Summary

Engelse
Samenvatting.
In the presence of others, people help each other less frequently and less quickly. Studies showed that this happens during emergencies such as accidents and crime. It also happens, however, in more common helping situations, such as when someone accidentally drops some items on the floor, or when someone asks for information on the internet (Latané & Darley, 1968; Latané & Nida, 1981; Voelpel et al., 2008). This phenomenon that people help others less and less quickly in the presence of bystanders, is often referred to as the bystander effect. After the first studies, the bystander effect became well known as one of the most robust findings in social psychology. Only since recent years, more situations have been identified in which the bystander effect does not occur, or sometimes even is reversed (people help more in the presence of others). In the current dissertation I aimed to identify these types of situations better, by looking at the role of reputation in the bystander effect. In four empirical chapters I report and discuss the findings of several experiments designed to study helping behavior in the presence of others, both in the field and in the lab.

In Chapter 2, two different experiments were conducted to investigate what happens when people are reminded that their behavior actually has consequences for what other people think of them, i.e. their behavior influences their reputation. Because reputation is very important for people, and helping is often seen as something admirable, I expected that people would help each other more in the presence of others. Certainly, when many people simultaneously can see a good deed, this is a very efficient way to bolster ones’ reputation. Research on the bystander effect, however, shows the opposite. Therefore, in this chapter I studied the role of accountability cues. These are small cues in the immediate environment that signal people that their individual behavior may have consequences for their reputation. These cues make people become publicly self-aware (“what do others think of me?”, “what type of consequences can my actions have for me, at this moment?”). This was studied by
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asking participants to log in at an internet forum, where they were either made very visible to others (making their name salient), or where they were made to feel watched (directing a webcam at them). On this forum, participants could read messages of others in social distress, while the number of online visitors was manipulated. As expected, participants gave less social support when they were in the presence of others. When participants were made to be more visible or feel more visible, however, they actually helped more in the presence of others. In short, because people were more aware that their behavior may impact their reputation, they behaved more pro-socially.

Chapter 3 builds on the findings of Chapter 2. Whereas previously I looked at a type of helping that has a really low threshold (sending a supporting message), I wanted to investigate if reminding people of their reputation also causes people to help more in the presence of others in a situation in which helping would have a rather high threshold and holds potential risks for the helper, such as a criminal situation. More importantly, I wanted to research if a security camera has a similar effect as the web camera from Chapter 2. An important difference is that a security camera is not only pointed at one individual, but at the entire area, including the other bystander, and the perpetrator.

To study this, participants were asked to participate in a questionnaire study in the lab. While they were filling out a questionnaire, the experimenter told them he needed to go to the bathroom, and would be back in a few minutes. When he was away, a participant (who was actually an actor) stole money from the experimenter’s desk. The study had a total of four different experimental conditions: There were either two additional actors who pretended to be participants and functioned as bystanders (bystander condition), or the actual participant was alone (alone condition). Half the participants were assigned to a condition in which the entire situation was overlooked by a security camera, whereas the other half of the participants entered a room without a camera. Similar to the first empirical chapter, without a
camera overseeing the situation, the bystander effect occurred: When participants were in the presence of two other bystanders, they intervened by stopping the thief less often than when they were alone. In the condition where there was a security camera, however, we did not find the bystander effect, and people actually intervened more often in the bystander condition. To summarize, the results of Chapter 3 indicate that security cameras—and possibly other accountability cues that signal multiple people at once about their reputation—could be effective tools to combat the bystander effect, and even lead people to help more in the presence of others.

Chapter 4 focusses on the role of feelings of inclusion and bystander intervention. In this chapter two opposing hypotheses were tested. Based on the notion that social exclusion makes people feel numb, it was expected that when people are excluded, they would feel less empathy towards others in need. Furthermore, it would be harder for them to anticipate future affect, such as the positive feeling of elation and pride after helping, or the negative feelings of shame and guilt after failing to help. One hypothesis in this chapter was, therefore, that people would be less willing to help after being socially excluded, even when they are already helping less due to the presence of others. There was, however, also an alternative hypothesis, based on the notion that people have a strong need to belong. Certainly, helping others could be a good way to try to obtain a feeling of acceptance or belongingness, after one has been excluded. By helping, people show they could be valuable to others, and thus valuable as a friend or group member.

In order to study the role of feelings of social exclusion in bystander intervention, we asked participants to play a virtual ball tossing game (cyberball). During this game, the participants received the balled a proportionate number of times (inclusion condition), all the time (over-inclusion condition), or hardly ever at all (exclusion condition). To study helping behavior we used the forum paradigm, similar to the one described in Chapter 2. The results
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provided support for the first hypothesis: The bystander effect was found when there were many visitors on the forum, but there was also a main effect of social exclusion. People who were socially excluded helped others in emotional distress less often than people who did feel accepted, even when helping was already less likely due to the presence of others.

In Chapter 5, I looked at the complexity of the situation when the bystander effect occurs. The presence of others makes the decision to help more complicated: Diffusion of responsibility may happen (“Let the other bystander take action”; “Why would it have to be me to be the one to help”), but also confusion of responsibility (“If I were to help this person, others may think I was the cause of the accident”), and people may fear embarrassment when they miscalculate the situation or respond inappropriately (“Maybe this person does truly not need help”, “Maybe it is wrong for me to interfere in these personal issues”). Because alcohol impairs cognitive functioning, this perception of increased situational complexity may not occur. When people drink alcohol, they pay less attention to their surroundings, and they dare to behave different, and more impulsive. In this chapter, it was, therefore, expected that people who consumed alcohol, were less susceptible to the influence of the bystander effect, and thus would intervene as frequently and as fast in the presence of others, as if they were alone, but more frequently and faster than people who were sober and in the presence of others.

In two experiments we studied this line of reasoning. In several bars in Amsterdam we recruited people to partake in one of the two experiments. The presence of others was counted (Study 5.1) or manipulated (Study 5.2) and it was measured how much alcohol participants drank the current night (among others, by means of a breathalyzer). In both studies, participants were placed in a situation where they could help someone (in Study 5.1 participants saw the internet forum paradigm on a laptop; in Study 5.2 the experimenter dropped some items on the floor). The results of both studies showed the bystander effect for
sober people: They helped less often and less quickly in the presence of others. People who consumed alcohol, however, helped much faster (but not more often) in the presence of others. These results indicate that, the complexity of the situation when bystanders are present indeed makes the decision to help more troublesome, and thus people decide slower.

Since 1968, the bystander effect has been known as a robust social psychological phenomenon that sometimes has dire consequences. It became notorious due to the large number of horrible accidents and crimes reported in the news, where reportedly, no one intervened (e.g., the case of Kitty Genovese). But the consequences of the bystander effect in everyday life, such as when people ask for information on an internet forum, can also be very substantial. In the current dissertation, I aimed to get more insight in the bystander effect, by studying how reputation may influence the phenomenon. Additionally there was the aim to study how bystanders can be moved to intervene more often or more quickly, in the presence of others. It was demonstrated that reputation is a very important factor in the bystander effect: It can motivate people to become active, and intervene more often, if they are aware that their prosocial behavior can influence how others think of them. Reputation, however, can also deactivate bystanders, as they may fear embarrassment and make the decision to help very slowly, or when they feel so numb due to socially exclusion, that they may not help at all. In short, with the contribution of the current dissertation, I think that certain social psychological processes that underlie the bystander effect are better understood. Moreover I hope that this increased understanding can perhaps be used to activate and motivate the otherwise passive bystander to lend those in need a helping hand.