to help in every condition. What kind of decision-making process might they have gone through before deciding to help? What are the requirements for deciding when help is needed? Darley and Latané (1968) identified several decision points that a bystander must face before helping someone in trouble. These decision points are outlined in Table 13.3.

Aside from the factors listed in the table, there are other influences on the decision to help. For example, the more ambiguity* there is in a situation, the less likely it becomes that the situation will be defined as an emergency. If there are

*Ambiguity: having the quality of being difficult to identify specific elements of the situation.

TABLE 13.3 HELP OR DON'T HELP: FIVE DECISION POINTS

Decision Point	Description	Factors Influencing Decision
Noticing	Realizing that there is a situation that might be an emergency	Hearing a loud crash or a cry for help.
Defining an Emergency	Interpreting the cues as signaling an emergency	Loud crash is associated with a car accident, people are obviously hurt.
Taking Responsibility	Personally assuming the responsibility to act	A single bystander is much more likely to act than when others are present (Latané & Darley, 1968).
Planning a Course of Action	Deciding how to help and what skills might be needed.	People who feel they have the necessary skills to help are more likely to help.
Taking Action	Actually helping.	Costs of helping (e.g., danger to self) must not outweigh the rewards of helping.

other people nearby, especially if the situation is ambiguous, bystanders may rely on the actions of the others to help determine if the situation is an emergency or not. Since all the bystanders are doing this, it is very likely that the situation will be seen as a non-emergency because no one is moving to help.

Another factor is the mood of the bystanders. People in a good mood are generally more likely to help than people in a bad mood, but oddly enough, they are not as likely to help if helping would destroy the good mood. Gender of the victim is also a factor, with women more likely to receive help than men if the bystander is male, but not if the bystander is female. Physically attractive people are more likely to be helped. Victims who look like “they deserve what is happening” are also less likely to be helped. For example, a man lying on the side of the street who is dressed in shabby clothing and appears to be drunk will be passed by, but if he is dressed in a business suit, people are more likely to stop and help. Racial and ethnicity differences between victim and bystander also decrease the probability of helping (Richards & Lowe, 2003; Tukuitonga & Bindman, 2002).