

The Murder of Kitty Genovese and the Bystander Effect

What would you do if you saw someone being attacked or someone in any other crisis situation? Would you choose to get involved?

On March 13, 1964, Catherine Susan “Kitty” Genovese, a 28-year-old woman, was returning home at 2:30 a.m. from her work as a bar manager, when she was brutally raped and repeatedly stabbed to death near her apartment building in Queens, New York. Winston Moseley, who was convicted and sentenced to death for Genovese’s murder, had been driving around that night, looking for a victim, when he spotted and followed her home. According to reports, the attack took place over the span of 30-minutes, with Moseley leaving for 10-minutes after one neighbor yelled at him from a window. At that time, Genovese was gravely injured but still alive; Moseley soon returned to kill her.

The day after the attack, on March 14th, the *New York Times* ran a short blurb titled “Queens Woman Is Stabbed to Death in Front of Home.” However, Genovese’s murder did not receive much attention until two weeks later when the *New York Times* published a second article titled “37 Who Saw Murder Didn’t Call Police,” claiming that dozens of neighbors heard her cries but failed to intervene. This article made national headlines, painting a haunting picture of societal apathy. While certainly a gruesome tragedy, it wasn’t Genovese’s murder itself, but rather the idea that so many witnesses stood idly by doing nothing to help that sparked public outrage and widespread discussion.

Subsequent investigations showed that the extent of neighbors’ inaction was grossly exaggerated by the article. However, one neighbor, Karl Ross, had seen Genovese lying on the ground, still alive and attempting to scream for help while Moseley stabbed her. Ross only called the police after another neighbor, Sophie Farrar, shouted at him to do so. Ross explained, “I didn’t want to get involved.” This justification became a defining feature of the “Bystander Effect.”

Kitty Genovese’s case spurred significant societal changes. It is credited with prompting the development of the national 911 emergency system in 1968 to streamline access to emergency services. Just as importantly, Genovese’s murder catalyzed groundbreaking social psychology research into human behavior: specifically how and why people tend to behave in a given situation. This led to the formulation of the theory of the bystander effect. Genovese’s tragic death has become a modern parable for the powerful effects of group dynamics on individual behavior.

Psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané identified the bystander effect phenomenon based on research that sought to understand why individuals, when in the presence of others, often

fail to extend help in emergencies. Their studies demonstrated that individuals are less likely to intervene when others are present than if they are alone. Darley and Latané determined that there are three main contributing factors for this behavior, including:

1. **Diffusion of Responsibility:** People assume that someone else will take action, thereby alleviating the sense of personal responsibility.
2. **Pluralistic Ignorance:** People look to others to gauge appropriate behavior and interpret others' inaction as a sign that intervention is unnecessary.
3. **Fear of Judgment:** People are concerned about making a mistake by overreacting and then feeling embarrassed in front of others.

According to Darley and Latané, an individual must mentally proceed through a five-step decision making process before potentially helping another person. First, they notice something is wrong. Second, they must define the situation as an emergency that may require assistance. Third, the observer must decide whether or not they are responsible for acting. Fourth, if they determine they should help, they must choose how to do so. Finally, they must implement their chosen course of action. Social influence fundamentally impacts people's decision making at each of these steps. At any of the decision points, failure to reach an affirmative decision results in a lack of engagement or action. Other research has shown that individuals' decision-making processes simultaneously include an assessment of the risks and rewards of getting involved. People rationalize their decision based on what action will have the best possible personal outcome, which can include personal growth, feeling good about oneself, or avoiding guilt caused by not helping.

This work has raised important ethical and societal questions about our moral responsibilities to others in our communities and highlights the importance of education to foster compassionate and courageous responses in moments of need. Knowledge of the bystander effect helps to address the psychological barriers to intervention so that individuals can be encouraged to take the initiative in moments of crisis to become proactive helpers rather than passive witnesses. It has also informed the development of policies and bystander intervention training aimed at overcoming these tendencies, such as the "See Something, Say Something" program. Intervention training has broad implications in many situations such as bullying in schools, misconduct in the workplace, and antisocial behavior in crowded subways.

Additionally, the Kitty Genovese case has led some jurisdictions to enact Duty-to-Rescue or Bad Samaritan laws, which impose legal consequences for failing to assist or report emergencies in certain situations. While most places do not require bystanders to intervene, these laws aim to encourage action by holding individuals accountable for choosing indifference in life-threatening situations.

Kitty Genovese's story endures as a powerful lesson on the consequences of apathy. Her legacy has inspired changes in emergency response systems and has deepened our understanding of the psychology that drives human behavior. It has led to the creation of bystander intervention education. Most importantly, it serves as a poignant reminder of the power of each person to get involved and make a difference when someone is in harm's way.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Who was Kitty Genovese, and how did what happened to her on the night of March 13, 1964 impact our understanding of group behavior?
2. Who were John Darley and Bibb Latané, and what was their contribution to our understanding of the bystander effect?
3. What are the three main psychological factors that contribute to the bystander effect?

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions:

4. Why might the presence of more people actually decrease the likelihood that someone will help in an emergency?
5. Do you think the bystander effect is still as relevant today, given the ease of calling for help with cell phones? Why or why not?
6. How can society encourage people to overcome the bystander effect and take action in emergencies?
7. Can you think of any modern examples where the bystander effect may have influenced people's reactions to emergencies?
8. Do you think laws should require bystanders to intervene in emergencies? Why or why not?
9. How might cultural or social norms affect the likelihood of people stepping in to help others?
10. What would you do if you witnessed a dangerous situation but weren't sure whether to intervene? How would you weigh the risks and rewards?

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