Piliavin et al. (1969): Subway Samaritans

Lesson 1.4.3 | Concepts and methods

1. Psychology and aims

Bystander apathy: failing to help someone in need. **Diffusion of responsibility:** each witness may feel less personal responsibility when others could act. A visible emergency with limited escape may differ from earlier laboratory emergencies that were only heard.

Investigate effects of victim condition/race, a helping model and observed group size on helping frequency and speed in a real setting.

2. Participants and setting

About 4,450 unsolicited New York subway passengers across 103 staged collapses, weekdays 11 a.m.-3 p.m., April-June 1968. Express journeys between 59th and 125th Streets lasted about 7.5 minutes. Cars averaged 43 passengers, about 8.5 in the critical area.

Four student teams each had a male victim, male model and two unobtrusive female observers. Victims were three White men and one Black man, aged 26-35; White models were 24-29.

3. Field experiment and procedure

Victim condition: apparently ill with a cane (65 trials), or smelling of alcohol with a bottle in a paper bag (38 trials). Race varied with actor; group size was observed, not set. DVs included help, latency, helper characteristics, movement and comments.

About 70 seconds after departure, the victim collapsed and remained on his back until helped. Clothing/position/collapse were kept similar. Models could help from the critical/adjacent area, early (about 70 seconds) or late (about 150 seconds after collapse), or have no scheduled intervention.

Observers recorded passengers, first response time, helpers, movement and remarks. If still needed, the model assisted before the next stop. Conditions were unequal and not perfectly alternated; a strike interrupted the study.

A trial receiving help, the number of helpers, spontaneous help and further help after a model are different measures.

Piliavin et al. (1969): Subway Samaritans

Lesson 1.4.3 | Evidence and interpretation

1. Spontaneous help before the model acted

Victim condition	Trials with help	Proportion
Cane	62 / 65	About 95%
Drunk	19 / 38	50%

Median response latency on **non-model trials**: cane 5 seconds; drunk 109 seconds. Nonresponses were coded as 400 seconds. These medians do not describe every model condition.

2. Helpers and modelling

About 90% of spontaneous first helpers were men, compared with about 60% of critical-area passengers. More than one person helped on about 60% of the 81 spontaneous-help trials. Same-race helping was more apparent with drunk victims, but that specific trend was not significant.

In the small drunk-condition model comparison, further help followed 9/9 early interventions versus 3/7 late interventions. Model location showed no reliable effect; few cane model trials were available.

3. Other responses and group size

Thirty-four passengers left the critical area across 21 trials. Moving away and comments were more common with delay and in drunk trials. Remarks concerned discomfort, uncertainty or perceived ability to lift the victim.

The expected slowing of help with larger groups did not appear here. Visible need and restricted escape may matter. Group size was not experimentally allocated; the finding does not disprove diffusion in all situations.

4. Arousal and cost-reward explanation

An emergency may create unpleasant arousal. Helping, obtaining help, moving away or reinterpreting the victim may reduce it. Helping can cost effort, embarrassment or risk but bring approval; not helping can preserve one's activity but bring guilt or criticism.

Conclusion: victim cues and context related to helping. The cost-reward account is a proposed explanation, not a set of mechanisms separately demonstrated by this experiment.

Piliavin et al. (1969): Subway Samaritans

Lesson 1.4.3 | Evaluation and connections

1. Strengths

Ecological validity: passengers encountered an apparently genuine emergency during ordinary travel.
Repeated trials: comparable staged collapses supported condition comparisons.
Mixed evidence: counts/times were complemented by movement and comments, enriching interpretation.

2. Limitations

Confounds: one Black versus three White victims confounded race with actor identity. Unequal cane/drunk trials and imperfect alternation weakened balance.
Uncontrolled groups: passenger composition varied; some could have appeared on more than one trial. Observed group size does not establish its causal effect.
Generalisation: a daytime New York express train with limited exit differs from an open street, remote emergency or other culture/time.

3. Ethics

Passengers did not give prior informed consent and were deceived into seeing a staged collapse. They might feel distress or attempt physical assistance. The moving train restricted withdrawal; the report does not describe full passenger debriefing.

Realistic field evidence has value, but realism does not cancel the obligation to assess welfare, consent, privacy and exit options. Public observation and a staged emergency pose different ethical burdens.

4. Debates and applications

Individual/situational: helper characteristics may matter alongside victim cues, model behaviour and the train setting. A victim's appearance is part of the helper's social situation.
Application: findings can inform discussion of visible need and perceived costs, but do not establish how every emergency should be handled.
Nature/nurture: more male first helpers does not establish an innate sex difference in helpfulness.

> Common error: "62 people helped cane victims." The 62 counts cane trials receiving spontaneous help; there could be multiple helpers in a trial.

Hint: Attach each statistic to its condition, time window and unit: trials, people, seconds or proportions.