

A LINE ON LIFE

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Don't Be a Bystander *

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After escaping from the Nazis in Germany and Communist rule in Hungary, Ervin Staub came to the United States, where he earned his doctorate in psychology. As a Jewish victim of repeated persecution, Staub's scientific interest was captured by the role of the **bystander** in helping or hindering evil acts. The bystanders could be nations observing the killing in Sarajevo, policemen observing the beating of Rodney King, or everyday citizens passing a person clearly in need of help. How do bystanders effect these situations?

Staub's most quoted study was mentioned in one of my previous articles, "Helping and the Holidays." Seminary students were asked to give a sermon on the Good Samaritan at a nearby chapel. They all passed a man (Staub's confederate) lying in a doorway, moaning for help. Of those who believed they were early for the sermon, 63% offered help, but only 10% of the late seminary students did so.

In trying to find out what would make people more likely to come to the aid of another person, Staub put pairs of volunteers into a room to do a writing task. Actually, one member of each pair was Staub's accomplice. Halfway through the task, a loud crash and groans (actually tape recorded) came from the next room.

In one condition, the confederate said, "*That probably has nothing to do with us.*" Only 25% of the naive subjects checked to find out what was happening in the next room. However, in the other condition, the confederate declared, "*That sounds pretty bad – I'll go get the experimenter and maybe you should check what's happening next door.*" In this second situation, *all* of the naive subjects checked out the adjacent room.

Essentially this indicates that inaction by a bystander is often seen as unspoken acceptance of the situation. Staub thought this was true in the Los Angeles Police Department before the Rodney King beating. As long as supervisors do not say anything about excessive violence, it is taken as implied approval – which encourages more violence. Staub thinks that the mindset of the officers can be changed – so even as bystanders – they will consider themselves responsible for what their fellow officers do. Rather than undermining loyalty to each other, it can change the meaning of that loyalty to "*stopping excess violence rather than hiding behind a code of silence.*" Even before violence starts, steps can be taken to avoid negative stereotypes, which tend to justify the use of excessive force. If the potential victim is viewed as a human being like yourself, violence is less likely to occur.

Passive bystanders encourage aggressors, demoralize victims, and support situations where they can become future victims.

More recently, Staub decided to study larger atrocities, from the Nazi Holocaust to the wholesale massacre of enemies of the right-wing government of Argentina. (His work is summarized in his book, *The Roots of Evil*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.) These horrors do not happen all at once, but they occur in small increments. For example, the Holocaust began with laws forbidding Jews to hold public positions. Here is where the bystanders can be influential. In Staub's words:

"If bystanders – people who are neither perpetrators nor victims – object firmly at this point, it can slow or even stop the whole process. But if no one objects, it emboldens the transgressors."

Not only does doing nothing give implied approval to the aggressor, it also affects the bystanders in subtle ways.

"If you empathize with the victim, but do nothing, you feel guilty. So there is a tendency to diminish the seriousness of the harm in your own mind, or to distance yourself from the victim. One way this happens is through the assumption that people who are suffering must somehow deserve it. Without quite realizing it, you can join the perpetrator in devaluing the victim."

The inaction of bystanders also demoralizes the victim.

"When the rest of the world did nothing to help the Jews in Germany, Jews felt abandoned. When you feel helpless and alone, you are less likely to resist. But in Belgium, where the population resisted Germany in its persecution of Jews, Jews themselves did much more on their behalf."

"Actions by bystanders – even simply protesting what is being done – empowers the victims, while passivity adds to their suffering.... People don't realize the power they have as bystanders to make a difference."

* Adapted from Daniel Goleman's "Studying the Pivotal Role of Bystanders," *The New York Times*, June 22, 1993, Reprinted in *Themes of the Times*, Prentice Hall, 1993, page 12.