

Social Inhibition of Helping Yourself: Bystander Response to a Cheeseburger

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Abstract. 111 elevator riders were given the opportunity to help themselves to a free lunch — a coupon good for one Quarter Pounder with Cheese. When others were in the elevator, individuals were less likely to take a coupon, even when there were enough to go around, demonstrating that social inhibition is not specific to helping others.

In their original work on bystander intervention in emergencies, Latané and Darley (1970) discovered a pervasive phenomenon: the real or imagined presence of other persons inhibits people from responding to others in need of help. Such social inhibition has since been found many times under a variety of circumstances (e.g. Bickman, 1971; Clark & Word, 1974; etc.). Recent research involving helping in non-emergency settings has also found social inhibition: group members are less likely to engage in effortful behavior on behalf of another than are individuals. For example, when other persons are present or available to respond, people are less likely to help pull hard on a rope (Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974), pick up coins in an elevator (Latané & Dabbs, 1975), answer someone's intercom (Levy, Lundgren, Ansel, Fell & McGrath, 1972), or work at evaluating poetry (Petty, Harkins, Williams & Latané, in press) than when alone.

In the present experiment, we test whether the presence of other people will inhibit individual response in a situation where responding is motivated by the chance to help oneself, not others. Participants who were either alone, in pairs, or with one or two unresponsive confederates were given a chance at a free lunch. Specifically, participants were given the opportunity to help themselves to a coupon for a complimentary McDonald's Quarter Pounder with Cheese. As we shall see, when the opportunity for a free lunch opened up, individuals were less likely to help themselves to a coupon if others were present, even when there were enough coupons to go around. This new example of social inhibition cannot be interpreted in terms of diffusion of responsibility.

Method. Two Ohio State elevators were pressed into service as mobile laboratories. Besides having well-defined boundaries in a familiar social setting (see Latané & Dabbs, 1975), these particular elevators offered additional advantages. Located in the computer science building, they travelled non-stop between the first and fifth floors evenings and week-ends, capturing a fairly steady stream of riders, about 75% male, who became our subjects for 28 to 31 seconds, thereby holding exposure time relatively constant.

Elevator riders almost invariably stood near the back and faced forward. When the doors closed, revealing a poster attached to the inside, they were approximately equidistant from it. "FREE McDONALD's BURGER" read the poster, 18 × 23 cm with a pocket underneath stating "Take this one, FREE." Inserted into the pocket was a glossy three-color printed 5 × 9 cm coupon with golden arches, good for one Quarter Pounder with Cheese (which usually costs about 85¢). Riders were

free to help themselves to the coupon. After they left, an experimenter would ride back, record whether the coupon was gone, and reload the pocket, leaving the elevator ready for the next session.

Of the 56 people who entered the elevator alone, 26 were randomly allowed to ride by themselves, while 16 were joined by an informally dressed male student, and 14 found themselves in the presence of two other passengers. When the poster came into view, these passengers, actually confederates of the experimenters, would look at the free offer but not react, adopting the normal blank stare endemic among elevator riders. In addition, 28 persons entered the elevator in natural pairs (most gave little sign of prior acquaintance). A small number of people arrived in larger groups, but as this happened rarely, no analysis could be made of their data.

In a second set of conditions, the poster contained two pockets, each reading "Take this one, FREE," and each containing a coupon. Fourteen people rode the elevator alone, and 13 were joined by a confederate. Too few people arrived in groups to permit meaningful analysis.

Results. With only one coupon available, single individuals were far more likely to help themselves to a cheeseburger than were people in the presence of others. Of those individuals given the opportunity alone, 81% helped themselves to the free coupon for a McDonald's Quarter Pounder with Cheese. With one other person present, only 38% helped themselves, and with the addition of a second person, only 14% took the coupon ($X^2(2) = 17.9, p < .001$). The response rates of persons with one or two others present, while not differing ($p > .20$), were both significantly lower than those of individuals who were alone ($ps < .01$).

When natural pairs rode the elevator together, the coupon was missing 64% of the time, but this condition cannot be directly compared to those where only one person could act. Inverting Lorge and Solomon's (1955) binomial model, if P_G is the obtained proportion of groups responding, and n is the size of the group, the individual probability of taking a coupon can be estimated as $1 - \sqrt[n]{1 - P_G}$ (Latané, in press). In the present case, $P_G = .64, n = 2$ and $1 - \sqrt[2]{1 - .64} = .40$; thus the effective individual response rate was 40%. This means that actual pairs behaved as if each member had an independent probability of taking the coupon of only four in ten, virtually identical to the 38% probability of response displayed by individuals in the presence of one confederate. According to the maximum likelihood technique suggested by Fienberg and Larntz (1972), individual members of actual pairs displayed a significantly lower probability of helping themselves than single individuals ($X^2(1) = 9.34, p < .01$).

