

Book Review

The Bystander Effect: The Psychology of Courage and How to Be Brave

Catherine Sanderson

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Most of us have itched to say something but instead held our tongue. My Dad called it – it was more of a look really, no wisdom like silence. One evening, I was in Nando's when two white men began vandalising the restaurant's glass door. Instead of reticence, I reacted. The men eventually left and the restaurant manager rewarded my efforts with free a pudding.

The bystander effect is a psychological theory which posits that a person (i.e., me) is less likely to help someone in need (i.e., the restaurant manager) when other people are present (i.e., the other diners). Catherine Sanderson, a Professor of Life Sciences at Amherst College, expands on this notion in *The Bystander Effect*. She asks, why don't we intervene? In most cases, "good people can and do engage in bad behaviour" because confusion about social norms, fear of social embarrassment, or fear of conflict inhibit one from taking action. Hence "the dichotomy between what people feel and how they act can lead us to conform to a norm that in reality does not exist."

Chapters one to five provide a readable explanation of these factors leveraging wide-ranging research from historical literature like Asch (1951) to modern neuroimaging. Sanderson bolsters each chapter with personal anecdotes and well-known accounts of bystanders caught up in media coverage. In chapter four, for example, she recalls the fear of interpersonal costs of challenging "comments [from a male colleague that] consistently made [her] feel uncomfortable". In this way, she strikes a chord with most readers and achieves her goal: to encourage readers to reflect on bystander apathy.

My primary contention lies with Sanderson's disengagement in the research presented to support her argumentation. While the evidence is seemingly credible, her lack of a critical eye renders her subject to confirmation bias. Parallels are drawn, for example, between her findings of young women's conceptions of body image with wider social norms around weight. "The discovery that women [perceived their classmates as thinner than themselves]... probably has to do with the focus on thinness in our society, which leads

women to... choose to tell their friends how little they've eaten". Here, Sanderson has failed to enrich her discussion with debates like fat-activism and body positivity that are demonstrating an increased resistance to body-shaming on social media. Jesse Singal argues in his *The Quick Fix* (2021) that cherry-picked evidence, common in self-help platitudes, fosters dangerous ignorance, and that this is common in pop psychology. The consequence? Enthusiasm outweighs scientific discourse.

How does Sanderson attempt to reconcile this contention? She threads in up-to-date fMRI and EPR material, often from US-based campus students, indicating she's au fait with the literature. In chapter four she cites an article localising brain regions, like the medial prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, implicated in social cognition in adolescents. This time, Sanderson overlooks clear data indicating that young people are particularly more susceptible to social influence and that sustained experiences affect brain structure and function. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that culture, defined by the combination of shared values, norms, and beliefs, impacts on perceptual processing from a young age. This journal has published on the effect of Western individualism compared with East Asian collectivism on decision-making. Gao et al., (2019) found that Chinese adults believed a patient with depression would be more likely to clinically benefit from family-centred decision making compared with European-American participants. In this way, drawing reverse inferences on correlational data almost exclusively from young US-based citizens is not only a logical fallacy but ethnocentric.

The book moves forward in chapters six to eight, equipping one with strategies to counteract the bystander effect at school, university, and work. This includes resisting the slippery slope of bad behaviour (yes, that includes pinching envelopes from the stationary cupboard) to asserting ourselves as 'other' in a way that negates the need to conform to social norms. However, unsupported claims like a student "was the only Black member of the fraternity and may have felt in some ways like an outsider [which meant] he would have felt less pressure to conform" are common. She in effect puts unqualified meaning on

other's feelings or experiences in a way that potentially discounts social, cultural, and political factors.

This introductory-level text would appeal to anyone interested in general social psychology. Those involved in mental health and leadership self-efficacy will find it worthwhile too. By firmly situating the bystander effect in media coverage of individuals who have acted unchallenged and unlawfully, Sanderson offers an accessible contribution to the self-development book-shelf. It is not, however, an eloquent or critical deep-dive into this psychological phenomenon. Notwithstanding this limitation, it appears we can bridge the gap between how we think and behave. As for anything beyond that, the proof will be in the next pudding.

References

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