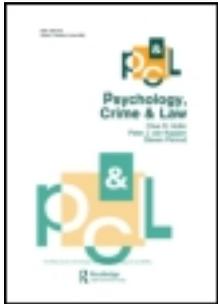


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Commitment, crime, and the responsive bystander: effect of the commitment form and conformism

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Commitment, crime, and the responsive bystander: effect of the commitment form and conformism

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Research has shown that eliciting commitment is a valuable way of inciting people to act, even in emergencies and dangerous situations. The purpose of the two studies presented here was to explore the relation between the form of commitment used to prevent a crime and the moderating effect exerted by the number of passive observers of this crime. At a bus stop, a first confederate put a bag down on the ground upon arriving and immediately left to withdraw money from an automated teller machine near the bus stop. Two male participants were present at the bus stop. In Study 1, the confederate said nothing (control), directly asked one participant to watch his bag (direct commitment), or asked all present to watch his bag (indirect commitment). About 30 seconds later, a male confederate walked up to the victim's bag, picked it up, and quickly walked away in the opposite direction of the victim. A total of 150 participants (50 per condition) were observed. It was found that 34% intervened in the control condition, 88% in the direct commitment condition, and 56% in the indirect commitment condition. In Study 2, 150 participants (50 per condition) were observed while two male confederates were present at the bus stop with the instruction not to react to the theft. It was found that more intervention was found in the direct commitment condition (88%) than in the control condition (18%). However, the indirect commitment condition did not elicit higher intervention (22%). Variation in the level of personal responsibility to help the victim is used to explain these differences.

Keywords: commitment; crime; bystander; intervention; conformity; responsibility

Several studies have shown that bystanders' perceived responsibility to act is an important factor of their own willingness to help the victim of an emergency (see Fischer et al., 2011; Latané & Nida, 1981, for review) and that diffusion of responsibility is frequently an explanation of non-intervention in dangerous and non-dangerous emergencies. The presence of a passive individual or especially several passive individuals is an important factor in the decreased perceived responsibility to act. Darley and Latané (1968) invited participants into an individual room from which a communication system enabled them to talk to other participants who were in fact confederates. The participants were told that a few minutes later, they would take part in a discussion on college life with the help of an intercom system. During the course of the discussion, one confederate simulated an epileptic fit. According to the experimental conditions, the group discussion was composed of two individuals (one participant and one victim), three individuals (one

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participant, one victim, and one passive confederate), or six individuals (one participant, one victim, and four passive confederates). When the confederate-victim's seizure occurred, the confederates were instructed not to intervene and to continue the discussion. The speed at which the participants reported the emergency to the experimenter was the dependent variable measured. It was found that the number of participants who intervened decreased as the group size increased. It was also reported that the intervention response time increased positively with the group size.

This inhibiting effect exerted by passive confederates or bystanders has been replicated in many experimental studies conducted in laboratory and in field settings (Harris & Robinson, 1973; Latané & Rodin, 1969; Ross, 1971; Smith, Smythe, & Lien, 1972). Diffusion of responsibility was often used to explain this inhibiting effect created by the group. When participants are alone, their sense of responsibility to intervene is high because they are the only ones who can help the victim. Therefore, the high level of personal responsibility creates high pressure to intervene. When someone else is present, participants deduce that this responsibility is shared between them and the other individual. Accordingly, the pressure to help decreases. As soon as the group size increases, this personal responsibility is diluted, and the pressure for action decreases dramatically.

