Unit 5 : The Psychology of Bystanders and Perpetrators

Today, we will ask the question: **What factors and thinking processes lead people (both groups and individuals) to either perpetrate injustice or allow it to happen?**

With your partner(s), you will read your section(s) of the assigned articles and answer the following questions on the paper provided about these eight concepts from psychology.

1) Read your portions of the articles, and highlight elements of your topic(s) that seem most important to this concept.
2) Write the "name" of the factor (from the list below) on the top of the page in large print.
3) Describe this factor--define it in your own words.
4) Why do you think this factor motivates some people to perpetrate or to become a bystander to injustice?
5) Is there a connection to *Kite Runner* or *Schindler's List*? Connection to other historical events?
6) Create a visual image or symbol that illustrates this factor

PART 1 :
Difficult life conditions and Basic human needs (293-294)

PART 2 :
Existing group conflict (bottom 294-295)
Devaluing of another culture (295-296)

PART 3 :
Respect for authority/ Obedience (296)
Living in a monolithic culture: (296-297)

PART 4 :
Believing in cultural superiority (297-298)

PART 5 :
Scapegoating to satisfy basic needs (299, Burton 1)

PART 6 :
Diffusion of Responsibility (Burkley article 2-4, 260)

STEP TWO : APPLY THE TERMS

→ Pick a perpetrator or bystander from brainstorm list from Monday - from film or book.

→ Walk through the gallery of psychological motivators that we just created. Consider what motivators are most affecting your chosen person.

→ Create a flow chart showing...

1. Who is it? What text?
2. What does the person do? Threaten to do? Not do? (page number)
3. What factors and beliefs motivate this decision?
4. What is the outcome?

on difficult life conditions as the primary activator of basic needs, which demand fulfillment. Conflict between groups is another activator. The pattern of predisposing cultural characteristics intensifies the basic needs and inclines the group toward fulfilling them in ways that turn the group against others. As they begin to harm the victim group, the perpetrators learn by and change as a result of their own actions, in ways that make the increasing mistreatment of the victims possible and probable. The perpetrators come to see their actions as necessary and even right. Bystanders have potential influence to inhibit the evolution of increasing destructiveness. However, they usually remain passive and themselves change as a result of their passivity, becoming less concerned about the fate of the victims, some of them joining the perpetrators.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERPETRATORS

Violence against a subgroup of society is the outcome of a societal process. It requires analysis at the level of both individuals and society. Analysis of the group processes of perpetrators, an intermediate level, is also important.

Instigators of Group Violence

Difficult Life Conditions and Basic Human Needs. Why does a government or a dominant group turn against a subgroup of society? Usually difficult life conditions, persistent life problems in a society, are an important starting point. They include economic problems such as extreme inflation, or depression and unemployment, political conflict and violence, war, a decline in the power, prestige, and importance of a nation, usually with attendant economic and political problems, and the chaos and social disorganization these often entail.

Severe, persistent difficulties of life frustrate powerful needs, basic human needs that demand fulfillment. Certain "predisposing" characteristics of the culture and social organization tend to further intensify these needs (Staub, 1989a, 1996, 1999b). These include needs for security, for a positive identity, for effectiveness and control over important events in one's life, for positive connections to other people, and for a meaningful understanding of the world or comprehension of reality. Psychological processes in individuals and social processes in groups can arise that turn the group against others as they offer destructive fulfillment of these needs.

Germany was faced with serious life problems after World War I. The war and defeat were followed by a revolution, a change in the political system, hyperinflation, the occupation of the Ruhr by the French, who were dissatisfied with the rate of reparation payments, severe economic depression, conflict between political extremes, political violence, social chaos, and disorganization. The intense conflict between political extremes and

the collapse of traditional social mores were both manifestations and further causes of life problems (Craig, 1982; A. DeJong, 1978). Intense life problems also existed in Turkey, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Argentina (Staub, 1989a, 1999a). For example, in Argentina, severe inflation, political instability, and repression, followed by wide-scale political violence, preceded the policy of disappearances: the kidnapping and torture of tens of thousands of people and the killing of at least 9,000 but perhaps as many as 30,000 people (Nunca Mas, 1986).

