

The Concentration of Responsibility: An Objective Self-Awareness Analysis of Group Size Effects in Helping Situations

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On the basis of the Gestalt figure-ground principle, an objective self-awareness theory interpretation of group size effects in helping situations was proposed. From this perspective, the diffusion of responsibility effect commonly observed in helping research is the decreasing likelihood of bystander objective self-awareness, and hence bystander intervention, that accompanies increases in the size of the bystander group. A complementary concentration of responsibility hypothesis derived from this analysis states that an increasing likelihood of bystander objective self-awareness, and therefore of bystander aiding behavior, is associated with increases in the size of the victim group. An experiment designed to test this hypothesis in a 2×2 design varying number of potential helpers (one vs. three) and number of victims (one vs. three) found that straightforward appeals for help were more likely to be met with assistance when there were fewer potential helpers or more victims; thus, both the diffusion and concentration of responsibility were observed. Ratings of attentional focus obtained from observers in a simulation of this experiment further substantiated the contention that these effects are attributable to variations in self-focused attention experienced by potential helpers.

The diffusion of responsibility hypothesis has been invoked in a wide variety of experimental paradigms to explain the decreasing incidence of helping behavior that accompanies increments in the number of potential helpers present in a helping situation (see, e.g., Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1970; Latané & Rodin, 1969). This hypothesis suggests that potential aid givers in an emergency may well identify the situation as such and may even decide that help is clearly needed but then fail to respond appropriately, because they assume that others present share their responsibility to help (Latané & Darley, 1970). In the present report, we offer an objective self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) interpretation of this effect and

then test the utility of our formulation by investigating a concomitant hypothesis derived from the theoretical framework—that the concentration of responsibility, and hence the likelihood of altruistic action, increases as the number of victims increases.

The argument linking diffusion of responsibility to the theory of objective self-awareness has two components, one addressing the intrapersonal effects of objective self-awareness, and the other concerning the variations in objective self-awareness associated with variations in group size. According to Duval and Wicklund (1972) and Wicklund (1975), differing intrapersonal effects arise as the individual alternates between two forms of conscious attention, one directed toward the self (objective self-awareness) and the other toward the environment (subjective self-awareness). Subjective self-awareness is usually accompanied by active manipulation of the environment, whereas objective self-awareness (elicited by self-focusing stimuli such as a mirror, camera, or audience) is said to be a

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more passive state. During objective self-awareness, however, the individual comes to evaluate his or her current self-conception in terms of an internal standard of correctness, feeling tension and discomfort when a negative discrepancy between these self-views is apparent and pleasure and well-being when a positive discrepancy is perceived. In the case of a negative discrepancy, the individual attempts either to avoid self-focusing stimuli or to reduce the discrepancy through action or attitude change; in the case of a positive discrepancy, the individual seeks out self-focusing stimuli.

Although there are some conceptual difficulties in the theory regarding the source of the internal standard of correctness, research has shown that this standard may correspond to the individual's reported ideal self (Ickes, Wicklund, & Ferris, 1973), may arise from perceptions of consensual or normative behavior (Duval & Wicklund, 1972, Chap. 5), or may coincide with the opinions of an experimenter perceived as highly expert (Carver, 1974). Under most conditions, however, it appears that the internal standard prescribes prosocial behavior. Individuals exposed to self-focusing stimuli become more likely to suppress aggression (Scheier, Fenigstein, & Buss, 1974), more inclined to attribute responsibility for negative events to the self (Duval & Hensley, 1976; Duval & Wicklund, 1973), and more likely to maintain the norm of equity (Chase & Gibbons, Note 1).

Research directly concerned with aid giving has revealed a similar pattern. Schwartz and Gottlieb (1976), for example, found that responses to a violent theft were increased when bystanders were made aware of others' awareness of them. Apsler's (1975) studies of embarrassment, although conceptualized apart from objective self-awareness theory, provide relevant evidence in support of a similar conclusion; individuals aware of being observed through a one-way mirror as they performed foolish actions, as compared with those who remained unobserved or who performed mundane actions, were later found more likely to comply with requests for aid. Since recent studies by Gibbons, Rosenfield, and Wicklund (Note 2) and Lingle and McPeck (Note 3) have sug-

gested several limiting conditions for the relationship between objective self-awareness and altruism (e.g., extreme bystander self-concern, availability of other discrepancy-reducing activities, potential for escape from self-focusing stimuli), it should not be concluded that helping behavior is the inevitable result of self-focused attention. There is sufficient evidence to conclude, however, that objective self-awareness increases the likelihood of aiding behavior under a certain range of conditions.

