

# Failure to Protect: The Bystander Effect

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Excerpt from Bloom and Reichert (1998) *Bearing Witness: Violence and Collective Responsibility*.

Who is a bystander? If you are not a victim or a perpetrator, you are a bystander. Bystanders are the audience. They are all those present at the scene of an incident who provide or deny support for a behavior. The victim & perpetrator form a linked figure and the bystanders form the ground against which perpetration is carried out or prevented. It is of vital interest to note that among many acts of perpetration which have been studied, it is the behavior of the bystanders that determines how far the perpetrators will go in carrying out their behavior. In this concept lies the key to interrupting the victim-perpetrator cycle of violence that is destroying our social safety. History attests to the fact that once violence is tolerated and supported as a group norm, an increasing number of bystanders become victims and/or perpetrators until it becomes increasingly difficult to make clear differentiations among the three groups. This describes the perilous situation in which we now find ourselves. Violence is no longer confined to the inner cities, to the poor, to the minority of our people. Violence now permeates every aspect of our social environment, wreaks its havoc on every strata of our society. Violence is intrinsic to the form of relaxation we choose at night, to the forms of entertainment we pursue in our leisure hours, to what we read and to what we teach our children. WE have allowed this to happen. It is time to turn our attention away from our exclusive preoccupation with the pathology of the victim and the pathology of the perpetrator and begin planning how to heal the pathology of the bystanders.

Humans live in social groups and individual thought and decision making readily gives way to the powerful influence of the authority of a group, an influence that people find very difficult to resist. In Stanley Milgram's famous studies of obedience, healthy normal people would inflict punishment on complete strangers when prodded to do so by the experimenter, even when faced with evidence of the increasing distress of the person they thought they were punishing. "I was only following orders" was the standard defense line of the Nazi's at Nuremberg. The power of the group can be exerted directly by setting up a military-like system in which people are commanded to do things they would not normally do, like killing, in service of the group norms. Or the influence of the group can be much more subtle. Research indicates that when extremely negative statements are made about a group they affect basic attitudes about that group even more than moderate statements. Thus, people will discredit the exact content of statements that, for instance, Jews murder babies, or African-Americans have lower IQ's, but will devalue Jews and African-Americans in a general way in response to those statements.

This process of devaluation is the first and essential step in guaranteeing that bystanders will not act to stop perpetrators. Countries in which Anti-Semitism was highest in the general population were the countries in which most Jews were killed. This basic prejudice did not cause the Nazi destruction but instead, allowed it to happen. In countries where Jews were more highly valued, the Nazi destruction of the Jewish population was significantly less.

Denial is another vital mechanism that determines the outcome of bystander behavior. Bystanders often deny the importance of what they see around them if they are not directly involved. Despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary, there is still a pervasive amount of "just world thinking" in our social environment. "Just world thinking" would have us believe that people generally deserve what they get, that bad things happen to bad people. This is a rationalization that we are set to believe, reinforced by a multitude of childhood experiences when we are repeatedly told that we deserve what we get, that our behavior has been the cause of our experienced loss of love, affection, or even overt abuse.

Such attitudes towards victims allows bystanders to ignore events, literally not see trains loaded with Jews on the tracks heading for the concentration camp, or to deny the significance of events, or to displace any personal responsibility onto the group. In emergency situations, when a number of people are present each person is less likely to respond than if they were alone in the situation. Our influence upon each other is startlingly powerful.

The body social can become infected just as can the body physical and the metaphor of an infection is useful in understanding this phenomenon. The infectious agent can be seen as the perpetrator, the immune system as the potential victim, and the other resources in the body as the bystanders. The state of nutrition, fitness, and overall well-being of the body determines the state of the immune system which determines how far the infection can spread. In a deteriorating body, the capacity of the immune system is overwhelmed and death easily occurs. Once the body has become overwhelmed by a pathogen, no amount of attention to diet, stress management, or fitness will help determine the outcome.

Similarly, in social behavior, early intervention and prevention works best. As bystanders become increasingly passive in the face of abusive behavior, action becomes increasingly difficult. Just as there is a deteriorating spiral of perpetration in which each act of violence becomes increasingly easy to accomplish, so too is there a deteriorating cycle of passivity. AS the perpetrators actively assume control over a system without any resistance on the part of bystanders, their power increases to the point that resistance on the part of bystanders becomes extremely difficult if not useless except to the extent that such behavior serves as an example for others.

Interestingly however, all it takes is for one bystander in a group to take some sort of positive action against perpetration and others will follow. Resistance to perpetration on the part of bystanders, both in words and in actions, influences others to become active instead of passive. There is much to be learned from the behavior of bystanders who DO

help because in any situation of perpetration, they define a different reality. Their actions provide an alternative way of relating, another example to the perpetrators, and would-be perpetrators, and victims, all of whom become locked into the cycle of violence and abuse.

Latane and Darley have outlined a five-stage process by which bystanders turn into helpers. First bystanders notice that something is amiss and then they interpret the situation as one in which people need help. In the next critical stage, they assume responsibility to offer that help, then choose a form of help, and finally implement that help. Helpful behavior can be derailed at any of these stages. But what increases the likelihood that helpful bystander behavior will not be derailed?

First of all, there is the intrinsic nature of the bystander. Helpful bystanders have many characteristics in common that tell us a great deal about how we need to raise our children and how we must behave in situations which confront us. Helpers have strong moral concerns that are transmitted by their parents and among those values are a fundamental sense of empathy for others, standards which are applied to people in different social, ethnic, and religious groups. Bystanders who become rescuers often have experience with being marginalized or victimized themselves but have been able to sustain connections with others rather than disconnecting from deeply human bonds. Helpful behavior falls along a very long continuum and evolves gradually over time. Each successful attempt to help leads to more helping behavior that becomes self-reinforcing. This implies that helping behavior can be modeled, learned, taught, reinforced - that it is not a given in any situation but can and must be constantly recreated.

But even willing helpers can be derailed by social propaganda, by coercion, and by the influence of others who want to deny the perpetrator behavior and who offer an alternative out with such explanations like "He deserves what he gets", "People can always find a job if they look hard enough", "The problem is not guns its the people who use them", "People just want to blame their parents", "Welfare recipients are just lazy and don't want to work", "There's more crime because we've gotten too soft on criminals".

If helpers can get past the propaganda and see the flaws in thinking, they still have to feel that they have some responsibility for solving the problem and that they are able to choose something to do to help and put their plan into action. This sense of mutual responsibility can be taught later in life but is mostly easily modeled within the family systems by what the children see in the behavior of their own parents towards other people. Finding effective ways to help often requires larger scale organization and the participation of others. It is the reverse of the downward spiral of perpetration.

The fundamental question is whether witnesses to the mistreatment of other people have an obligation to act? What is our moral responsibility to each other? Are we, in fact, "our brother's keeper?" Until quite recently in human history, the family group or the tribe were the only groups to which we felt the kind of loyalty that demands protective action. In the last two centuries, our sense of loyalty has expanded to our national groups. More recently, global ethnicity has been commanding fealty. But we have entered an age of

such intense global interdependency that perpetration against one can be seen increasingly to effect the whole in an every escalating cycle of violence and destruction. We may never be able to eliminate the forces that produce violent perpetration but it is not too late to contain the violence. This containment can happen, however, only if bystanders choose to become witnesses and rescuers, instead of silently colluding with the perpetrators.

Staub, E. *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Fogelman, E. *Conscience & Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

