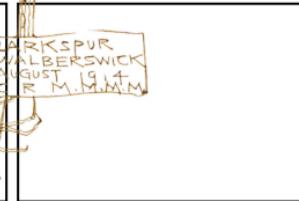


WHEN THE  
BYSTANDERS  
RISE





[www.whenthebystandersriseup.com](http://www.whenthebystandersriseup.com)

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Amsterdam, October 2025

These drawings are made by Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1929). He was an important figure in the Arts and Crafts movement. He's known from the *Glasgow Four*. He combines lines and stripes with movement from nature. I chose him for this theme because it reminds me of the paradoxes in society we face on a day-to-day basis.



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*A moral & biologic orientation in a complex society*

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*Be safe, secure and a hero*

*Choose your own intensity. Nothing is mandatory. Safety goes before ambition. Keep in mind that 'One visible sign can break pluralistic ignorance faster than ten thoughts.' In this booklet we will lower personal costs and raise the reward for small acts of courage. Last but not least: Preparation beats guilt afterwards. We practice scripts, not heroism. You are a hero already.*



## IN WHICH STORY DO YOU WANT TO WALK?

When I took the wrong bus during a trip in Scotland, I ended up in Balquhidder. Sixty miles from my actual destination.

Saturday morning 11am. At a teahouse. With a sign that read '*Some say the middle of nowhere. We say the centre of everything*'. And true it was. In the coziness of the house, with soft voices and sounds of cups, the world seemed gone. I thought about flipping my journey. The feeling in the area was both appealing and mysterious.

I stayed until the second bus of the day picked me up at 4 p.m. A short encounter. Yet, it reminded me once again how life guides us. Not only along our physical paths, but also through insights that suddenly spark. An everlasting loop appears, if only you choose to see it.

# WHEN WE BECOME UNSOLICITED WITNESSES

A few days later, on this same journey, I became an ‘unsolicited witness’ during a train ride. It wasn’t a harsh situation. But vivid enough to make me aware I was an observer in this country and not a participant. This event showed me again that we do have a choice. Always. Not in what happens to us, but in how we choose to act.

The topic of bystander behaviour in the 21st century raised my interest. For years I focused on pioneers and ‘light dots’ in organizations that I advised and guided. This new personal perspective deepened my compassion for bystanders.

In the months that followed I studied and read many articles on recent research. Exploring new approaches, interventions, thought experiments and inspirations that helped me take a fresh look at the bystanders theme. From a point of view that suits today’s life: with digital challenges, global conflicts, climate change and social ranking all around us.

Who are we in this overload of options? What role in this play do we choose? How can we cope with our choices: to be, at the end of the day, *secure, safe and a hero*. All at the same time.

*Annette Dölle*

## The Bystander phenomenon in science

Although the word 'bystander' exists for ages, the phenomenon itself is less than a century old. Behavioural scientists paid little attention to this specific 'role' in the field. All energy went to the predator and the victim. Since we have become more aware of systemic patterns in which all creatures are involved, the *bystander* has now become vividly seen.

*March 1964: A 28-year-old woman got murdered in New York. Editor Rosenthal heard the story from a policeman in shock because '37 eyewitnesses and nobody did something'. He assigned Gansberg to write an article for The 'Times' about it.*

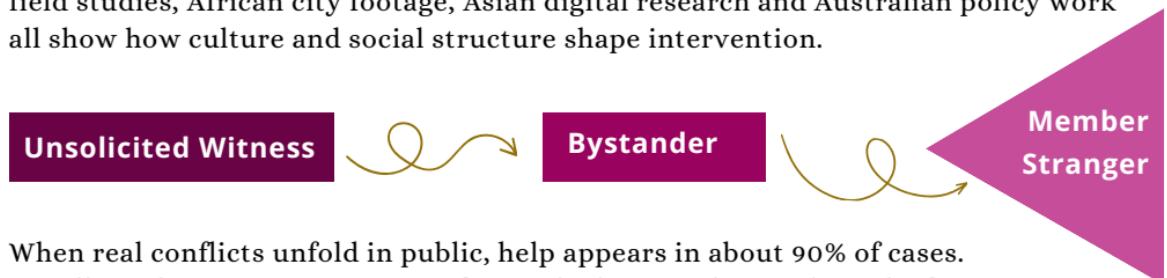
*The murder came to represent a profoundly disturbing sociological trend.*