The connection between diffusion of responsibility and the elicitation of help through objective self-awareness becomes apparent when we consider the probability that various individuals present in a helping situation will focus attention on themselves. In relating their interpretation of group size effects in conformity experiments, Duval and Wicklund (1972) suggested that the effect of an audience in focusing a person's attention on the self is a relative one. If the person perceives himself or herself as a member of some larger group in that situation, then the person's attention would more often be focused on the audience than on the self. Appealing to the Gestalt figure-ground principle elaborated by Koffka (1935), these theorists proposed that individuals in a group segregated into two or more homogeneous subgroups (on the basis of some salient perceived difference) would most frequently focus their attention on the smallest subgroup (see McArthur & Post, 1977, for a similar analysis). The individuals in the smallest subgroup would focus attention on themselves (and become objectively self-aware), whereas individuals in the larger subgroup(s) would also focus attention on the smallest subgroup (and thus become subjectively self-aware). Typical helping situations are open to a similar analysis.

In line with the explanation of bystander effects offered by Latané and Darley (1970), we suggest that the diffusion of responsibility takes place after individuals have recognized the occurrence of a mishap. The incident—whether directly observed or merely inferred from a request for aid—serves to dichotomize those present into victim and bystander subgroups. Bystander action or lack of action fol-

lows that realization and is determined by the relative size of the bystander subgroup. When one potential helper witnesses the plight of a victim, for example, differential subgroup size does not dictate a single focus of attention. The bystander's attention would focus partially on the victim and partially on the self; the bystander would often become objectively self-aware and thus would frequently proffer assistance. When many potential helpers are present, this larger subgroup would most often focus its attention on the victim (the smaller subgroup); the potential helpers would seldom experience self-focused attention and hence would only infrequently offer aid. The diffusion of responsibility, in this light, is the decreasing probability of bystander objective self-awareness that accompanies increases in the relative size of the bystander group.

The present research was designed to extend this interpretation of the diffusion of responsibility by investigating its complement—the concentration of responsibility. On the basis of the figure-ground principle and on the basis of previous findings indicating the possibility of such an effect (Latané, 1970), it was predicted that bystanders confronted with a large number of victims would be more likely to become objectively self-aware and to lend assistance than those viewing only one victim.

The experimental arrangements of this study deserve some preliminary comment. After a series of failures to institute adequate experimental conditions in a naturalistic field setting, we decided to investigate the concentration and diffusion effects using a straightforward appeal for help in a nonthreatening laboratory situation (cf. Levy et al., 1972). Although such a setting seems more than once removed from the emergencies studied by Latané and Darley and requires some stretching of the terms *victim* and *potential helper*, it does offer the unique opportunity of examining the importance of group size for the individual potential helper. In previous bystander research (see, e.g., Latané & Darley, 1970, Experiment 7), the individual potential helper has typically been exposed to the action or lack of action of other potential helpers. In

the present study, the setting was arranged such that the individual was aware of the number of victims and of other potential helpers but was not aware of whether or not help was given. The altruistic responses of the individual, therefore, were consequences only of perceived group size and were not confounded with the effects of modeling the altruistic responses of others.

Method

Overview and Design

Subjects participating in a "simulated industrial setting" were paid for their work and were led to believe that others working with them either would or would not be paid. The subject was either the only one or one of a group of three workers who had surpassed a quota of production and who would therefore be paid. Either one or three other workers were said to be below quota and would not be paid. Following each of two work periods, subjects were allowed the option of transferring some of their work credit to the worker(s) below quota. A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ design was used to assess the effects of number of potential helpers (one vs. three), number of victims (one vs. three), and work period (first vs. second) on the dependent measure, the amount of work credit the subject transferred to others. The design allowed for a parallel examination of both the diffusion and concentration of responsibility.

