

The Situational Samaritan: How group reputation threat shapes reparatory behavior

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Have you ever felt this?

You're on vacation abroad, enjoying a meal. At a nearby table, a group of tourists from your home country are being loud and disrespectful to the staff.

You're not involved, but you feel embarrassed. You might even feel a sudden urge to be extra polite, apologize, or leave a generous tip to show we're not all like that."

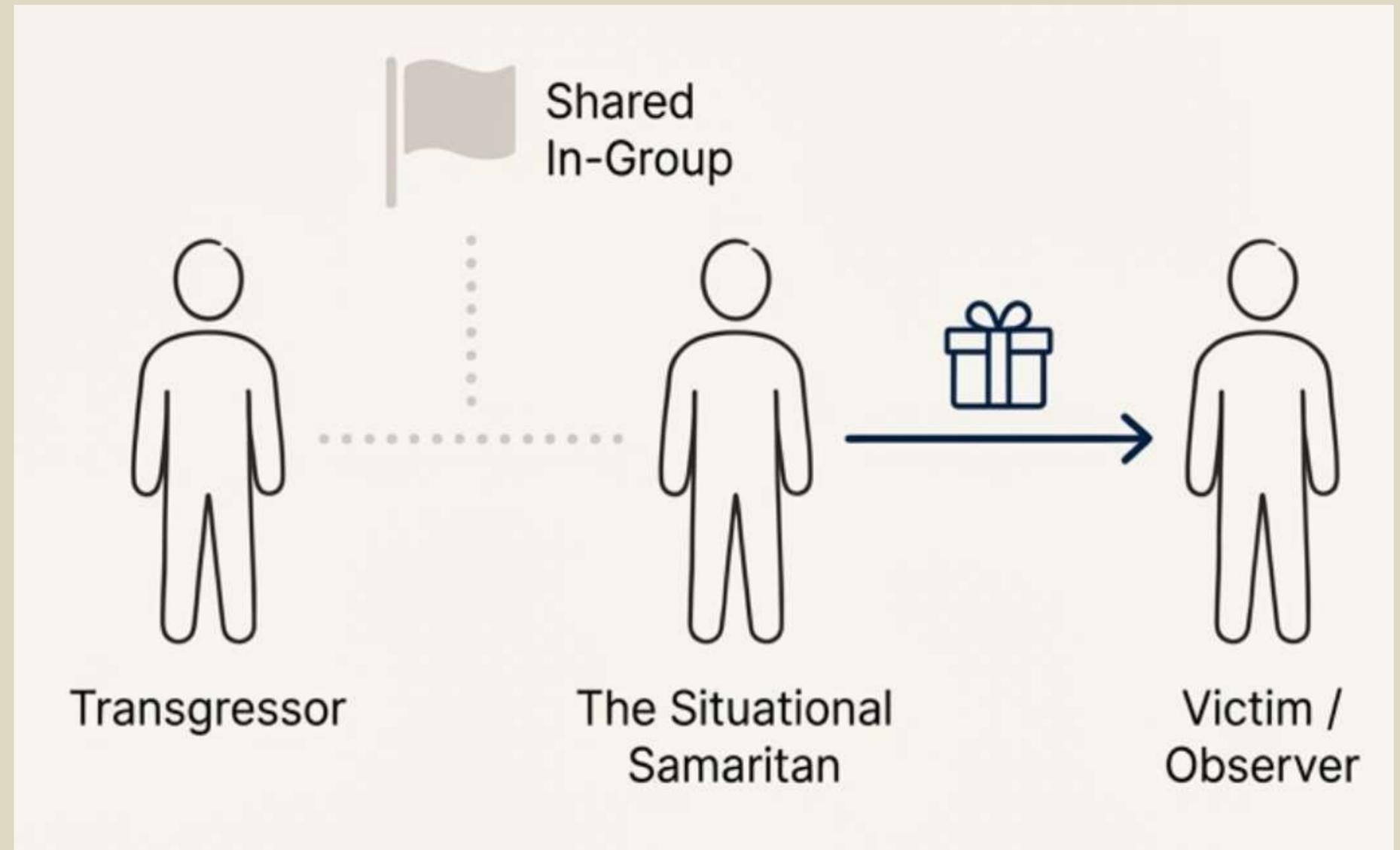
Why do we feel compelled to clean up the mess made by a total stranger?



