

Diffusion of responsibility



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The diffusion of responsibility could be referred to as the unwillingness of a bystander to take responsible personal intervention measure either consciously or unconsciously. It is also referred to as the tendency of an individual in a group to fail to take the required action on assumption that somebody else would do what is required. Sometimes diffusion of responsibility is linked to bystander effect or a situation where people stand by and look as things go wrong but none of them is volunteering to act. This research paper will discuss in depth about the social psychological concept of diffusion of responsibility and will also give classic high profile cases where the situation was observed.

There are different situations when this social phenomenon can arise a good example is when an incident happens due to the failure of those present to swing into action to stop it thinking that somebody else would do so. It can also arise in a situation where people working in a group lack motivation to work harder and develop an attitude that they are not responsible for their actions (Hewstone and Manstead, 1997). These people do not act when things go wrong and simply hide themselves in the group feeling secure they cannot be recognized in fact this is what is also referred to as social loafing. The situation has also been said to arise in hierarchical organizations where those in charge claim that their work is only to issue directives while those at the bottom argue that they are only following instructions. In this case, bad things can happen in the process but because they are not happening in ones field no one would volunteer to check the wrong that has occurred.

(Gilbert et al, 295) Pro-socially developed people are expected to be nurturing and caring in nature and thus it is baffling to see people failing to

respond to situations where others are in difficulties. According to Berkowitz (1939), awareness of others standing by inhibits an individual to take intervention measure and he goes on to add that this situation only occurs in non emergency situations where the feelings of responsibility are minimal but according to Schwartz and Gottlieb (1976) pure diffusion of responsibility can only occur when bystanders are not aware of how others would respond to a situation. As per Darley and Latane, even if a situation is considered an emergency, presence of others may inhibit one to act. " If others are available, each individual may feel less personal obligation to come forward and help" (Gilbert et al, 1968).

Mentality that other people are there and that they are doing what is required deters people to move into action. A good example where diffusion of responsibility was properly manifested was in the murder of Catherine Kitty Genovese. According to Silk (2006), the murder of Kitty Genovese took place on 13th march in 1964 at around 3: 20 AM. The incident took place when she was returning home at Queens, New York from her work, bar manager.

She reached home safely, parked the car outside but as she headed to her apartment she was grabbed by a man who was later identified as Winston Moseley and she screamed. The scream was loud enough to be heard in the neighborhood in fact those in the tenth floor heard this and lit their lights and opened their windows. They knew too well that she was in danger and needed their help because she made it very clear that somebody had stabbed her, " Oh my God, he stabbed me! Please help! " One resident heard that and ordered the attacker to leave the girl alone and he left but instead

of people going to help her they closed their windows and switched off the lights. Unfortunately as Miss Genovese struggled to get to her feet, the attacker reappeared and stabbed her again and she screamed again and lights were lit again. This time the attacker was scared because he jumped in his vehicle and drove off but instead of the residents going to save the woman for the second time they went back to their businesses. They assumed the attacker had left but was only pretending to have left.

He returned and rendered the third and the fatal stab that left Genovese dead. One resident alerted the police at 3: 50, that is thirty minutes after the first incident and the police responded within the next two minutes only to find the woman dead. According to the neighbors, none was willing to call the police and even the police were called by one of her neighbors after he consulted from his friend whether it was okay to do so (Silk, 2006). If only somebody had taken the responsibility to act in time, the lady would not have died because the attacker would not have stabbed again also if they called the police for help; the attacker would have been apprehended because within two minutes after they alerted the police they had already responded. May be those in the tenth apartments thought that those in the bottom apartments would go to help and those at the lower apartments thought that anybody would go to save her because the scream was loud enough to wake everybody.

Again the feelings that one would be held responsible if they went to help or called the police deterred many to act responsibly because this is what one resident said, " I did not want to be involved" (Silk, 2006). Another case where diffusion of responsibility was witnessed was in the case of Puerto

Rican Central Park Rampage in New York where young black and Latino men descended upon white women who were enjoying themselves. They molested, doused and stripped them naked. These men went on rampage at about 2: 00 PM and continued up to about 6: 30 but the funny thing was that this was happening while more than a thousand police officers were in sight and public members were there (Saletan, 2000). Though police failed to respond, the members of the public also stood aside and watched the women being assaulted by this gang. None of these members took the lead to save them.

Both the police officers and the public later started pointed accusation finger on the other citing a different reason for their failure to act. " Each side accused the other of its professed principle as a front for racism" (Saletan, 2000). The Latino men and blacks claim they were being oppressed but the reason why their anger took ethnic dimension is yet to be established. Many argued that it was the responsibility of the visitors to take care of themselves in fact, one police shrugged off one sexually assaulted woman who went to report an assault case that his family would never attend such an activity. Had either side acted responsibly to intervene, this ugly incident would never have resulted. The unwillingness of both sides to stop the gang from attacking women gave the attackers the courage to continue with whatever they were doing and that was how this came to last for hours a thing that would have been controlled within minutes.

Diffusion of responsibility is defined by many as the failure of an individual within a group to act responsibly in situations where they are required to do so and a case in point where this situation arose was when Genovese

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neighbors failed to act to save her life leading to her death. Everybody in the apartment thought that the other would go to help but finally none of them responded giving the attacker a chance to execute his mission in no hurry. The same was witnessed in the case of Puerto Rican Parade in New York where a group of young men attacked white women who were having their party. This was happening in full sight of both the police and the public but neither side took the initiative to intervene. Each thought it is the responsibility of the other to stop the gang and this is what led these women to suffer for hours.

The mentality that there are others who are taking action and thinking that one is not responsible is what mostly leads to these situations.