Subjects

Forty-eight undergraduates (24 males and 24 females) recruited from introductory psychology classes at Trinity University agreed to participate in the experiment in exchange for "a chance to earn some money." Twelve subjects served in each of the four between-subjects conditions of the design. It should be noted that males and females were assigned randomly to experimental conditions and that no sex differences were observed in the analyses. Under the restriction that individuals in a particular group be unacquainted with one another, subjects were run in mixed-sex groups of four or six.

Procedure

At the beginning of the session, subjects were told that the keeping of exact records of the experiment required that all communication during the session be written. Each subject was seated at a different table in the room and was given a box of materials (sunglasses, eyepatch, printed material, pencils), a manual of instructions, and a set of memo forms for communication with the experimenter. The instruction manual explained that the experiment was a

simulation of the problems of the handicapped worker in industry and that the subject would be asked to perform an editing task (using different colored pencils to circle configurations of letters such as *on* or *th* in the printed material) while handicapped with an eyepatch and sunglasses. The subject was informed that at the end of each of two work periods, bonuses of 50¢ plus 3¢ per line of editing would be paid to those workers above a production quota; those workers below the quota would receive nothing. The instructions explained that some workers in the room had large print for the task, while others had smaller, less visible print, and that the subject had been selected by chance to receive large print. The particular workers receiving large and small print were identified by letter (e.g., Worker B), but were not otherwise identified to the subject. The manual went on to describe the various memos the subject would be required to send to the experimenter during the break after each work period—one to request more printed material to edit, one to request another color pencil, and one to request that lines of editing be transferred from his or her own production total to the totals of any other workers.

When they had finished reading the instructions, all subjects in the room were directed to put on eyepatches and sunglasses and to begin work. After 10 minutes, the experimenter rang a bell to signal the end of the work period and then collected the completed work from each subject. The experimenter returned to the subject a (fictitious) production report that informed the subject of each worker's performance with respect to the quota. This was the manipulation of number of victims and number of potential helpers, and thus it varied in accord with the different experimental conditions. In the condition with three potential helpers and three victims, for example, each of the six subjects in the room was given large print and had been told in the instructions that two others had received large print and that the remaining three had received small print. In the production report that each subject received, the three workers having large print (again identified by letter) were shown to be above quota; the subject was 15 lines over, while the other two workers were 13 and 16 lines over. The three workers said to have small print were shown to be 1, 2, and 2 lines below the quota. Thus, the subject saw himself as one of a group of three individuals who would receive the bonus and who could ensure, by means of transfer memos, that three other individuals would also receive a bonus.

In the other conditions, a comparable procedure was followed. In the one-potential-helper, three-victim condition, each of four subjects in the room was given a production report showing that he or she alone had surpassed the quota by 15 lines and that the other workers were 1, 2, and 2 lines below the quota. In the three-potential-helpers, one-victim condition, each of the four subjects in the room received a production report stating that he or she and two other workers had surpassed the quota by 15, 13, and

16 lines, and that one worker was below quota by 5 lines. In the one-potential-helper, one-victim condition, each of the four subjects in the room was told that he or she had surpassed the quota by 15 lines, and that the other worker in the same "division of the industrial plant" had fallen 5 lines below quota; the subject had been informed in the instructions that the two other subjects in the room were workers in a different division and that no communication would take place between divisions. It should be noted that the total cost of helping (5 lines) was the same in all four conditions.

After receiving the production report, the subject sent the memos to the experimenter requesting more materials and transfer of work credit. The transfer memo required the subject to fill in the number of lines of editing he or she wished to transfer to each other group member. If the subject did not elect to transfer lines, he or she was still required to complete the memo and acknowledge that no credit was transferred. Once subjects had sent their memos and new work materials were distributed, the second work period was begun. Again, after 10 minutes of work, subjects were given production reports and were asked to return transfer memos. The subjects were then paid and given questionnaires designed to assess their perceptions of the study. After completing these, subjects were carefully debriefed and were dismissed.

