

The bystander effect

Brooke meets Dr Lasana T Harris, experimental psychologist from UCL, who has set up a demonstration to show how people in a crowd can be influenced by the so-called bystander effect.

Brooke Kinsella; Today I'm meeting a psychologist who's studied some of the reasons why people don't get involved, even when it's obvious somebody may be in trouble.

Dr Lasana Harris; So what we have here is a demonstration we set up with an actor to illustrate the bystander effect, which is a scenario where if no one stops to help other people will fail to stop to help as well.

So he's audibly moaning and these guys are going by, without even stopping and paying attention to it. The busier it is the less likely people are to stop as well.

Brooke Kinsella; That's funny because if I was on my own I'd be more scared to stop. I think I'd probably feel safer if there was people around.

Lasana; Yeah - which is what you might think but it works the opposite way, right?

Brooke; Yeah – I can see that!

Lasana; But the minute one person jumps in and stops, other people are more likely to as well.

Brooke; Why is that?

Lasana; You get your information from other people. So there's lots of social psychology that demonstrates we figure out information about the world based on what other people are doing. Now a lot of the people who do stop are people who have experience helping. So here we have a nun that stops and helps. We also have a city worker who's used to seeing people that need help... and surprisingly lots of people with kids who stop to help. It's the middle of the day, it's a busy area, they don't feel threatened.

But it's interesting because you have some people who don't stop at all, they don't even pay any attention, they don't even look... And you have others who look who probably decide it's not okay to stop.

Brooke; I was quite shocked just how many people walked on by and didn't help; and I always thought the main reason would be fear, which I completely understand. In the case of my brother there were many people there that night who didn't help because they were scared. But I learnt today that mainly it's because a) we're not aware of the situation and b) we expect other people

to help. I think now that I'm aware of the bystander effect and if other people become aware of the Bystander Effect then you can fight against that instinct to just walk on by.