Commitment and bystander intervention

A number of research studies have examined ways of increasing individuals' intervention rates even in emergencies and dangerous situations (see Fischer et al., 2011 for a review). It has been found that participants' commitment increases dramatically people's intervention rates. In the seminal work on this topic, Moriarty (1975) demonstrated in two field experiments that bystanders were more willing to stop a theft if they had previously made a commitment to the victim. In a field experiment conducted at Jones Beach, New York, one confederate (the victim) placed a blanket near a participant and turned on a portable radio. After two minutes, the victim left his blanket and spoke to the participant. In one condition (commitment), he asked the participant to watch his things because he had to go up to the boardwalk for a few minutes whereas in the no-commitment control condition, he requested a cigarette light from the participant. The confederate-victim then strolled away in the direction of the boardwalk and remained out of sight. One minute later, a second confederate (the thief) walked up to the victim's blanket, picked up the portable radio, and walked away in the opposite direction of the victim. The participant's reaction to the theft was the dependent variable measured in this experiment. In the commitment condition, 95% of the participants intervened to stop the theft while only 20% did so in the control no-commitment condition. The same pattern of results was found with both male and female participants. These first positive results were confirmed in a second study where customers in a restaurant were either asked by a female confederate to watch her suitcase or not. Again, 100% of the participants in the commitment condition intervened when the theft occurred while only 13% did so in the control no-commitment condition.

The effect of commitment on reaction to a crime has been reported in several studies (Austin, 1979; Harris & Samerotte, 1976; Schwarz, Jennings, Petrillo, & Kidd, 1980; Shaffer, Rogle, & Hendrick, 1975; Stewart & Cannon, 1977). Findings have shown that commitment is associated with greater intervention even when participant's reaction to a theft was not the dependent variable measured. At a supermarket cash register, customers

were asked by a female confederate to keep an eye on her shopping cart because she had forgotten something (Guéguen, Pascual, & Lader, 2003). A few seconds later, a second female confederate began to move the first confederate's cart. Results showed that participants intervened 95% of the time in the commitment condition while they intervened 15% of the time when no previous commitment had been solicited.

In all of the studies, the percentage of participants offering assistance at the time of the theft increased dramatically in the commitment condition while the percentage of intervention was low in the no-commitment control condition. Interestingly, Shaffer et al. (1975, Experiment 1) reported that in a control role-play condition (where participants had the scenario described to them as well as the actions of those involved in the real experiment), no differences were found between the commitment and the no-commitment group: in both conditions, a high percentage of interventions was reported. However, when a real experiment was conducted with actual participants, it was found that the percentage of interventions was low in the no-commitment condition while it was high in the commitment condition.

Some studies have also shown that some factors influence the efficacy of commitment on a participant's response. In a replication of Moriarty's (1975) study conducted in a university library, Shaffer et al. (1975, Experiment 2) asked a confederate to act as a passive individual. This confederate was instructed to stay near the participant, be passive, and not intervene when the theft attempt occurred. In another condition, this confederate was not present. In the commitment condition, the victim of the theft asked the participant, who was alone, to protect his property. In the control condition, no request was addressed to the lone participant or to the dyad. One minute after the victim had left his place, the theft occurred. At the end of the experiment, the participants were asked to evaluate how they had personally felt about preventing the theft. Again, it was found that eliciting commitment increased participants' intervention (75% in the commitment condition vs. 32% in the control no-commitment condition). Nonetheless, it was also found that the presence of the passive confederate was associated with a decrease in the participants' intervention, even when commitment had been requested (75% when the participant was alone vs. 50% when a passive confederate was present). Another result was that commitment increased the level of participants' own responsibility to prevent the theft, but this level of responsibility decreased when the passive confederate was present, even when commitment had been elicited from the participants ($M = 7.75$ when the participant was alone vs. $M = 5.31$ when a passive confederate was present). According to the authors, congruent with the responsibility dilution theory (Darley & Latané, 1968), the passive confederate allowed participants to diffuse some of the responsibility for intervention to the confederate, thereby decreasing their sense of responsibility and willingness to intervene.

The purpose of the current study was to extend the preliminary results found by Shaffer et al. (1975). First, only one passive confederate was used in their study, and a replication with more passive bystanders is necessary given that research has shown a negative relationship between group size and the level of intervention. Second, in the passive confederate commitment condition manipulated in Shaffer et al.'s study, the commitment was not elicited from both individuals (the participant and the confederate) but only from the participant. The commitment elicitation was just whispered by the victim. Thus, the participant could have thought that the confederate had not heard the request. What would happen if the participant was requested to watch the victim's belongings and the request was heard by the confederate? Second, what would happen if both the participant and the passive confederate were requested to watch the victim's things?