Results

Manipulation Effectiveness

In a review of objective self-awareness research, Wicklund (1975) argued that direct checks on the manipulation of objective self-awareness were problematic, because any attempt to question the individual regarding self-focused attention would typically bring about such a state. Our strategy in circumventing this complication was to arrange an indirect check on the present manipulations. Wegner and Finstuen (1977) have noted that observers who focus attention on an actor (as opposed to the actor's situation) simulate the attentional state of objective self-awareness in the actor. If it is shown that the focus of attention of observers in a simulation of the present paradigm follows the expected pattern (i.e., greater attention toward an individual the smaller his own group or the larger his complementary group), it is then conceivable that a similar pattern of attention characterizes the actors in the actual experiment.

Members of each of four groups of observer-subjects (total $N = 126$) were given a

written account of one of the four conditions of the design. This page-long narrative described the work to be done by subjects, the handicapping procedure, the allocation of large and small print, and the payment each subject was to receive at the end of the first work period (before transfer of work credit was to begin). The observer was then asked to consider two persons in the group (a member of the victim subgroup and a member of the potential-helper subgroup) in answering the following question: "If you were observing this situation, how much would your attention be focused on each of these persons?" Responses were recorded on two 9-point scales (1 = "not at all"; 9 = "very much"). The means for each of these measures—focus on victim and focus on potential helper—for each of the four conditions of the design are shown in Table 1. Separate analyses were conducted for each measure.

A 2×2 factorial unweighted-means analysis of variance conducted on observers' ratings of attention toward the victim revealed significant main effects for number of potential helpers, $F(1, 122) = 8.24$, $p < .01$, and for number of victims, $F(1, 122) = 8.08$, $p < .01$. Observers were more likely to focus on the victim when there were three potential helpers ($M = 6.87$) than when there was one potential helper ($M = 5.83$), and were more likely to focus on the victim when there was one victim ($M = 6.86$) than when there were three victims ($M = 5.82$). The interaction of number of victims and number of potential helpers was not significant.

A parallel analysis of variance employed in assessing the effects of group size manipulations on observers' ratings of attention focused on the potential helper revealed a significant main effect for number of victims, $F(1, 122) = 8.41$, $p < .01$, and a marginally significant main effect for number of potential helpers, $F(1, 122) = 3.18$, $p < .07$. Observers were more likely to focus attention on the potential helper in the three-victim conditions ($M = 5.37$) than in the one-victim conditions ($M = 4.28$); there was a tendency for observers to focus greater attention on the potential helper when there was one potential helper ($M = 5.16$) than when there were three potential

Table 1
Mean Observer Ratings of Attention Toward Victim and Potential Helper

Number of victims	Number of potential helpers	
	1	3
Attention toward victim		
1	6.43	7.30
3	5.23	6.44
Attention toward potential helper		
1	4.29	4.27
3	6.03	4.71

Note. Greater values indicate greater attention on a 9-point scale (1 = no attention, 9 = very much attention).

helpers ($M = 4.49$). Again, the interaction of number of victims and number of potential helpers was not significant.

Given the analogy between observer and actor focus of attention, these results provide support for the efficacy of the present manipulation of objective self-awareness. From the perspective of observers, a bystander is more likely to become subjectively self-aware (by focusing attention on the victim) when there are fewer victims or when there are more bystanders. Observers' ratings also suggest that the bystander is more likely to focus attention on the self when there are more victims or when there are fewer potential helpers.

Helping Responses

A $2 \times 2 \times 2$ analysis of variance with repeated measures on the third factor was used to determine the effects of number of potential helpers, number of victims, and work period on the amount of work credit subjects transferred to others. No significant effects were associated with the repeated measures factor; thus, the means shown in Table 2 are for the four experimental conditions with work periods combined. A significant main effect for number of potential helpers, $F(1, 44) = 5.68$, $p < .05$, indicated that the diffusion of responsibility effect was indeed operative in this paradigm. Subjects offered a mean of 6.42 lines of work credit when they perceived them-

Table 2
*Helping Responses as a Function of Number
 of Victims and Number of Potential Helpers*

Number of victims	Number of potential helpers	
	1	3
1	5.46	2.62
3	7.38	5.17

Note. Entries are mean numbers of lines of work credit transferred to victim(s); range = 0 to 15.

selves as the only potential helper and offered a mean of 3.90 lines when they believed they were accompanied by two other potential helpers. Of special interest, however, is the significant main effect for number of victims, $F(1, 44) = 4.45$, $p < .05$. Subjects offered a mean of 4.04 lines when they believed only one person needed assistance, but offered a mean of 6.27 lines when they believed three individuals were in need of aid; this finding is congruent with the expected concentration of responsibility effect.