Although these results provide strong support for the hypothesis that individuals in groups will be inhibited from responding even when the response brings immediate tangible reward, they were obtained under somewhat special circumstances — only one reward was available. There are several reasons why persons in groups might not have reached for a reward when only one reward was available: subjects in groups may not have taken the coupon because of salient norms against "taking the last piece of cake;" to take the last cheeseburger might have seemed greedy and selfish; it would have been embarrassing to grab the last cheeseburger; it would not have been equitable to claim the entire reward for oneself; others in the elevator might have become incensed at the injustice and retaliated. The two-coupon conditions were designed to test whether group pre-

sence would inhibit helping oneself if there were enough coupons for everybody, making such processes as fear of appearing greedy or desire for equity inoperative.³

Even with two coupons available, single individuals were more likely to help themselves than people faced with an unresponsive witness. Overall, 86% of those individuals who were alone took at least one coupon, with 43% helping themselves to both. By comparison, only 31% of those with one other person present helped themselves to even one coupon, and no one took two ($X^2(1) = 8.4, p < .01$). These data are very similar to the comparable proportions of 81% and 38% obtained when there was only one coupon. Clearly, social inhibition of helping oneself is not limited to situations in which taking the reward prevents others from sharing the prize.

Discussion. Latané & Darley (1976) suggest three reasons why the presence of others can lead to inhibition of responding, one of which is diffusion of responsibility. In most helping situations, action costs time and effort but earns little in the way of reward. Under these circumstances, it is likely that people are largely motivated by the cost of not acting — the responsibility for someone's continued suffering, unhappiness, or need. The knowledge that others share the onus may diffuse this responsibility and lower the cost of inaction and thus the incentive to respond. In the present experiment, however, the incentive for action was an immediate, tangible, positive reward, costs were low, and diffusion of responsibility should have had little effect on behavior.

Two other processes suggested by Latané and Darley involve more direct forms of social influence whereby persons may be deterred from action by being witnessed by others or by witnessing the inaction of others. Unlike diffusion, these processes require the existence of communication channels between bystanders (Latané & Darley, 1976). In addition, however, they do not depend on the particular cost reward structure necessary for diffusion of responsibility. First, the fact that others observe your behavior can make you self-conscious and embarrassed and lead you to suppress or delay actions that might elicit unfavorable attention. Since riders were only in the elevator for 30 seconds, even a brief delay would prevent responding. Second, the actions of others may give you information as to what they consider appropriate behavior. Until someone acts, everyone sees only non-responsive models and may be led to suppose that self-restraint is called for.

Although social inhibition seems to be a rather general phenomenon, it is not clear that the presence of others must always lead to the inhibition of behavior. Two lines of theory, in fact, predict the opposite. Social facilitation theory (Zajonc, 1965) cites situations where performance appears to be enhanced by the mere presence of others. In most research on social facilitation, the appropriate behavior is clearly specified and the question is how much or fast or well it is performed. In many social inhibition studies, on the other hand, the situation is more ambiguous and the problem for the subject is to choose among a variety of alternative courses of action, and to determine what behavior is appropriate. It may be that the presence of others can have different consequences for the initiation of a behavior sequence than for its maintenance.

Deindividuation theory claims that the presence of others can disinhibit antisocial or deviant behavior if somehow the individual becomes submerged unrecognizably in the group (Zimbardo, 1969). In the more usual case where subjects are

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identifiable, however, the presence of others should inhibit antisocial behavior. For example, no one would be surprised by experiments demonstrating that persons are less willing to shoplift in the presence of others than by themselves. The presence of other people should inhibit shoplifting, not because others model inactivity or cause the potential pilferer to ponder the appropriateness of his act, but because the shoplifter would be more likely to be caught.

The present experiment suggests the surprising conclusion that the presence of others restrains persons from taking something for themselves, even when it is perfectly legitimate and proper to do so. More generally, the results show that the empirical phenomenon of social inhibition of bystander response, first demonstrated in emergencies, applies to helping oneself as well as to helping others.

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Footnotes

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³If participants were thinking of later riders, however, it may still have appeared selfish to take the last or next to last coupon in the presence of witnesses.