

A LINE ON LIFE

12/19/93

Helping and the Holidays *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Many of us enjoy the holiday mood of giving of ourselves to help others. We also wonder why we aren't as helpful during the rest of the year. Beside the strong social norms of the season – which emphasize the positive aspects of giving to others – there are other reasons why we are not helpful all year long.

In the 1970s, psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latane explored **bystander apathy** – the tendency of people to *not* help others, even in emergency situations. They found that several questions need to be answered before helping. If any of these questions is answered, "No," help will not be given.

Do I notice what is happening? In one study, seminary students were to give a speech on either (1) the *Good Samaritan* or (2) what types of tasks they enjoy. They were told that (1) they were ahead of schedule, (2) they were on time, or (3) they were late for their engagement. On the day of their engagement, all of the seminary students passed the experimenter's confederate slumped over in a doorway, coughing and groaning. The topic had no effect on offering help, but the time pressures did. Of those who were early, 63% offered help; those who were on time, 45%. Only 10% of those who were late offered help. All of us – when concerned about our personal responsibilities – tend to narrow our attention. We notice only things around us that relate to our task at hand.

Does the situation require help? Is the person who is slumped over merely drunk? Or is he having a heart attack? Similarly, is the person standing on the street corner with a "*will work for food*" sign really in need? Or is he looking for a handout to buy more booze? If the situation is **ambiguous**, we might not act until we receive more information. Often we get this information from the people around us.

We look to the responses of others to determine the need for help – even in emergencies. For example, Darley and Latane asked subjects to fill out questionnaires in a room, either alone or in groups of three. While filling out forms, smoke was pumped into the room. Of those working alone, 75% reported the smoke – half of them within 2 minutes. In the groups of three, only 63% reported the smoke. However, only one person reported the smoke within 4 minutes. Not only did fewer people respond, but also it took them at least twice as long to do so! We learn that it is important to "*keep our cool*" in an emergency. However, it leads each person to assume that the "*cool*" others do not view the situation as one requiring action. So each – to preserve their own "*cool*" – is more hesitant to act.

Am I responsible? This is also influenced by the presence of others. In contrast to having others present, individuals are more likely to offer help if they are *alone*. For example, one study had 80% of lone subjects offer to help in an emergency situation, while only 17% of subjects with one other bystander did so. If stranded, you are more likely to get a ride on an isolated highway than a busy street. On the busy street, each driver is more likely to assume that someone else will offer you a ride. This is a **diffusion of responsibility**. The responsibility is diffused (spread) among other people rather than resting on the shoulder of one person.

Am I capable of helping? Do I have the abilities and/or resources to help? Any non-swimmer is very sensible to avoid jumping into the water to save a drowning person. (However, the non-swimmer could throw a life preserver and/or call someone else capable of helping.) In one study – even with a bystander present – nurses were more

likely to help an accident victim than college students. Likewise, if we are worried about paying for the family holiday dinner (or other bills), we are unlikely to donate to the Salvation Army bell-ringer (or anyone else).

Will I take the risk of helping? This related to costs beyond time, effort and money – the threat of physical danger, getting your clothes dirty, being rejected or sued by the victim, or just making a social blunder. Few of us want to respond to screams from a neighboring apartment – only to find out that it was only a loud TV show. Likewise, there is less risk perceived by donating money to a stranger who "*will work for food*," in contrast to taking him home to clean your garage.

If we answer "Yes" to all of these questions, then we will help. In addition, if others **model** this helping behavior – set an example – we are more likely to help. Knowing this, we can be models for others to follow. If so, this can lead to a happier holiday season. If we continue this positive example through the rest of the year, it can lead to a happier lifetime for us – and those around us. *Have a happier lifetime!*

* Adapted from Baron and Byrne's *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction*, Allyn and Bacon Publishers, 1991, pages 352-362.