- Latane & Darley (1968)
- Pilaiavin, Rodin & Pilaiavin: famous subway experiment (1969)
- Atkinson & Turner: The Observer effect ('69)
- Thomas & Foppa: Hilfeleistung und soziale Verantwortung ('68-'70)
- *As from 1970 everywhere in Europe and the US the 'Genovese case' was examined and discussed.*

The focus changed from a philosophy-moral theory into an experimental causaliteit. The question 'How could this happen?' raise awareness.

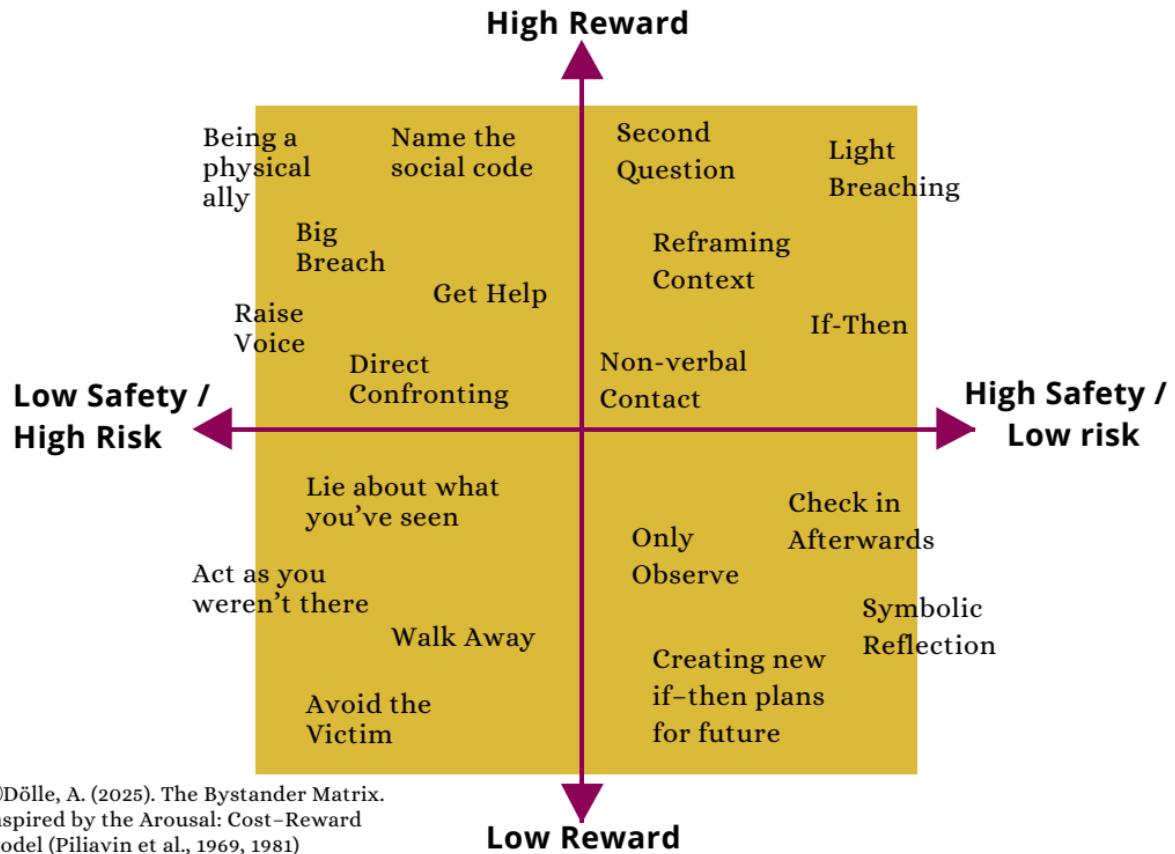
## Development towards the 21st Century

As society got more dynamic, our point of view of the bystanders' responsibility also began to raise: From not even being a role in the play, to a serious member of a systemic dynamic. The story of the bystander effect is no longer American. European field studies, African city footage, Asian digital research and Australian policy work all show how culture and social structure shape intervention.