The inability to protect oneself and one's family and the inability to control the circumstances of one's life greatly threaten security. They also deeply threaten identity or the psychological self – self-concept, values, beliefs, and ways of life – as well as the need for effectiveness and control. The need for comprehension of reality (Epstein, 1980; Janoff-Bulman, 1985, 1992; Staub, 1989a), and a conception of the world, one's place in it, and how to live is frustrated as the social chaos and disorganization render the existing views of reality inadequate. The need for connection to other people and the group is frustrated at a time when people need it most, by the competition for resources and self-focus that difficult life conditions foster. Finally, people need hope in a better future. These psychological needs join material ones, such as the need for food and physical safety, and rival them in intensity and importance. Since the capacity to control or address life problems and to satisfy material needs is limited, the psychological needs become predominant in guiding action (Staub, 1989a, 1996, 1999b).

The motivations just described can be satisfied by joining others in a shared effort to solve life problems. But constructive solutions to a breakdown in the functioning of society are difficult to find and take time to implement. Certain cultural-societal characteristics, present in most societies but to greatly varying extents, add to the likelihood that these needs will be fulfilled in ways that turn the group against another group. They create a predisposition for group violence.

In Germany a two-step process led to the genocide. The difficult life conditions gave rise to psychological and social processes, such as scapegoating and destructive ideologies, which are described later. Such processes do not directly lead to genocide. However, they turn one group against another. In Germany, they brought an ideological movement to power and led to the beginning of an evolution, or steps along the continuum of destruction, also described later. Life conditions improved, but guided by ideology, the social processes and acts of harm-doing they gave rise to continued to intensify. In the midst of another great social upheaval, created by Germany, namely, World War II, they led to genocide.

Group Conflict. Another instigator that frustrates basic needs and gives rise to psychological conditions in individuals and social processes in

groups that may lead to genocide is conflict between groups. The conflict may revolve around essential interests, such as territory needed for living space. Even in this case, however, psychological elements tend to make the conflict intractable, such as attachment by groups to a particular territory, unhealed wounds in the group, or prior devaluation and mistrust of the other.

Or the conflict may be between superordinate or dominant groups and subordinate groups with limited rights and limited access to resources. Such conflicts deeply affect the needs for security and positive identity, as well as other basic needs. They have often been the originators of mass killing or genocide since World War II (Fein, 1993). When group conflict turns into war and the other predisposing conditions are present, mass killing or genocide becomes especially likely (Harff, Gurr, & Unger, 1999). In Rwanda, preceding the genocide by Hutus of Tutsis in 1994, there were both difficult life conditions and conflict between groups, a combination that is an especially intense instigator. Starting in 1990, there was also the beginning of a civil war (des Forges, 1999; Staub, 1999a).

Cultural-Societal Characteristics

Cultural Devaluation. The differentiation between in-group and out-group, us and them, tends by itself to give rise to a favoring of the in-group and relative devaluation of the out-group and discrimination against its members (Brewer, 1978; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel, Flamant, Billig, & Bundy, 1971). Devaluation of individuals and groups, whatever its source, makes it easier to harm them (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Duster, 1971).

A history of devaluation of a group, negative stereotypes, and negative images in the products of the culture, its literature, art, and media, "preselect" this group as a potential scapegoat and enemy (Staub, 1989a). In Germany, there had been a long history of anti-Semitism, with periods of intense mistreatment of Jews (Dimont, 1962; Girard, 1980). In addition to early Christian theological anti-Semitism (Girard, 1980), the intense anti-Semitism of Luther (Hilberg, 1961; Luther, 1955–1975), who described Jews in language similar to that later used by Hitler, was an important influence. Centuries of discrimination and persecution further enhanced anti-Semitism and made it an aspect of German culture. Even though at the end of World War I German Jews were relatively assimilated, anti-Semitism in the *deep structure* of German culture provided a cultural blueprint, a constant potential, for renewed antagonism against them. In Turkey, deep-seated cultural devaluation of and discrimination against Armenians had existed for centuries. In Rwanda, there was intense hostility by Hutus toward Tutsis, as a result of prior dominance by Tutsis.