This isn't a random feeling. It's the instinct of The Situational Samaritan.

This research reveals a powerful, predictable pattern in human behavior. We often act to correct the wrongdoings of strangers from our “in—group” - but only under very specific circumstances.

This response is driven by a powerful psychological trigger called **Group Reputation Threat**.



The Core Concept: Group Reputation Threat

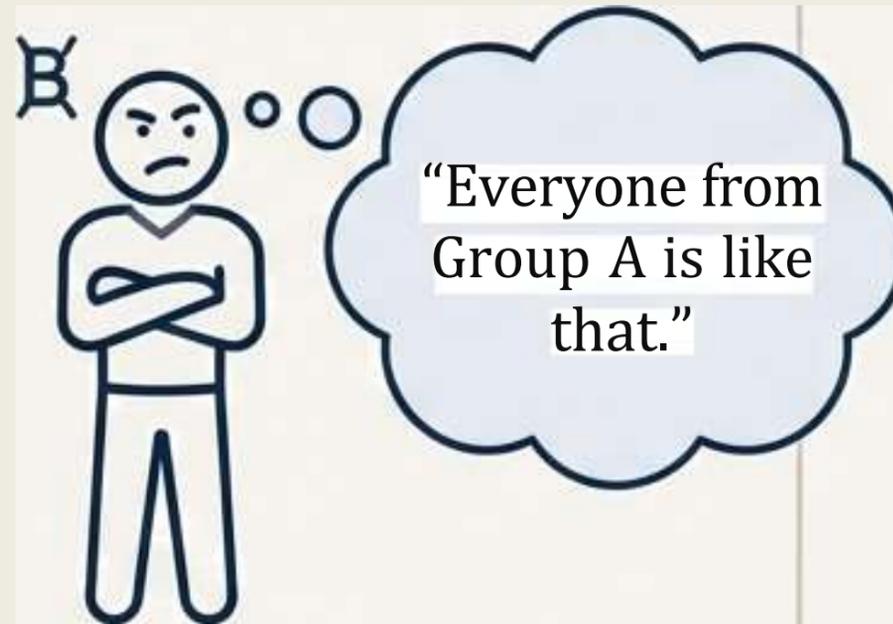
Group Reputation Threat is the fear that outside observers will negatively judge your *entire group* based on the bad actions of a single in-group member.

The Action



Bad Actor
(Group A)

The Observation



Out-Group Observer
(Group B)

The Threat



Bystander
(Group A)