Postexperimental Questionnaire

In responding to a series of open-ended questions regarding the experiment, no subject expressed any suspicion of the production reports or noted any awareness of the experimental hypotheses. However, some 90% of the subjects indicated that the experiment was concerned in some way with helping or sharing. Although subjects were not differentially aware of this demand across conditions, this finding does require a qualification of the present results. This research has not shown that objective self-awareness increases the likelihood of altruistic action in a setting devoid of demand for such action. Rather, the value of the present study is in establishing the occurrence of the postulated group size effects given that helping is perceived as appropriate in the experimental situation.

Discussion

The present findings are entirely consistent with an objective self-awareness interpretation of group size effects in helping situations.

As expected, the diffusion of responsibility effect regularly observed in past research was observed once again; potential helpers were less likely to tender aid when they were members of a three-person group than when they were alone. And, as predicted, a concentration of responsibility effect was obtained; potential helpers were more likely to lend assistance when confronted with three victims than when confronted with only one victim. An explanation of both effects is offered by objective self-awareness theory. In short, a potential helper is more likely to become objectively self-aware, and is therefore more inclined toward prosocial behavior (when such behavior is perceived as appropriate), when he or she is accompanied by few other potential helpers or is confronted with many victims.

The results of the manipulation check serve to reinforce the contention that the diffusion and concentration effects are traceable to variations in self-focused attention experienced by potential helpers. Observers of this experiment more often focused attention on a potential helper when the helper group was small or the victim group was large; these were the conditions under which the greatest amounts of helping were observed in the experiment. Observers more often focused attention on a victim when the victim group was small or the potential helper group was large; these were the conditions under which only little aiding behavior was observed in the experiment. Because this evidence is based on the focus of attention of observers, it is of course only indirect; yet the striking correspondence of attention ratings and helping responses provides substantial support for the advocated interpretation of both the diffusion and concentration effects.

Alternate Interpretations

There are several theoretical formulations that offer competing analyses of group size phenomena. From the perspectives elaborated by Berkowitz (1972) and Lerner (1975), group size effects are a function of variations in perceived victim dependency or need. More victims produce greater amounts of perceived dependency and hence elicit greater aid, whereas more potential helpers decrease the

perception of dependency (because there are greater total resources available to the victim) and thus attenuate levels of aid. Alternatively, group size effects might be considered in terms of fear of victim retaliation (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). Larger numbers of victims could conceivably inflict greater harm on a bystander who fails to help, whereas larger numbers of bystanders might decrease the likelihood of such reprisals. These interpretations, although consistent with the helping data obtained in the present study, fall short of a full explication of group size effects.

In line with propositions offered by Wicklund (1975), we suggest that the probability of individual altruism in a helping situation is determined by two factors: (a) the existence of a salient discrepancy between the individual's ideal self and actual self and (b) the likelihood that the individual will focus attention on the self. Theories of dependency, need, or even fear of retaliation (as well as other explanations of helping based on internalized norms, ideals, and the like) are especially relevant for the specification of the individual's ideal self. All of these variables can be represented in terms of self-expectations held by many persons (Schwartz, 1973). The *salience* of an intraself discrepancy experienced by a potential helper, then, might be calculated on the basis of the amount of need, the deviation from normative prescriptions, or even the magnitude of retaliation threat. In this way, factors that have been shown to be effective predictors of helping behavior in previous research can be represented within the matrix of objective self-awareness theory.