At times devaluation of the potential victims is the result of a newly emerging ideology that designates a group as the enemy. The ideology usually draws on existing differentiations and divisions in society. For example, in Cambodia, there had been a long-standing rift between the city, inhabited by those who ruled, the officialdom, the aristocracy, and the educated, and the country, with its peasant population (Chandler, 1983; Etcheson, 1984). The Khmer Rouge ideology drew on this division, defining all city dwellers as actual or potential enemies (Staub, 1989a).

This is a probabilistic conception, with different elements enhancing or diminishing the likelihood of one group turning against another. Not all probabilities become actualities. For example, intense anti-Semitism had existed at least in parts of Russia before the revolution of 1917. While it was perhaps not as embedded in the deep structure of the culture as in Germany, it did create the potential for Jews to become scapegoats or ideological enemies. Deep divisions had also existed between rulers and privileged members of society, on the one hand, and the peasants and workers, on the other. The ideology that guided the leaders of the revolution led them to focus on this latter division.

Respect for Authority. Overly strong respect for authority, with a predominant tendency to obey authority, is another important cultural characteristic. It leads people to turn to authorities, old or new, for guidance in difficult times (Fromm, 1965). It leads them to accept the authorities' definition of reality, their views of problems and solutions, and stops them from resisting authorities when they lead them to harm others. There is substantial evidence that Germans had strong respect for authority that was deeply rooted in their culture, as well as a tendency to obey those with even limited authority (Craig, 1982; Girard, 1980). German families and schools were authoritarian, with restrictive and punitive child-rearing practices (Miller, 1983; Devereux, 1972). Strong respect for authority has also characterized the other societies that engaged in genocide or mass killing, such as Turkey, Cambodia, and Rwanda, although in some cases it was especially strong in the subgroup of the society that became the perpetrator, as in Argentina, where the military was both the architect and the executor of the disappearances (Nunca Mas, 1986).

A Monolithic Culture. A monolithic in contrast to pluralistic society, with a small range of predominant values and/or limitations on the free flow of ideas, adds to the predisposition for group violence. The negative representation of a victim group and the definition of reality by authorities that justifies or even necessitates the victims' mistreatment will be more broadly accepted. Democratic societies, which tend to be more pluralistic, are unlikely to engage in genocide (Rummel, 1994), especially if they

are "mature" democracies, with well-developed civic institutions (Staub, 1999a).

German culture was monolithic: It stressed obedience, order, efficiency, and loyalty to the group (Craig, 1982; Staub, 1989a). As I noted earlier, the evolution of the Holocaust can be divided into two phases. The first one brought Hitler to power. During the second phase, Nazi rule, the totalitarian system further reduced the range of acceptable ideas and the freedom of their expression. In the other cases, the societies, and at times particularly the perpetrator groups in them, such as the military and paramilitary groups in Argentina, were also monolithic. In the frequent cases of genocide or mass killing when the political-ideological system was highly authoritarian and even totalitarian, monolithic tendencies were further intensified.

Cultural Self-Concepts. A belief in cultural superiority (that goes beyond the usual ethnocentrism), as well as a shaky group self-concept that requires self-defense, can also contribute to the tendency to turn against others. Frequently the two combine, a belief in the superiority of one's group with an underlying sense of vulnerability and weakness. Thus the cultural self-concept that predisposes to group violence can be complex but demonstrable through the products of the culture, its literature, its intellectual and artistic products, its media.