Thus, the purpose of the two studies presented hereafter was to extend the preliminary work performed by Shaffer et al. (1975) that linked commitment and the presence of a passive confederate. However, in our two studies, commitment was elicited directly from the participants or indirectly from the participants and the confederates. It was hypothesized that if the commitment was directly addressed to the participants, passive confederates would have no effect on the participants' reaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 300 male dyads (age range approximately 25–45 years old), standing at a bus shelter and waiting for the bus in two towns (between 60,000 and 70,000 inhabitants) situated on the south coast of Brittany, France. Study 1 was conducted in one town, and Study 2 was conducted in the other one. In both studies, the bus shelter was situated near a bank with an automated teller machine (ATM). Three conditions were manipulated in the two studies; a total of 150 participants were tested (50 per condition).

Procedure

Two separate experiments were performed: one tested the reactions of individuals without the presence of passive confederates, and the second tested the effect of passive confederates. A pretest and training stage performed with 10 participants had shown that all the participants heard and understood the request of the confederate.

Study 1 was conducted when only two male individuals were present waiting for a bus. A first male confederate (C1) holding a shoulder bag arrived and began to consult his watch and the bus timetable posted on a board. After 20 seconds, C1 put his bag down on the ground and said to himself but loud enough to be heard by the two participants present, 'I have some time before the bus arrives.' At this point, one of the three experimental conditions was manipulated. In the control condition, C1 left the bus stop and made his way to the bank situated nearly 30 m behind and simulated using the ATM. In the direct commitment condition, C1 made clear eye contact with one of the two participants (the participant was selected according to a randomized selection process) and said, 'I am going to withdraw some money from the ATM nearby (C1 pointed to the bank). Could you keep an eye on my bag please? Thanks,' and then left in the direction of the bank. In the indirect commitment condition, C1 did not make any eye contact with any of the two participants and just looked in the direction of the bank and said, 'I am going to withdraw some money from the ATM nearby (C1 pointed to the bank). Could one of you keep an eye on my bag please? Thanks,' and then he walked immediately in the direction of the bank. One minute later, a second male confederate (C2) arrived at the bus stop. He was instructed to look around him and not to look at the participants or interact verbally with them. After 30 seconds, C2 picked up the shoulder bag and walked away in the opposite direction of where C1 was. The reaction to the theft of 150 participants (50 per condition) was observed. Reaction to the theft was classified as either responsive or nonresponsive. A responsive reaction meant that a participant ran up to and stopped the thief. A nonresponsive reaction meant that participants looked away and/or did not intervene physically or verbally to stop the theft.

In Study 2, the procedure was the same as in Study 1, but two male confederates were now present at the bus stop. These two confederates arrived before C1, one after the other

with a 15-second interval. These two confederates were instructed not to interact with the two participants present at the bus stop or with each other. They were instructed to wait and to consult their smartphone throughout the procedure. In the direct commitment condition, C1 only interacted with one of the two participants and not with the two confederates. When the theft occurred, the two confederates were instructed not to intervene and to continue to consult their smartphone. Again, the reaction to the theft of 150 participants (50 per condition) was the dependent variable measured. The participants' reaction was coded as in Study 1.

Results

The frequency of participants who intervened in each condition in the two experiments is presented in Table 1.

Each study was examined separately with the help of a chi-square independent test.

In Study 1, an overall effect of the experimental conditions was found. ($\chi^2(2) = 30.56$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .41$). Post-hoc comparison revealed that the direct commitment condition was significantly different from the control condition ($\chi^2(1) = 30.64$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .48$) and the indirect commitment condition ($\chi^2(1) = 12.70$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .31$) whereas the indirect commitment condition appeared significantly different from the no-commitment control condition ($\chi^2(1) = 4.88$, $p = .027$, $\phi = .22$). Thus, both commitment conditions appeared efficient at increasing the participants' reaction, but the direct commitment appeared more efficient at increasing the frequency of interventions.