When real conflicts unfold in public, help appears in about 90% of cases. Usually, at least one person steps forward. The more bystanders, the faster it happens. The truth is that everyday citizens are far more cooperative than early lab research suggested. Crowds aren't the problem, they're often the solution.

Also: Modern brain research shows that hesitation in crises isn't egoistic. It's biology! When people witness danger, their nervous system floods with stress before conscious reasoning even begins. *It's a reflex, not a moral defect.* This insight helps! We can train the body to respond, reduce paralysis. Courage is not about being fearless. It's about having practiced, so that your reflexes know your options.



©Dölle, A. (2025). The Bystander Matrix.  
Inspired by the Arousal: Cost–Reward  
Model (Piliavin et al., 1969, 1981)

## The Bystanders Matrix for micro interventions

The brain fog and anxious muscle tension that appear when we're put in a difficult social situation shut down all thinking. And also our reaction. Or at least the speed of a helpful intervention. I call this the '*unsolicited witness phase*'. It's an in-between phase in which there is still room to move: We do have an explicit choice, since we're an acknowledged space in the systemic field.

Research has shown that it helps when we are prepared for several options (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 1999). This matrix helps us to organise our senses in advance. It is inspired by the cost-reward model of Piliavin, with one distinct difference: I added micro-interventions to act upon, once somebody finds themselves in a bystander situation.

### How to use it

There are two axes. One represents *High Reward* versus *Low Reward*. The other, *Safety*. With this bridge, I bring several topics together. It creates a more explicit visual that combines interventions, cost-reward theory (Piliavin) and social breaching (Garfinkel). This is a new matrix of its kind. And above all: Subjective.

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©Dölle, A. (2025). The Bystander Matrix: Integrating Safety and Reward Dimensions in Micro-Interventions. Inspired by the Arousal: Cost–Reward Model (Piliavin et al., 1969, 1981) and Implementation Intentions Theory (Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 1999).

## High Reward/Low Safety

For moral pioneers. Or situations that are slightly safe. So speak up. Speak out. Show where you stand. Help the other. Be exposed, because you'll want to be on the right side of history. And smile in the mirror.

## High Reward/High Safety

A place to be. Just like in a social pioneering situation this quadrant is rewarding. With smart interventions you create safety, and experience it. Through breaching, if-then scripts and second questions the context changes.

## Low Reward/Low Safety

Here, moral ecology becomes fragile: people walk away, pretend not to see, or avoid the victim. It feels safe, but it erodes equality and connection. This behaviour doesn't create an equal and healthy society.

## Low Reward/High Safety

In this quadrant you are safe, but the interaction with victim and predator is unknown. Or minimal. There is no social follow-up. You reflect on your own afterwards. This is a deep learning process that helps you intervene next time.

## **The world of experiments and exercise**

Nothing is taught without practice. It's simply impossible to learn about life from only a book. One day you'll need to step into the world. This can be a meeting with nature, with her vivid energy and unconditional being. Or in a lively urban area. But for sure, there will also be other humans involved.

We share this planet with approximately 8 billion people. In the last 75 years our population grew from 2.4 billion to 8.2 billion. Our lifespan has increased from an average of 46,5 years old into 72.8 years old. Let's make it practical: There are a lot of us! And it doesn't look like this will change any time soon. So we'd better learn to live together!

### **How do we learn in public?**

Public learning is a field that's explored by multiple scientists. They cheer for a live long learning process, developing learning theories and set up Community of Practices. In these safe 'bubbles' people explore choices and interventions around their profession.

