

The psychological context of bystanders apathy

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The Psychological Context of Bystander's Apathy The case of Kitty Genovese was a sensational event which had become a of much discussion in the field of Psychology in recent times. What made it a subject of much debate and analysis was the controversial report about the murder of the woman.

Catherine Susan "Kitty" Genovese was brutally murdered by Winston Moseley while on her way from her parked car to her apartment in a cold 3:15 AM of March 13 1964. About 38 bystanders were believed to witness the event but one had shouted on the attacker and another one called the police while the rest witnessed the event from their windows without doing anything.

The major point of the discussions was the behavior the witnesses showed during such terrible incident. But questions arise in the psychological context as to how these witnesses perceived the scenes (the cognitive aspect), what are their behaviors in response to what they saw (behaviorist point of view), and what was the reasons for such behaviors (the psychodynamics).

In the cognitive viewpoint Hofstetter (1997) mentioned that the reaction of human beings on a certain event is based on perception, thought, and memory. In this case the witnesses were looking at the event individually and each one just saw a portion of the event. Judgment on what was currently seen would be based on past events or similar and relevant events. This means that the reaction was based on what had been learned from the past. Since most of the witnesses did not actually saw the brutal part of stabbing, or as one witness analyzed was hitting, they considered it a kind of lover's quarrel that has no cause for alarm. Only the witnesses that saw the harsh part reacted by shouting and calling the police. The reaction was based on available information and not a show of unconcern.

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In a psychodynamic point, granting the witnesses really perceived the event unfolding in their eyes was a murder, whether they saw it in part or in whole, the reaction was a result of the feelings not to be involved. Getting involved in such an event would complicate things and therefore being silent means getting away from any responsibilities and burden. There are emotional connections with the decisions not to be involved. It can be fear, anxiety, fatigue, or other factors. This type of bystander's reactions to a situation differs when they are in a group than when they saw it individually (Silk, 2005)

In behaviorist point of view man is no more than a machine that act in response to conditioning (DeMar, 2007). The reaction of the bystanders on this case was considered a natural behavior for an individual. His motivation to act further as necessary is affected by other factors such as experience, emotions, and other psychological factors as the driving force. Their behaviors were partly conditioned by the way of life their urban community had taught them.

Silk, Kristine (2005). Why Did Kitty Genovese Die?. Retrieved on October 22, 2007 from <http://www.objectivistcenter.org/showcontent.aspx?ct=25&h=53>

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