The Germans saw themselves as superior in character, competence, honor, loyalty, devotion to family, civic organization, and cultural achievements. Superiority had expressed itself in many ways, including proclamations by German intellectuals of German superiority and of their belief in Germany's right to rule other nations (Craig, 1982; Nathan & Norden, 1960; Staub, 1989a). Partly as a result of tremendous devastation in past wars (Craig, 1982; Mayer, 1955) and lack of unity and statehood until 1871, there was also a deep feeling of vulnerability and shaky self-esteem. Following unification and a brief period of strength, the loss of World War I and the intense life problems afterward were a great blow to cultural and societal self-concept.

The combination of a sense of superiority with weakness and vulnerability seems to have been present in Turkey, Cambodia, and Argentina as well. In Argentina, progressively deteriorating economic conditions and political violence deeply threatened a belief in the specialness and superiority of the nation, especially strongly held by the military, and an elevated view by the military of itself as protector of the nation (Crawley, 1984). In both Cambodia and Turkey, a past history of empire and national glory were deeply embedded in group consciousness (Staub, 1989a). The existing conditions sharply contrasted with the glory of the past. Difficult life conditions threaten the belief in superiority and activate the underlying feelings of weakness and vulnerability. They intensify

the need to defend and/or elevate the self-concept, both individual and cultural.[1]

To a large extent, people define themselves by belonging to groups (Mack, 1983), which makes their social identity important (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1987). Group self-concepts become especially important in difficult times as the inability to deal with life problems threatens personal identity. Over time, the group's inability to help fulfill basic needs and societal disorganization also threaten group self-concept, people's vision and evaluation of their group.

Unhealed Wounds Due to Past Victimization. Another important cultural characteristic that contributes to a sense of vulnerability is a past history of victimization. Just like victimized individuals (Herman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990), groups of people who have been victimized in the past are intensely affected. Their sense of self is diminished. They come to see the world and people in it, especially outsiders, individuals as well as whole groups, as dangerous. They feel vulnerable, needing to defend themselves, which can lead them to strike out violently. Healing by victimized groups is essential to reduce the likelihood that they become perpetrators (Staub, 1998, 1999a).

The limited evidence, as yet, indicates that the effects of group victimization are transmitted through the generations. This is suggested both by the study of individual survivors and their offspring, and group culture. For example, Craig (1982) has suggested that long-ago wars in which large percentages of the German population were killed led to the strongly authoritarian tendencies in Prussian and then German society. People in authority became especially important in providing protection against danger.

A History of Aggressiveness. A history of aggression as a way of dealing with conflict also contributes to the predisposition for group violence. It makes renewed aggression more acceptable, more normal. Such a tradition, which existed in Germany before World War I, was greatly strengthened by the war and the widespread political violence that followed it (Kren & Rappoport, 1980). It was intense in Turkey; it existed in Cambodia as well (Chandler, 1983), intensified by tremendous violence during the civil war between 1970 and 1975; it expressed itself in repeated mass killing of Tutsis in Rwanda (des Forges, 1999); and it existed in Argentina, intensified by

---

[1] In Cambodia, especially, the focus on past national glory may have been not so much an expression of a feeling of superiority as a defense against feelings of inferiority. The glory of the Angkor empire faded hundreds of years earlier, and in the intervening centuries Cambodia was frequently invaded by others and ruled for very long periods by Vietnam and France.

the mutual violence between guerrilla groups, right-wing groups and the government preceding the disappearances (Staub, 1989a).

In Germany, an additional predisposing factor was the presence of war veterans. We now know about the existence and prolonged nature of post-traumatic stress disorder in Vietnam War veterans. The disorder was probably widespread among German veterans who had similar experiences – direct combat, a lost war, and lack of appreciation by society. Decline in self-esteem, loss of faith in the benevolence of the world and in legitimate authority, and a search for alternative authority are among the characteristics of this disorder in Vietnam veterans (Card, 1983; Egendorf, Kadushin, Laufer, Rothbart, & Sloan, 1981; Wilson, 1980; see also Herman, 1992). In Germany, they would have intensified needs created by the difficult life conditions and added to the guiding force of cultural predispositions. For example, they would have given special appeal to alternate authority, given the weakness and collapse of traditional authority.