In Study 2, an overall effect of the experimental conditions was observed ($\chi^2(2) = 63.17$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .54$). Again, post-hoc comparison was done and revealed that the direct commitment condition was significantly different from the control condition ($\chi^2(1) = 49.48$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .57$) and the indirect commitment condition ($\chi^2(1) = 44.01$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .55$). However, the indirect commitment condition did not differ significantly from the no-commitment control condition ($\chi^2(1) = 0.25$, $p = .62$, $\phi = .05$).

In order to evaluate the influence of the two passive confederates used in Study 2, we compared the difference of the frequency of interventions between the two studies for each experimental condition. In the direct commitment condition, no statistical difference was found ($\chi^2(1) = 0.00$, *ns*) whereas in the indirect commitment condition, the difference was significant ($\chi^2(1) = 12.15$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .33$). In the control condition, the difference was nearly significant ($\chi^2(1) = 3.33$, $p = .07$, $\phi = .18$).

Table 1. Frequency of participants who intervened to stop the theft.

	Commitment condition			Total
	Control no-commitment	Direct commitment	Indirect commitment	
Study 1: no passive confederate	34% (17/50)	88% (44/50)	56% (28/50)	59.3%
Study 2: two passive confederates	18% (9/50)	88% (44/50)	22% (11/50)	42.7%
Total	26%	88%	39%	

Discussion

Overall, these two studies showed that commitment increased the rate of participants' interventions to stop the theft. These results are clearly in accordance with previous studies (Austin, 1979; Harris & Samerotte, 1976; Moriarty, 1975; Schwarz et al., 1980; Shaffer et al., 1975; Stewart & Cannon, 1977). The effect-size of commitment was large, which suggests that 'commitment appears to be a necessary condition for prosocial action in response to the type of theft situation created here' (Austin, 1979, p. 2114). Overall, it was also found that the presence of a group of passive confederates was associated with a decrease in the number of interventions to stop the theft. Again, such results are congruent with the results reported in the literature examining the effect of the presence of others on reactions in emergency situations (Darley & Latané, 1968; Harris & Robinson, 1973; Latané & Rodin, 1969; Ross, 1971; Smith et al., 1972).

However, the results of our two studies revealed that the overall effect of both commitment and the deleterious effect of passive confederates on action in emergency situations should be interpreted with caution. Indeed, our two studies revealed two major and new findings on the effect of commitment on people's reaction to a crime. First, we found that the presence of the two passive confederates (and additionally the second participant) exerted no effect in the direct commitment condition. Indeed, the frequency of participant intervention was high (88%) and remained the same whether the dyad of passive confederates was present or not. Such results suggest that this effect is probably explained by the high level of personal responsibility induced by commitment. This level was certainly so high that the classical dilution effect argument used to explain why individuals intervened less frequently in emergency situations as soon as the number of passive bystanders around increased did not operate. It seems that when direct commitment is addressed, participants are not influenced by the presence of others around them.

Such behavioral consistency between the two conditions has some theoretical importance. In their review of the literature on the effect of group size on people's willingness to help somebody in an emergency situation, Latané and Nida (1981) identified three possible theoretical reasons that might explain the deleterious effect exerted by passive bystanders. The first process was audience inhibition, namely, individuals avoid acting in the wrong manner in the presence of others. The second was the social influence process according to which the inaction of others leads the participants to interpret the situation as ambiguous or less critical, which in turn leads them to act differently than when they are alone. The third process was related to the diffusion of responsibility explanation which posited that when people are present, the psychological cost associated with non-intervention decreased, which in turn increased the probability of non-intervention. When the participants are alone, their level of responsibility to intervene is high, and the psychological cost not to intervene is also high.