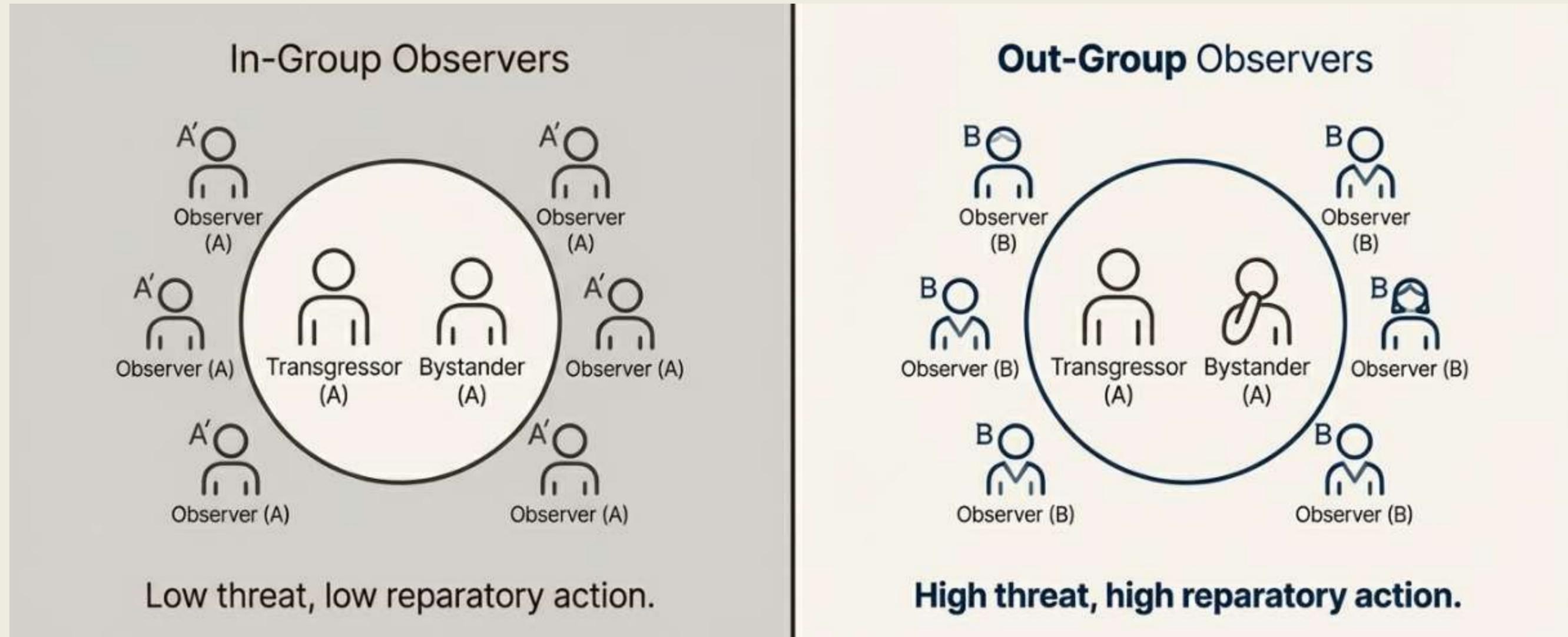


What are the precise ingredients that turn a bystander into a Samaritan?

- **The Conditions:** What specific situation must exist for us to feel this threat?
- **The Psychological Engine:** What happens in our minds to drive us to act?
- **The Boundaries:** When is this effect turned on or off?

An analysis of eight preregistered experiments reveals the formula.

The effect hinges on a single, critical factor: *Who is watching.*



The presence of an 'out-group' audience is the primary trigger for Group Reputation Threat.

The Psychological Engine: How Threat Becomes Action



Affective Response: Embarrassment

A bystander feels embarrassed *on behalf of their group*. This is a social emotion signaling concern for reputation.

Motivational Response: Desire to Differentiate

This embarrassment activates a goal to publicly signal that the transgressor is not representative of the group's true values.

This sequential process—embarrassment, then a desire to differentiate—is what mobilizes the Situational Samaritan.

The On/Off Switches: When the Samaritan instinct is muted.

The effect is powerful but not absolute. The research identified two key situations that significantly weaken or eliminate the need for an individual to take reparatory action.



No visible identity



Someone Else Steps Up

Why This Matters: From Psychological Insight to Strategic Application

Understanding the Situational Samaritan reveals that we are not just managers of our own image, but also caretakers of the identities we share.

For Understanding Consumers



- Prosocial behavior can be triggered by witnessing *negative* actions, not just positive ones.
- The social context—specifically the identity of the audience—is a powerful and often overlooked driver of consumer choice.
- Identity is a collective asset that consumers will pay to protect.

For Brand & Marketing Strategy



- Nonprofits can leverage group identity in campaigns (e.g., at university events, national holidays) where reputation concerns are salient.
- Subtle environmental cues that heighten group identity and social visibility can organically encourage prosocial actions like tipping or donating.
- Caution: Leveraging group embarrassment must be authentic; perceived manipulation can backfire.

Thank You

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