## Turning Against Others: Scapegoating and Ideology

Scapegoating and ideologies that arise in the face of difficult life conditions or group conflict are means for satisfying basic needs. However, they offer destructive satisfaction of basic needs in that they are likely to lead to harmful actions against others.

In the face of persistently difficult life conditions, already devalued outgroups are further devalued and scapegoated. Diminishing others is a way to elevate the self. Scapegoating protects a positive identity by reducing the feeling of responsibility for problems. By providing an explanation for problems, it offers the possibility of effective action or control – unfortunately, mainly in the form of taking action against the scapegoat. It can unite people against the scapegoated other, thereby fulfilling the need for positive connection and support in difficult times.

Adopting nationalistic and/or "better-world" ideologies offers a new comprehension of reality and, by promising a better future, hope as well. But usually some group is identified as the enemy that stands in the way of the ideology's fulfillment. By joining an ideological movement, people can relinquish a burdensome self to leaders or the group. They gain connection to others and a sense of significance in working for the ideology's fulfillment. Along the way, members of the "enemy" group, usually the group that is also scapegoated for life problems, are further devaluated and, in the end, often excluded from the moral realm. The moral values that protect people from violence become inoperative in relation to them (Staub, 1989a).

The ideology that the Nazis and Hitler offered the German people fit German culture. Its racial principle identified Aryans, and their supposedly best representatives, the Germans, as the superior race. The material
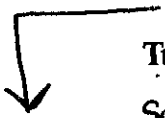
Who Do We Scapegoat?

by Andy Mort | 0 Comments
http://www.sheepdressedlikewolves.com/scapegoat/

There was a very wise king who lived somewhere, some time ago. He would often do things which seemed to his people strange and useless; but all that he did, he did to teach his people good habits and to care for one another.

"Nothing good can come from a people that complain and expect others to fix their problems for them."
One night, while everyone else slept, he placed a large stone in the road that led past his palace. First came a farmer with his wagon heavily loaded with grain, which he was taking to the mill to be ground.
"Well, whoever saw such carelessness?" he said, as he turned his team and drove around the stone. **"Why don't these lazy people have that rock taken from the road?"**

And so he went on complaining of the uselessness of others, but not touching the stone himself.
Soon afterward, a young soldier came singing along the road. He was thinking of the wonderful bravery he would show in the war. He did not see the stone, but tripped over it. He rose to his feet, shook the dust from his clothes, picked up his sword, and stormed angrily about the lazy people who had no more sense than to leave such a huge rock in the road. Then he, too, walked away, not once thinking that he might move it himself.

So the day passed. Everyone who came by complained and whined because the stone lay in the road, but no one touched it.

At last, just at nightfall, the miller's daughter came past. She was tired and had been working at the mill since the early morning. But she said to herself, **"It is almost dark. Somebody may fall over this stone in the night, and perhaps he could be badly hurt. I will move it out of the way."** So she tugged at the heavy stone. It was hard to move, but she pulled and pulled, and pushed, and lifted until at last she moved it from its place. To her surprise, she found a box underneath.
The box was heavy, and upon it was written:
"This box belongs to the one who moves the stone."
She opened the lid, and found it was full of gold. When everyone heard what had happened, they gathered around the spot in the road where the stone had been and scratched around, looking for more gold.

Blame helps us deflect responsibility. Blame is an instinctual response, responsibility is a choice.

Our default mindset is often one with blame at the centre. We blame others for the state of the world, or the state of our lives, or the state of a particular situation. It's always someone's fault.

The Scapegoat

Blame usually occurs at the foot of a single entity. Not in a meaninful sense at any cause of the problem, but at a place where the problem bubbles to the surface, or to a person or community that we are able to use as a scapegoat: *"children, old people, those with physical abnormalities, women, members of ethnic or racial minorities, the poor, and 'those whose natural endowments (beauty, intelligence, charm) or status (wealth, position) mark them as exceptional"* (Girard – The Scapegoat).

Blame and responsibility are both modelled and imitated.

