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The Affect of a Victim's Language on the Likelihood of Bystander Intervention

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Abstract - The purpose of this experiment is to find out whether language affects the likelihood of bystander intervention. In society, there is a lot of linguistic prejudice and bias against people who do not speak the native language (Gluszek, 2010). The experiment took place in a park, in which one confederate pretended to have a sprained ankle and the researcher was far away recording the results. The subjects were adults who passed by the scene, and they were debriefed afterwards. Results showed that the likelihood of bystander intervention was greater when the victim asked for help in English, as opposed to a foreign language (Albanian). When the victim was asking for help in English, about 68% of the bystanders intervened and about 32% did not intervene. However, when the victim was asking for help in Albanian, about 53% intervened, and 47% of the bystanders did not. The total number of subjects was 180 bystanders. Overall, the likelihood of bystander intervention was greater when the victim speaks English.

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The Affect of a Victim's Language on the Likelihood of Bystander Intervention

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I. INTRODUCTION

You have just witnessed an emergency, in which someone is hurt and needs help from others. The first thing that comes to your mind is: should I help? Or should I leave it to other people to help? The bystander effect is the likelihood of bystander intervention in an emergency. The bystander weighs the options of intervening and not intervening, and looks at the effects of both. In this experiment, an emergency was orchestrated by acting out a broken ankle in a public place. There were two groups, one in which the victim asked for help in English, and the other in which the victim asks for help in a foreign language (Albanian). The hypothesis was that bystanders would intervene in an emergency more when the victim spoke English because on one hand it would take a lot less effort on the bystander's part, and on the other, the victim could experience some bias and prejudice based on the language they speak.

Intervention depends on the "in-group/out-group" theory. The in-group/out-group theory is when individuals feel they belong to a group; they hold positive attitudes towards that group and negative attitudes towards the out-group. Levine (2002) tested the social psychology of helping. The study found that the students intervened more when the victim was from their university. The results also showed that people will

intervene more in situations where they relate to the victim, whether this "group" is age, gender, or the school they attend.

Before bystanders intervene, they go through the process of evaluating the costs and benefits of helping and not-helping. Some examples of the costs of not helping can be public scrutiny, time and guilt (Finkelstein, M. 2000). Based on the costs and benefits, a bystander will make a decision to intervene or not (Darley, 1969). If the cost is too high, then the bystander will not intervene (Finkelstein, 2000).

The in-group/out-group factor is being tested in this experiment. By changing the victim's language, it may prevent bystanders from relating to the victim, and also create a severe language barrier. In an emergency, a bystander is more likely to intervene when the victim has the same ethnicity, race, etc. (Kunstman, 2008). The bias towards immigrants and people who do not speak English is very evident in society. Gluszek (2010) conducted a study which showed that speaking with a non-native accent was significantly associated with the feeling of not belonging in society, and having problems in communicating (Gluszek, 2010). However, discrimination towards non-native speakers also depends on the position in society that the non-native speakers are in. Dawson (2011), assigned non-native speakers the roles of a manager of a restaurant, and the English speakers were assigned as the workers; then the roles switched. The results showed that the discrimination and bias towards non-native speakers from the managers were significantly less when the non-native speakers were in positions of power (Dawson, 2011).

Bystander effect has many variables that affect it and influence a bystander's decision. Bystanders consider the costs/rewards of helping/not helping, what others will think of them, what others are doing about the situation, how many people there are around, and the severity of the situation before they make a decision to intervene. However, it also depends on whether the bystander can relate to the victim. The way we perceive others is affected by how we show ourselves to others. If the victim who does not speak English and feels like he/she doesn't belong, then this will allow the bystanders to have a different outlook on the situation. If the victim is not getting her point across, then people will be bias towards her and the situation. The perception of the situation and what the bystanders feel

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about the victim affects the likelihood of bystander intervention. Unfortunately, linguistic prejudice and bias is evident in our society, and it does affect those who are in need of help.