### **Breaching, If-then scripts, Second Question magic and Reflective Capital.**

Think of this as our own *Community of Practice* around bystander behaviour. All experiments and exercises help you to cope with transforming your being, when you feel yourself confronted within a complex social situation.

# BREACHING EXPERIMENT

Let me start by saying how much I love breaching experiments. To me, they are the most fun and safe ways of putting a lightbulb on our social codes. Codes that we are mostly unaware of and that are hard to discuss. At least, who wants to start a deep conversation about public transport behavior once you're on a bus? But creating light-hearted awareness without risking discussion is much easier!

When you're one of the people who thinks you've never experienced a breaching experiment, I can tell you: You have. We've all seen street theatre, 'free hugs' signs or guerrilla gardening in our neighborhood. These are all small breaching experiments: They disrupt the social code and burst into our brains. What will it create? Does it breach the system? Are people pulled out of their unaware rhythms. And the essence: Does it make us feel present and members of a situation?

## **A founding father who wanted to stay out of change**

Harold Garfinkel created these experiments as part of his ethnomethodology: All of our culture is created by minor behavioural codes that together build a society. He critiqued other scientists for ignoring the *situational nature of action*. But, even though he was an opponent of applying them as actors of change. Students reflected that with awareness change en social development appears naturally. But Garfinkel was against this. He said '*We only describe what we see, we do not change it. It's an attitude, not an instrument.*'

# LIGHT VERSION OF BREACH-BINGO

There are thousands of miniature rules. How we dress, move, or even behave inside organizations. Some are useful, others keep us imprisoned in unseen cages. *What can you breach in a bystander situation?* In a soft way, without harming yourself or others.

Experiment: On the cover of this booklet you'll find eight light breaching experiments to try out in daily life. They are meant to make you feel at home with this kind of behavior, and open up space for movement.

## Reflection:

- What rule did you break? What happened to you? And to others? Can you have a dialogue about it? This is all about self-observation and self-alignment
- This is a great way of creating awareness within a team or organization. You can do this during the week or on special occasions, as long as there is time to reflect upon it afterwards.

To respect the ethical and original way of conducting breaching experiments, there are two elements we have to keep in mind for our applied version in bystander situations:

1. *The complexity of codes:* social codes are deeply anchored. Sometimes even institutional and legal. Opening these codes can dislocate systems.
2. *Personal interpretation:* Breaching must be carried out carefully to make the disruption valuable.

# IF-THEN SCRIPTS

What if...? This is a tricky one. Because the last thing I want to do is worry you with thoughts and raise your fears. So, be aware. This is definitely *not* a manifestation exercise. Instead, it's a way to help our brain to stay calm when sh\*t hits the fan.

Research has shown that people act more accurately and faster when they know the moral script beforehand. This is how we train children in school: how to walk outside during breaks, or what to do when they are at a playground. But guess what, this also helps the adult brain (*Implementation intentions*, Gollwitzer, 1999, 2006).

## **How do we train unexpected situations?**

We all know this little voice inside our head. Hopefully it speaks to you about dreams and wishes. Or vacations and creative projects. Beautiful things to accomplish. This same voice can also help us in a healthy way to prepare for unexpected situations. The only difference? We stay emotionally out of the story.

*Staying out of the story:* We simply watch, but we don't enter the story. This means we leave our emotions and senses out of it. When you're daydreaming, you drift away. This is the opposite. We stay in the present. We don't let ourselves get carried away by feelings. We do visualize: In a very pragmatic way of looking at it. Once we've seen it, we let go.

## IF-THEN EXERCISE

With this exercise you'll walk through some fictional situations. You train the brain to create an '*if-then script*'. This balances and regulates your stress system.

1. Find personal potential triggers. For example: (online) meetings, coffee corner talk, awkward silences, shopping mall, family dinners.
2. Write on a card 3 situations: IF (trigger) → THEN (micro-action). What would you say or do? For example: '*If someone is rude, then I'll ask what they mean*'
3. Output: Put the card in your wallet as a cognitive reminder.
4. Potential pitfall: Making it too big. F.e.: '*If there's violence, then I'll save someone*'.

