

## **In Groups, We Shrink From Loner's Heroics**

*March, 1991*

*Some of the most disturbing stories in the news are about crowds of people who see someone being hurt or even killed and who do nothing. "What's wrong with those people?" we may ask. But as this article shows, the fault lies as much with the situation as with the people. Do you remember watching the famous videotape of Rodney King being beaten by four police officers? If so, do you also remember seeing the other officers who were watching the beating, but who did nothing? After you finish this article, ask yourself what you would do if you and your friends saw someone being chased and beaten by someone on the street. Would you be able to resist the "diffusion of responsibility?" See chapter 17 for a related discussion in your text.*

The ghost of Kitty Genovese would sympathize with Rodney King. Genovese became the symbol of bystander apathy in America when, screaming for help, she was stabbed repeatedly and killed in front of her New York apartment building. Not one of the 38 neighbors who heard her, including those who came to their windows to watch, even called the police. People were horrified by this story, but it is repeated often. In fact, one of the things many people find appalling in the videotape of Rodney King's assault is the image of at least 11 police officers watching four of their colleagues administer the savage beating and doing nothing to intervene. Whatever is the matter with them, we wonder?

The answer from social science is: Nothing. It is normal for people in groups to think and act differently than they would on their own. Most people, if they observe some disaster or danger on their own--a woman being stabbed, a pedestrian slammed by a hit-and-run driver--will at least call for help. Many will even risk their own safety to intervene. But if they are in a group observing the same danger, they hold back. The reason is not necessarily that they are lazy, cowardly, or have other personality deficiencies; it has more to do with the nature of groups than with the nature of individuals.

In one experiment, for instance, students were seated in a room, either alone or in groups of three, as a staged emergency occurred: smoke began pouring through the vents. Students who were on their own usually hesitated a minute, got up, checked the vents, and then went out to report what seemed like fire. But the students who were sitting in groups of three did not move. They sat there for six minutes, with smoke so thick they could barely see, rubbing their eyes and coughing.

In another experiment, psychologists staged a situation in which people overheard a crash, a scream, and a woman moaning that her ankle was broken. Fully 70 percent of those who were alone when the accident occurred went to her aid, compared to only 40 percent of those who heard her in the presence of another person.

For victims, obviously, there is no safety in numbers. Why? One reason is that if other people aren't doing anything, the individual assumes that nothing needs to be done. In the smoke-filled room study, the students in groups said they thought the smoke was caused by "steam pipes," "truth gas," or "leaks in the air conditioning"; not one said what the students on their own did: "I thought it was fire." In the lady-in-distress study, those who failed to help offered these reasons: "I thought she had a mild sprain;" "I didn't want to embarrass her."

Often, observers think nothing needs to be done because someone else has already taken care of it, and the more observers there are, the less likely any one person is to call for help. In Albuquerque, N.M., 30 people watched for an hour and a half as a building burned to the ground before they realized that no one had called the fire department. Psychologists call this process "diffusion of responsibility" or "social loafing:" The more people in a group, the lazier each individual in it becomes.

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But there was no mistaking what those officers were doing to Rodney King. There was no way for those observers to discount the severity of the beating King was getting. What kept them silent?

One explanation, of course, is that they approved. They may have identified with the abusers, vicariously participating in a beating they rationalized as justified. The widespread racism in the LAPD and the unprovoked abuse of black people is now undeniable. A friend of mine who runs a trucking company told me recently that one of her drivers, a 50-year-old black man, is routinely pulled over by Los Angeles cops for the flimsiest of reasons, "and made to lie down on the street like a dog." None of her white drivers has been treated this way.

Or the observers may have hated what was happening and been caught in the oldest of human dilemmas: do the moral thing, and be disliked, humiliated, embarrassed and rejected. Our nation, for all its celebration of the Lone Ranger and the independent pioneer, does not really value the individual--at least, not when the person is behaving individually and standing up to the group. Countless studies have shown that people will go along rather than risk the embarrassment of being disobedient, rude, or disloyal.

And so the banality of evil is once again confirmed. Most people do not behave badly because they are inherently bad. They behave badly because they aren't paying attention, or they leave it to Harry, or they don't want to rock the boat, or they don't want to embarrass themselves or others if they're wrong.

Every time the news reports another story of a group that has behaved mindlessly, violently, and stupidly, including the inevitable members who are just going along, many people shake their heads in shock and anger at the failings of "human nature." But the findings of behavioral research can direct us instead to appreciate the conditions under which individuals in groups will behave morally or not. Once we know the conditions, we can begin to prescribe antidotes. By understanding the impulse to diffuse responsibility, perhaps as individuals we will be more likely to act. By understanding the social pressures that reward groupthink, loyalty, and obedience, we can foster those that reward whistleblowing and moral courage. And, as a society, we can reinforce the belief that they also sin who only stand and watch.