Lesson Title: Bystander Intervention: Explaining Behavior in Terms of Multiple Variables

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How to Teach the Bystander Intervention Lesson

Pre-Lesson

STEP ONE
Prepare for the lesson.
- Materials needed. Make copies of student handouts for the lesson: Bystander Pre-Test, Group Exercise 1, Group Exercise 2, Model of Bystander Intervention, Individual Analysis, and Bystander Post-Test. See links to handouts.
- Pre-Test. Give the Bystander Pre-Test to students as a homework assignment one week before the lesson. Give half the students Form A and half Form B. Students analyze four bystander scenarios. For each they predict how the bystander is likely to act and identify factors that influence bystanders’ actions.
- Students email their Pre-Test responses to the instructor several days before the research lesson and bring hard copy of their pre-test responses to the lesson.
- Analyze Pre-Test responses. Look for patterns and tendencies in how students predict and explain bystander behavior. Use these to anticipate how students will respond to the group exercises.
- Student reading. The bystander lesson is the first lesson on the topic of social psychology. There are no assigned readings.
- Research Lesson Directions to Students. Read over the directions to students. Make any changes in the directions before the lesson. Link: Research Lesson Directions to Students.

The Lesson

STEP TWO (10 minutes)
Introduce the topic and goals of the lesson.
- Describe and explain the concept of bystander intervention. We used the Kitty Genovese incident to pose the question of why bystanders help or do not help strangers. See Myers, D, (2005). Psychology (7th ed.), pp. 734-737.
- Describe the goals of the lesson—to develop an understanding of bystander intervention and the ability to analyze and explain behavior in terms of multiple factors.

STEP THREE (30 minutes)
Group Exercise 1: Small groups analyze factors that influence bystander behavior.
- Assign students to small groups (4-6). Put roughly equal numbers of students with Form A and Form B in each group.
- Distribute Group Exercise 1 Handout.
- Read and explain directions for Group Exercise 1 to the class. Link: Research Lesson Directions to Students.

Students compare the scenarios from Pre-Test Forms A and B. For each pair of scenarios they discuss the factors that influence bystander behavior and predict whether bystanders are likely to help or not help the person in need. They work
through each pair of scenarios and compile a list of categories for all the variables they discuss. Each group writes its categories on an overhead transparency.

- Circulate among the groups. Clarify the task and answer questions. After students work on the exercise for 15 minutes, check with each group to see what kinds of categories they have produced. If necessary, suggest ways to combine individual examples into categories (e.g., whether the onlooker is male, whether the onlooker is female combine into gender of onlooker).

**STEP FOUR (15 minutes)**
Whole Class discussion. (15 minutes)
- Collect the overhead transparencies from each group.
- Compare groups’ categories and predictions. On the overhead projector show a transparency from one of the groups and ask the team members to explain their categories and predictions. After discussion of 2-3 transparencies the ideas may become redundant. At that point ask subsequent groups to point out any unique categories or factors that have not been identified.

**STEP FIVE (10 minutes)**
Instructor presentation of research model to the class.
- Distribute the Model of Bystander Intervention Handout.
- Introduce the model and highlight the major variables in the model. Point out similarities and differences between the research model and students’ categories.

**STEP SIX (10 minutes)**
Group Exercise 2. Students work in small groups
- Distribute Group Exercise 2 Handout to groups.
- Go over instructions with students. Each group compares its factors to the research model and hands in one group summary at the end of class.

**STEP SEVEN (10 minutes)**
Individual analysis.
- Distribute Individual Analysis handout to students.
- Go over instructions. Students write an individual analysis of how their group’s factors fit the bystander model. Link: Individual Analysis.

We used the individual analysis to help students consolidate their thinking about the bystander model and to get data from each student. We wanted a record of individual thinking separate from the group summaries.

**Post-Lesson**

**STEP EIGHT**
- Give students the Bystander Post-test as a take home assignment.
- At the next class period discuss students’ answers and compare these to actual research results. Links: Bystander Post-test and Bystander Studies Handout.

We used the Post-test to determine whether students’ predictions and explanations were different from their pre-lesson responses. The Post-test scenarios were based on those used in research studies of bystander intervention.
**Student Learning Goals**
As a result of the lesson students should be
1. better able to analyze and explain the psychology of bystander intervention.
2. better able and more inclined to analyze and explain human behavior in terms of multiple factors (or variables).

The immediate academic goal of the lesson is to develop students’ understanding of bystander intervention as a social psychological phenomenon. Because this is the first lesson in the social psychology unit, the goal is also to use bystander intervention to illustrate how the presence of others affects how individuals act, think and feel. Subsequent lessons on the topics of conformity, obedience, and social influence further elaborate on this idea.

The broad goal of the lesson is to develop students' ability (and inclination) to think in terms of multiple variables, a basic feature of psychological reasoning. To explain any form of behavior one needs to determine the factors, conditions, variables, and antecedents that influence the actions in question. We see a tendency for students to oversimplify human actions, and to explain behavior in terms of a single factor or variable—a tendency we call "The One Factor Theory." For example, students often explain children's behavior problems in terms of "low self esteem." We think it is important to provide experiences that develop students' capacity to think in more complex ways about the nature of human behavior.