Even if these three processes combined help to explain why people did not intervene in an emergency situation, our results suggest that some of these processes are not a good explanation in the direct commitment condition. We found no difference in the direct commitment condition, whether passive bystanders were near the participants or not, which suggests that audience inhibition and the social influence of others are not good explanations. The responsibility process, in contrast, still explains why we found no difference in the two group size conditions with direct commitment. In this situation, the personal responsibility to intervene activated by the direct commitment elicited by the victim was probably sufficiently high to prevent later group dilution. Everything occurred

as if the participants were led to think that they were entirely responsible for what would happen to the victim's property. As the commitment was clearly requested, the psychological cost associated with non-intervention remained sufficiently high when the theft occurred even if the participants realized that people around were not reacting to the theft.

Guéguen and Triffaut (2003) conducted an experiment using a non-problematic helping situation where it was found that an initial responsibility to watch the victim's things remained efficient at influencing later behavior even if the participant had no obligation to act. In their experiment, a female confederate had initially asked a participant to protect her property in her absence. In the control condition, this solicitation was not made. After the confederate's return, and therefore after the initial commitment had come to an end, she left with her belongings and forgot an object. An effect of persistence of the initial commitment was found comparatively with a situation where this commitment had not been solicited. In a second study performed by these authors, it was also found that participants estimated the victim to be less negligent to have forgotten her things in the commitment condition and that the committed participants estimated that they were more responsible for various negative events that could happen to the confederate. Of course, in Guéguen and Triffaut's study, no passive individuals were present. However, it seems that commitment elicited a high level of responsibility to help the victim, which persisted after a long period. Thus, in our experiment, it could be argued that direct commitment activated a high level of responsibility, which would explain why we found the level of intervention to be the same when passive bystanders were present.

The second major, new finding our experiment revealed is that the form of commitment had some effect on participant intervention. When the commitment was indirect, that is, not directly addressed to somebody but to all present, the level of intervention decreased even when no passive confederates were present. Again, in this case, a possible dilution responsibility effect could explain the results observed. When the theft occurred, each participant probably thought that it was the responsibility of the other to intervene. As both participants had the same thoughts, the probability of one of them intervening decreased. In the presence of the two passive confederates, this dilution responsibility effect probably increased, which in turn decreased the participant intervention. Thus, it seems that the form of commitment used clearly has an impact on individuals' subsequent behavior. Some form of commitment does not appear to be influenced by the presence of others or the dilution of responsibility effect (direct face-to-face commitment) while another form of commitment (indirect commitment) leads individuals to be influenced by the presence of people around them and by the dilution effect. Research has shown that perceiving one's own responsibility to act is an important factor in one's willingness to help the victim of an emergency (see Fischer et al., 2011; Latané & Nida, 1981 for review). Our study seems to confirm the importance of a sense of responsibility and that some forms of commitment have the property to create a high and persistent level of responsibility to help someone.

These two studies conducted in a field setting and examining the behavior of real bystanders have some practical interests for crime control and law enforcement. First, it could be useful to film such experiments and clearly show bystanders' behavior in order to make people aware that some external factors (i.e. passive bystanders) have a negative effect on intervention in crime situations. Second, such experiments and previous studies on the same topic confirm the role of previous commitment on people's willingness to intervene even in a crime situation. Thus, crime prevention campaigns could focus on the effect of using commitment to prevent some crimes (e.g. people asking their neighbors to

watch their house during a long absence) or to be aware of the deleterious effect regarding intervention created by the presence of passive bystanders.

Of course, these studies have some limitations. The confederates were not informed about the real objective of the studies and previous research on this topic. However, they may have unconsciously behaved differently, which in turn influenced participants' behavior. In both studies, the participants were male; even if previous research has not shown any difference brought by the participants' gender on reactions to a theft (Austin, 1979), the generalization of our results to female participants still remains in question. In both studies, only participants' reaction to the theft was examined. However, it would be worth investigating, in further studies, the cognitive and emotional responses to the experimental situation being manipulated. In our studies, only the participants' behavior when faced by a theft was evaluated; further studies could examine the effect of commitment and passive bystanders in other criminal situations (e.g. a fight between two individuals).

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