II. PROCEDURE

In order to test the effect the language the victim speaks has on the bystander effect, the experiment will be conducted in a small community park (Juniper Valley Park). The experiment will begin with a confederate (18 or older, female, and casually dressed) pretending to be hurt and another researcher will be recording the observations. The confederate in pain (victim) will hold onto their ankle. The victim will say things like "help" or "I'm in pain," etc, in two languages, depending on the trial. First the confederate will be asking for help in English, and the second round of trials the confederate will ask for help in a non-English language (Albanian). This will be taking place on the corner of a road (in Juniper Valley Park, Middle Village). The purpose of the experiment taking place on the turn of a road is so it can be secluded. Any person turning the corner will immediately see the incident, and therefore it will allow us to easily count the bystanders. Also, the bystanders saying they did not see the incident will not affect the results. The confederate recording the observations will be 30 ft away so that nobody can make a connection between the scene and the recorder. The data that will be recorded is whether the subjects intervened and the number of subjects that did not intervene.

The help of a bystander will be defined by any slight indication of help. An example of this would be for the bystander to simply acknowledge the confederate, by talking to them (anything less is not considered helping). It is not relevant as to what they say, as long as they say anything that shows recognition of the emergency.

The subjects will be debriefed afterward because if they were told ahead of time, the study would not be testing bystander intervention since the subjects would know it is not real. The experiment will be concluded after 100 people are tested for each trial (first trial being the victim speaking English, and the second being the victim speaking Albanian).

III. RESULTS

In this experiment, the likelihood of bystander intervention was greater when the victim asked for help in English, as opposed to a foreign language (Albanian). Figure 1 compares the number who helped in each condition. When the victim asked for help in English, about 68% of the bystanders intervened and about 32% did not intervene. When the victim asked for help in Albanian, about 53% intervened and 47% of the bystanders did not. The data from a few bystanders had to be omitted because they spoke Albanian when the victim asked for help in Albanian. These results could not be included in the study because the bystanders are not supposed to understand the victim.

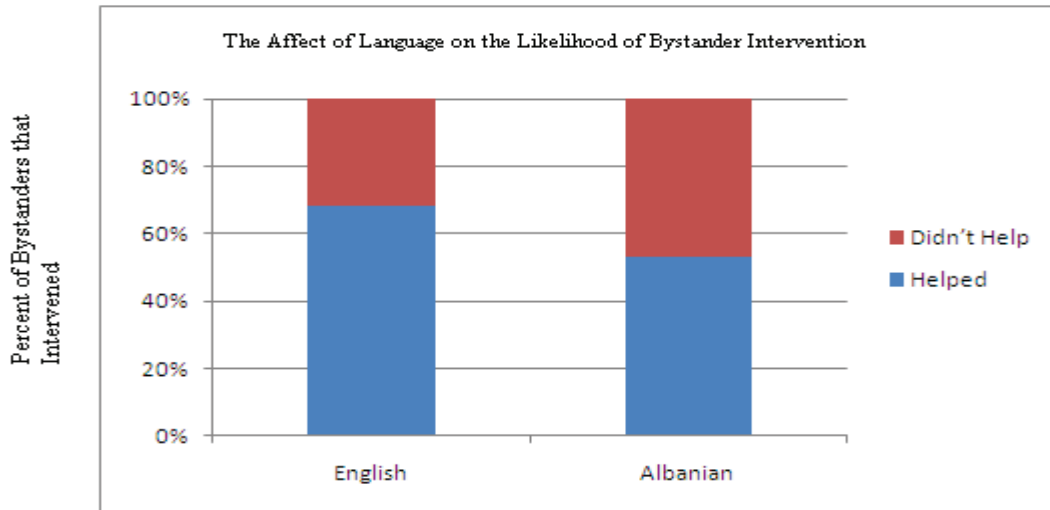


Figure 1: The percent of bystanders that intervened and did not intervene.

IV. DISCUSSION

Ultimately, language does affect the likelihood of bystander intervention. The native speakers are more likely to be helped than non-native speakers. One

limitation of this study was that most of the participants were Caucasian, and different races feel differently towards other cultures. What could be done differently is to conduct the experiment in a more diverse area. Also,

different languages can be tested to see if whether a specific language affects the likelihood of bystander intervention.

The implications of this experiment were to provide insight on how bias towards non-native speakers affects bystander intervention. Society should help everyone who is in need, regardless of their background and language. If people who are in need of help are helped by bystanders, many emergencies could be prevented and many lives could be saved. Future research that could be done is to look at a new variable: time. This would look at whether bystanders intervene quicker with the native or non-native victim.

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