The lesson topic, "the psychology of bystander intervention," focuses on why bystanders help or do not help (intervene) in situations where a stranger needs assistance. We selected the topic because the phenomenon involves everyday situations that are familiar to students. They can easily imagine these types of situations and may have experienced them both as a bystander and as a person in need of help. In addition, the research findings are incongruent with everyday beliefs. For example, research demonstrates the importance of situational variables such as how the number of people present in the situation affects bystander intervention (i.e., more people present, the less likely it is that someone will help). In contrast, students emphasize the importance of the bystander's personality and character as determinants of behavior.

**How the Lesson Works**
To promote thinking in terms of multiple variables the lesson engages students in analyzing and explaining bystander scenarios depicting people in need of help. The lesson involves analytical activities in which students:
1. predict how bystanders are likely to act in a variety of situations (Pre-Test, Group Exercise 1, Post-Test).
2. explain the reasons why a bystander would or would not help in various situations (Pre-Test, Group Exercise 1, Post-Test)
3. compare their explanations of bystander intervention to a research-based model of bystander intervention (Group Exercise 2 and Individual Analysis).

In general, research indicates that "explaining" and "predicting" are sense-making activities that help students articulate, examine and revise their understanding of concepts (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Schwartz and Bransford, 1998). Moreover these activities make student thinking visible throughout the class period so that we can observe how they construe the scenarios and explain bystander behavior.
Instructional materials. The Bystander Scenarios are key to the lesson. They depict concrete examples of real situations in which a person needs help. For each scenario students predict what onlookers will do (i.e., help or not help) and then explain the factors that influence onlookers’ behavior in the situation.

We created four (4) pairs of scenarios, manipulating such factors as number of bystanders present, the age or gender of the person in need of help, the “severity” of the situation, and the potential threat to the bystander. Link: Bystander Scenarios.

Each pair of scenarios differed with respect to one important variable. For example, the pair below depicts a snowbound motorist. In one scenario the motorist is an older woman and in the other a young woman.

A. On a bitterly cold day, an older woman struggles to shovel her car out of its parking spot on a busy street. There are a number of pedestrians on the sidewalk and cars passing by who notice her.

B. On a bitterly cold day, a young woman struggles to shovel her car out of its parking spot on a busy street. There are a number of pedestrians on the sidewalk and cars passing by who notice her.

The reason for creating alternate forms of the scenarios is to focus student attention on specific factors such as the number of bystanders present or the potential “cost” to the bystander for offering assistance.

The scenarios are used for the Pre-Test and Group Exercise 1. On the Pre-Test each student receives 4 scenarios, one scenario from each pair. In class we assign students to groups so that about half the students in each group have Form A and half have Form B. Link: Bystander Pre-Test.

Instructional and learning activities. The learning activities consisted of: 1) Group Exercise 1, 2) the instructor’s explanation of the Bystander Intervention Research Model, 3) Group Exercise 2, 4) Individual Analysis, and 5) Post-Test and class discussion.

Group Exercise 1: In Group Exercise 1 students generate and discuss a wide variety of variables based on the concrete, familiar situations depicted in the scenarios. They predict how bystanders will act and then explain the factors likely to influence bystander behavior. The exercise is an opportunity to think about the multiple variables that affect bystander behavior. Because the scenarios highlight situational factors, students are faced with many potential reasons why bystanders may or may not help a stranger.

Explanation of the Bystander Intervention Research Model. Rather than present the research model as the beginning of the lesson, we introduce it after students produce their own ideas about what accounts for bystander intervention. We believe that the model makes more sense after students have analyzed bystander intervention situations as it offers a framework for organizing the “facts” and observations they have generated. Link: Bystander Intervention Model.

Group Exercise 2 involves students in comparing their group’s ideas about bystander intervention with the research-based model. The model introduces a more coherent way to think about bystander behavior and is based on actual research evidence. Although the
model is not complex, we think students will be more inclined to try to understand the model after they produce their own predictions and explanations of bystander intervention.

The Individual Analysis follows the Group Exercise 2. Each student writes his/her own summary, comparing the research model to the group’s ideas about bystander intervention. This is also a way to monitor each student’s understanding of the concepts.

Students do a Post-Test as a homework assignment that includes scenarios from well know research studies on bystander intervention. Students predict and explain how research subjects are likely to act in each situation. See the sample item below. Link: Bystander Post-Test.

Subjects in a testing room heard a female experimenter (who was behind a curtain) climb on a chair to retrieve a book from a shelf. They then heard the experimenter fall to the floor and groan: “Oh, my God—my foot . . . I . . . can’t move it. Oh . . . my ankle . . . I can’t get this thing off me.” Her groans lasted for another minute and the entire episode lasted about two minutes. The research subjects were either alone in the room when they heard the accident or in the room with two other subjects. Predict how the subjects responded. In which of the conditions (alone or with others) were the research subjects more likely to help the woman? Explain the reasons for your prediction.

The Post-Test is a final opportunity to examine the major concepts related to bystander intervention. Moreover, the Post-Test items have actual answers so students can compare their predictions to what subjects did in the research studies. At the next class meeting the instructor examines the Post-Test responses. Link: Bystander Studies Handout.