The way we respond to situations is going to be imitated. Unless we are consciously aware the way we respond to situations IS an imitation. If we deflect responsibility by constantly charging blame then we quickly find ourselves surrounded by and immersed in a so-called 'blame culture'.

It's like the junior doctor who was treated like shit by his seniors at the hospital.

The consultants would lord it over those trainee medics, making them feel small and helpless. As he climbed each rung of the heircharchy he grew more powerful and those above him were fewer in number. He saw it as his duty to do to those below as he had done to him – THEY were his scapegoat. He felt humiliated when he was younger so made sure that he got his chance to humiliate them and wield his new authority. It didn't matter that these junior doctors had nothing to do with his original problems.

It never occured to him to use his experience, rather than getting bogged down in a world of blame, bitterness and hatred, to empathise and take responsibility for creating something new and treating them as he wished he had been treated. In fact he might now (in a cousin of Stockholm Syndrome) go so far as to look back at his experiences with rose-tinted glasses and make claims that they made him a better doctor, thus somehow justifying his own bullying behaviour.

It's the same in any organisation, ingrained through our school system. We will all get our chance to inflict the pain that we had inflicted upon us, but it will always be to a scapegoat, a group not responsible for our humiliation (we don't fight back, we simply pass it down). Remember moving up the school? Going from the youngest to the second youngest year?

Well that's the blame culture and scapegoat mechanism at work. Responsibility moves the huge stone out of the way. Usually however, rather than addressing the issue of the stone we just accept it's existence, complain about it, but ultimately hand responsibility for its removal to someone else. We don't even consider the possibility that we can do something about it.

The truth is if we're not willing to take responsibility we can't expect anyone else to either.

Part 6 : Diffusion of Responsibility

"The bystander is a modern archetype, from the Holocaust to the genocide in Rwanda to the current environmental crisis," says Charles Garfield, a clinical professor of psychology at the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine who is writing a book about the psychological differences between bystanders and people who display "moral courage."

"Why," asked Garfield, "do some people respond to these crises while others don't?"

In the shadow of these crises, researchers have spent the past few decades trying to answer Garfield's question. Their findings reveal a valuable story about human nature: Often, only subtle differences separate the bystanders from the morally courageous people of the world. Most of us, it seems, have the potential to fall into either category. It is the slight, seemingly insignificant details in a situation that can push us one way or the other.

Researchers have identified some of the invisible forces that restrain us from acting on our own moral instincts while also suggesting how we might fight back against these unseen inhibitors of altruism. Taken together, these results offer a scientific understanding for what spurs us to everyday altruism and lifetimes of activism, and what induces us to remain bystanders.

Altruistic inertia

Among the most infamous bystanders are 38 people in Queens, New York, who in 1964 witnessed the murder of one of their neighbors, a young woman named Kitty Genovese (see sidebar).

A serial killer attacked and stabbed Genovese late one night outside her apartment house, and these 38 neighbors later admitted to hearing her screams; at least three said they saw part of the attack take place. Yet no one intervened.

While the Genovese murder shocked the American public, it also moved several social psychologists to try to understand the behavior of people like Genovese's neighbors.

One of those psychologists was John Darley, who was living in New York at the time. Ten days after the Genovese murder, Darley had lunch with another psychologist, Bibb Latané, and they discussed the incident.

"The newspaper explanations were focusing on the appalling personalities of those who saw the murder but didn't intervene, saying they had been dehumanized by living in an urban environment," said Darley, now a professor at Princeton University. "We wanted to see if we could explain the incident by drawing on the social psychological principles that we knew."

A main goal of their research was to determine whether the presence of other people inhibits someone from intervening in an emergency, as had seemed to be the case in the Genovese murder. In one of their studies, college students sat in a cubicle and were instructed to talk with fellow students through an intercom. They were told that they would be speaking with one, two, or five other students, and only one person could use the intercom at a time.

