

LINE ON LIFE

2/28/99

Reducing Bystander Apathy *

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On May 25, 1997, in a Las Vegas casino, Jeremy Strohmeier molested and murdered 7-year-old Sherrice Iverson. His friend, David Cash, watched. Cash did not try to stop Strohmeier or call the police.



After this murder, many people wanted to draft laws to make people more responsible for crimes that they witness. They assumed that making witnesses legally responsible would make them intervene in these acts or at least report them to authorities. Are they right?

Lack of action when witnessing a crisis is not an isolated event. Over 30 years ago, Kitty Genovese was murdered in an attack that lasted 45 minutes. It was witnessed by 38 of her neighbors. No one helped. This spurred psychological studies about helping in a crisis.

In 1970, psychologists Latané and Darley published their study on "*bystander apathy*." They found that – in order to help in a crisis – any bystander has to answer five questions. If any one of these questions is answered negatively, help will not be given.

- 1. Do I notice something happening?** If the person is in a hurry or distracted by personal problems, they are less likely to notice what is happening around them.
- 2. Is the situation an emergency?** Is a person laying in a doorway a homeless person resting, a drunk, or a person who has collapsed from a heart attack? Most situations have a high degree of **ambiguity**. It is hard to tell what is happening.
- 3. Am I responsible?** Latané and Darley found that with more people around, there was a **diffusion of responsibility** – bystanders assume that others will act, so they are not personally responsible.
- 4. What can I do?** Often people are unsure of their abilities (training or skills) to help in a given situation. They may be concerned that they might make the situation worse.
- 5. Will I intervene?** Bystanders must weigh the costs or dangers of intervening. Will I be harmed? Will I be sued?

Bystanders must give positive answers to these five questions to intervene. If any question is answered, "No," help will not be given. However, we are more likely to help if we perceive the victim to be more like us — we tend to empathize with them more.

Although we may want to brand Cash (the witness in the Las Vegas murder) as "evil," many so-called "normal" people have witnessed violence against children and done nothing about it. In 1994, psychologists Christy and Voigt surveyed 300 people. Half had witnessed child abuse. However, only 26% of them intervened or reported it. In this study, the number of other bystanders was not a significant factor. Even as a lone bystander, the person was not more likely to intervene. However, there were some differences between those who helped and those who did not. The people who did intervene indicated that they had personal experience with abuse, felt more responsible, and knew what to do.

That is not to say that the personality of the bystander does not affect the likelihood of helping. Individuals who are less likely to help tend to have certain personality traits. They are more likely to have the trait of **egoism** – exclusive concern with their own welfare. Another trait is **hedonism** – desiring to maximize their own pleasure and minimize personal pain. Inactive bystanders also lack **empathy** – the ability to understand how others feel, to see the world from their viewpoint.

Rather than being simple, the decision to help someone is a relatively complex one. It involves the interaction of many factors. It is unlikely that laws would help. They would only effect one of the many factors by making bystanders legally responsible. Laws cannot eliminate all the other factors that are critical in making the decision to help. When interviewed, Cash said he hasn't "lost any sleep over Sherrice's killing." If anything, he revealed that the notoriety of his situation has helped him get dates. Do you think any law could make a person like Cash change?

It takes much more than laws to promote helping behavior.

Instead of merely trying to legislate helping behavior, the problem needs to be attacked from many directions.

- We need to expose people, especially young people, to helpful role models. This can be done through our schools and the media. We need to promote social norms that encourage altruism.
- We must provide people with the necessary knowledge, skills, and training to provide help.

- We should encourage those who need help to ask for it. This would reduce the ambiguity of the situation. Because our culture places such a high value on independence and self-reliance, many of us find it difficult to ask for help.
- Parents need to be just as concerned about teaching their children empathy and compassion as teaching reading, writing and mathematics.
- However, some law changes would be helpful. People can be protected from so called "*good Samaritan*" lawsuits.

To sum it all up, to effectively reduce bystander apathy, it is wiser to educate rather than just legislate. Making the world a better place to live begins with you and those close to you. Are you ready to start that change?

* Adapted from Patricia A. Oswald's "When Bystanders Just Stand By: Are 'Good Samaritan' Laws the Answer?" (February, 1999) This article is on the **Psychstudy** web page of Wadsworth Publishers.