## THE SECOND QUESTION

When you first hear about *second questions* you logically wonder what happened to the first one. A *second questions* is a kind of metaphor for *the question that matters*. They are amazingly helpful. They help us to stay open and connected. Within the right amount of respect and care for the complex situation and victim. A direct intervention when tension or uncertainty is still palpable. The *second question* breaks the social script of superficiality. It's situational, immediate, regulating the moment. In other words: It's a real-time micro-breach that restores safety, recognition, and presence.

## THE SECOND QUESTION

This intervention can be either a *high reward- high safety or low safety* action. This means the action is totally *in* the moment. When you're helping at an accident this is the go-to behavior. When someone is bullied or harassed in your presence this is a way to *be an ally* and stand by the victim. It changes the complete course of the situation, when someone is truly seen in the deepest of his/her being and the situation.

**The effects are grand. It has both a neurological as a social effect:**

It disrupts the automatic freeze or social distancing response. It requires presence and attention. It has a regulating function: it brings the social order back to human scale.

- Would you like me to stay with you for a moment?
- Would you prefer that I say something, or would you rather not?
- Shall I call or get someone for you?
- Would it help if I paused the situation for a second?
- Would you like me to name what just happened, or leave it?
- Do you want me to step back, or stay around?
- Would it be useful if I check in with you later?
- Would it help if I made a bit of space for you?
- Is it alright if I signal that out loud?

# REFLECTIVE CAPITAL®

My exploration around *Reflective Capital* started in 2014. With a simple blog about winning when you share. I stated that *Reflection*, in the form of Capital (Coleman), is your greatest reward. In every situation: If you know how to reflect, you can't loose. I wrote about interventions to collect it. But it didn't click the way I wanted. It all felt too simplistic. Years went by. Sometimes I thought that the big achievements are utterly simple. So why complicate them? Finally, within this bystander theme I feel there's a place for the essence of *Reflective Capital*.

**Observe**



**Digest**



**Try**



**Read**



Ask *generative questions*. Many. As many you can find. A generative questions is answered differently by every person on this planet. It's open, personal, inspiring, curious and makes room for exploring. It's particularly inviting. A famous example is the 'wonder question' (from solution based therapy): '*When you wake up tomorrow and everything is perfect. What has changed?*'



On the WHW. After I took the wrong bus and arrived at the right Kingshouse.

## About Annette Dölle

I'm born on the whitest thursday in April, 1976. In Friesland, the Netherlands. My youth was a mixture of sports, play and music. I always wondered why people were eager to create a lineair lifetime: You can do all, and the order will unfold at the right time. This is exactly how most of my life has been.

I became a teacher, an actress, a drama therapist, a documentary maker (I utterly failed in that), a sociologist. And most of all: myself.

I'm happiest when I'm walking long distances or making music. When everything falls into place because life itself is carrying me. At least, that's how I feel.

In my core, I want people to see, think and feel for themselves. I perform in lectures, guidance sessions and open space events.



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Written & Designed by Annette Dölle  
Edited with the support of ChatGPT

Note: On the other side of this cover you'll find a *Breach Bingo*.  
Be inspired. Add your own insights and move your social world.

# WHEN THE BYSTANDERS RISE UP

*At the coffee corner:  
Give the person behind  
you a coffee*

Network: Ask someone what they need, not what they do.

On a train with plenty of space: Take a seat on an empty seat next to someone. What happens?

Network: Greet someone who you've never met as an old forgotten friend.

*Work: Someone takes something that isn't theirs. Try to intervene with an if-then script*

Street: Someone throws litter on the street. What do you do? Breaching: Pick it up for them.

[bingo]

Work: A colleague acts patronisingly towards an other colleague. Intervene with a light breaching moment

Supermarket: Let someone go in front of you.