There was actually only one other person in the study—a confederate (someone working with the researchers). Early in the study, the confederate mentioned that he sometimes suffered from seizures. The next time he spoke, he became increasingly loud and incoherent; he pretended to choke and gasp. Before falling silent, he stammered:

If someone could help me out it would it would er er s-s-sure be sure be good... because er there er er a cause I er I uh I've got a a one of the er sei-er-er things coming on and and and I could really er use some help... I'm gonna die er er I'm gonna die er help er er seizure er...

Eighty-five percent of the participants who were in the two-person situation, and hence believed they were the only witness to the victim's seizure, left their cubicles to help. In contrast, only 62 percent of the participants who were in the three-person situation and 31 percent of the participants in the six-person situation tried to help.

Darley and Latané attributed their results to a "diffusion of responsibility." When study participants thought there were other witnesses to the emergency, they felt less personal

responsibility to intervene. Similarly, the witnesses of the Kitty Genovese murder may have seen other apartment lights go on, or seen each other in the windows, and assumed someone else would help. The end result is altruistic inertia. Other researchers have also suggested the effects of a "confusion of responsibility," where bystanders fail to help someone in distress because they don't want to be mistaken for the cause of that distress.

Darley and Latané also suspected that bystanders don't intervene in an emergency because they're misled by the reactions of the people around them. To test this hypothesis, they ran an experiment in which they asked participants to fill out questionnaires in a laboratory room. After the participants had gotten to work, smoke filtered into the room—a clear signal of danger.

When participants were alone, 75 percent of them left the room and reported the smoke to the experimenter. With three participants in the room, only 38 percent left to report the smoke. And quite remarkably, when a participant was joined by two confederates instructed not to show any concern, only 10 percent of the participants reported the smoke to the experimenter.

The passive bystanders in this study succumbed to what's known as "pluralistic ignorance"—the tendency to mistake one another's calm demeanor as a sign that no emergency is actually taking place. There are strong social norms that reinforce pluralistic ignorance. It is somewhat embarrassing, after all, to be the one who loses his cool when no danger actually exists. Such an effect was likely acting on the people who witnessed the Kitty Genovese incident; indeed, many said they didn't realize what was going on beneath their windows and assumed it was a lover's quarrel. That interpretation was reinforced by the fact that no one else was responding, either.

A few years later, Darley ran a study with psychologist Daniel Batson that had seminary students at Princeton walk across campus to give a talk. Along the way, the students passed a study confederate, slumped over and groaning in a passageway. Their response depended largely on a single variable: whether or not they were late. Only 10 percent of the students stopped to help when they were in a hurry; more than six times as many helped when they had plenty of time before their talk.

Lateness, the presence of other people—these are some of the factors that can turn us all into bystanders in an emergency. Yet another important factor is the characteristics of the victim. Research has shown that people are more likely to help those they perceive to be similar to them, including others from their own racial or ethnic groups. In general, women tend to receive more help than men. But this varies according to appearance: More attractive and femininely dressed women tend to receive more help from passersby, perhaps because they fit the gender stereotype of the vulnerable female.

We don't like to discover that our propensity for altruism can depend on prejudice or the details of a particular situation—details that seem beyond our control. But these scientific findings force us to consider how we'd perform under pressure; they reveal that Kitty Genovese's neighbors might have been just like us. Even more frightening, it becomes easier to understand how good people in Rwanda or Nazi Germany remained silent against the horrors around them. Afraid, confused, coerced, or willfully unaware, they could convince themselves that it wasn't their responsibility to intervene.

But still, some did assume this responsibility, and this is the other half of the bystander story. Some researchers refer to the "active bystander," that person who witnesses an emergency, recognizes it as such, and takes it upon herself to do something about it.

Who are these people? Are they inspired to action because they receive strong cues within a situation, indicating it's an emergency? Or is there a particular set of characteristics—a personality type—that makes some people more likely to be active bystanders while others remain passive?

Why people help

A leader in the study of the differences between active and passive bystanders is psychologist Ervin Staub, whose research interests were shaped by his experiences as a young Jewish child in Hungary during World War II.