It is our contention, nevertheless, that the diffusion and concentration of responsibility are determined in large part by attentional patterns in groups and that variations in the magnitude of discrepancy are only secondary determinants of group size effects. A decision on the validity of this contention cannot be made through recourse to the present data. Our confidence in the assertion stems instead from a series of unique theoretical derivations that ensue when self-awareness is assumed to underlie group size phenomena; several of these have been supported by previous research,

while others provide intriguing hypotheses for future study.

Theoretical Derivations

Given the link between the diffusion and concentration of responsibility and the objective self-awareness of the potential helper, one obvious prediction is that neither of the group size effects could occur among potential helpers incapable of self-focused attention. Such a group of potential helpers was studied by Staub (1970). Since Duval and Wicklund (1972), with Piaget (1924/1966) and others, have argued that the very young child is cognitively incapable of viewing the self from the perspective of another, the developmental sample studied by Staub would be expected to vary in their capacity for objective self-awareness. In this study, diffusion of responsibility did not occur among children in kindergarten or second grade but did occur among fourth and sixth graders. Since objective self-awareness could not be expected to mediate diffusion of responsibility in the younger children, Staub's results are congruent with our formulation.

A second set of predictions based on the present framework involves the effect of additional persons—other than victims or potential helpers—present in the helping situation. Such persons form another subgroup to be considered in the figure-ground analysis of the total group. The prediction that these additional persons would increase potential-helper objective self-awareness, and would therefore increase the probability of aiding behavior, has received partial support in two studies. Bickman (1971) examined the effect of an additional person—a bystander who could not help—upon the latency and frequency of helping exhibited by a bystander able to help. Responsibility did not diffuse in this situation; the able bystander helped as frequently and as quickly when aware of the additional person as when alone. In line with our prediction, there was a slight but nonsignificant tendency for a greater frequency of helping in the presence of the additional person. The second study suggesting an effect for additional persons was conducted by Latané and Darley (1970, Experiment 9). In this inventive ex-

periment, bystanders witnessed the clerk at a liquor store being victimized as either one or two robbers carried off a case of beer. The researchers reasoned that greater help should be forthcoming with one robber than two because of the decreased potential threat, but found instead a tendency in the opposite direction. The hypothesis suggested by a figure-ground analysis, that bystanders would be more likely to focus on themselves and tender aid in the face of larger numbers of additional persons (in this case, robbers), was substantiated. Since both these experiments assessed the effect of only one additional person, it could be expected that effects of greater magnitude would be produced by the presence of several additional persons.

A third set of predictions, and a series of crucial questions, follows from a consideration of the relationship between objective self-awareness and prosocial behavior. As noted earlier in this report, we believe it is unlikely that self-focused attention always engenders altruistic action. Rather, aiding tendencies should be enhanced by the self-focused state when there is a salient discrepancy between the person's ideal and actual self. In natural settings, this hypothesized sequence might be aborted or modified in several ways. It could be, for example, that individuals might find means of avoiding self-focused attention. The occurrence of the concentration of responsibility might be limited to settings in which the potential helpers are somehow constrained to remain in the vicinity of the victims (the self-focusing stimulus); since the diffusion of responsibility is dependent not on increments but on reductions in self-focused attention, it would not be affected by this possibility.

Disruptions in group size phenomena also might be traced to variations in the nature of the potential helper's ideal self. Although dispositional variables such as moral judgment level might have profound consequences for an individual's internal standard (cf. Gunzburger, Wegner, & Anooshian, 1977), it is important to note several situational variables that might lead to transitory changes. In settings where helping is neither demanded nor valued, for instance, objective self-awareness would have little effect on prosocial activity;

thus, neither the concentration nor the diffusion of responsibility should be observed. Under other conditions, the individual might be induced to perceive himself as a failure (cf. Gibbons et al., Note 2) or as a nonhelper (cf. Uranowitz, 1975). Such fluctuations in the individual's global or specific conception of self might eliminate or even reverse the direction of discrepancy-reducing activities. Here again, the effects of variations in the size of victim and potential helper subgroups might be altered.

Objective self-awareness theory, in sum, provides a framework within which a variety of previous helping behavior theories and findings may be integrated. More important, the theory offers several testable propositions that may lead to further understanding.

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