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Trends. Social Cognition and Global Warming

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Beyond discourse on the validity of global warming and on putative causes of the discourse and--if ontologically valid--of global warming, one might entertain the social psychology of how people might address a global environmental threat. Psychological literature on the bystander effect seems pertinent.

Piliavin, et al.'s classic article (1969) outlined a model bearing on whether an individual would get involved or not in an emergency or crisis situation (ECS). Not getting involved in the presence of other individuals was typed the bystander effect. Piliavin, et al. posited that getting involved was dependent on emotional arousal that increased as an individual empathized more with real or potential victims, was physically close to the locus of the emergency or crisis, and as the ECS continued through time without abatement. The individual would then be faced with the need to decrease emotional arousal through getting involved or, unfortunately, leaving the ECS or believing that victims did not need help.

In a global warming scenario, leaving the ECS might be difficult--although those who discount a valid phenomenon may be doing exactly this. Believing that victims don't need help might be difficult if one believed oneself to be a victim. Or one might engage in some sort of magical thinking that spared oneself and loved ones to the exclusion of others. Other researchers have suggested that, as the ECS is perceived as less ambiguous, the probability of getting involved would increase. This probability would also increase as the individual's competency concerning the ECS increased.

Most psychological research on the bystander effect has involved a circumscribed ECS involving only a small number of people. The uncircumscribed nature of environmental threat theoretically affects everyone and might induce unique psychodynamics. Future bystander research with the latter parameters might prove very fruitful for human psychology and human existence--regardless of the validity of a specific phenomenon like global warming. (See Cramer, R.E., et al. (1998). Subject competence and minimization of the bystander effect. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 18, 1133-1148; Harrison, J.A., & Wells, R.B. (1991). Bystander effects on male helping behavior: Social comparison and diffusion of responsibility. *Representative Research in Social Psychology*, 19, 53-63; Piliavin, I.M., Rodin, J.A., & Piliavin, J. (1969). Good samaritanism: An underground phenomenon? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 13, 289-299; McComas, K., & Shanahan, J. (1999). Telling stories about global climate change: Measuring the impact of narratives on Issue cycles. *Communication Research*, 26, 30-57; O'Connor, R.E., Bord, R. J., & Fisher, A. (1998). Rating threat mitigators: Faith in experts, governments, and individuals themselves to create a safer world. *Risk Analysis*, 18, 547-556; Sundstrom, E., et al. (1996). Environmental psychology 1989-1994. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 47, 482-512.) (Keywords: Bystander Effect, Global Warming.)