BBC NEWS

Fight or flight - would you 'have a go'?

By Brian King

How would you react if you saw someone being attacked in the street? Britain has been called a "bystander society" but new research shows we are more likely to intervene than expected.

According to the New York Times, more than three dozen people watched as 28-year-old Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death in a brutal and prolonged attack outside her New York apartment. Not one of them lifted a finger to help or even called the police.

THE CASE OF KITTY GENOVESE
- Genovese (above) stabbed to death near her home in New York City in March 1964
- Initial newspaper report said 38 people had heard/seen parts of the attack
- This was later scaled back and none saw/were aware of entire incident
- It nevertheless prompted investigation of what came to be known as bystander effect

The shocking murder, back in 1964, prompted more than four decades of psychological studies into how witnesses behave when confronted by violence in the street. The studies all identified a "bystander effect", which predicts that the larger the group of people who observe a violent incident, the less likely it is anyone will take action.

The bystander effect would seem to have been at work in August 2007 when passers-by in a Lancashire park failed to intervene when they saw two youths kick to death 20-year-old gap-year student Sophie Lancaster. Her killers stamped on her head because she was dressed as a Goth.

Evolutionary biology suggests that our natural genetic instinct is to behave in an altruistic and supportive way if someone is being attacked. So why do people seem to walk by, particularly if they are in a crowd?

Group kinship

Psychologists suggest three reasons. One is "audience inhibition", which makes us fear that taking action will be viewed negatively by the other people. The second is "social influence", which leads us to assume that if no-one else is helping, there is no need to do anything. And the third, most important, reason is "diffusion of responsibility", which encourages us to take the view that if no-one else is doing anything then why should we.

The more obvious possibility, that people are simply too frightened to intervene, is discounted by psychologists. They point out that if this were true people would be less likely to "have a go" if they were alone, whereas the opposite is the case.

WHY I DID INTERVENE
What are people thinking when they step in to help someone and would they do it again?

Sefryn Penrose, 32, was in Clacton, Essex, when she tried to stop a man attacking a woman who'd cut him up in his car. "What shocked me was that he was over six foot tall and she was tiny. He was holding her and just punching her head.

I didn't think, I just ran over and tried to push him off. I got hit and my earring was ripped out. My partner shouted at someone to call the police and he jumped into his car and drove off.

It was the injustice that got me. I remember feeling completely outraged that this huge man was doing that to a tiny woman. He also had a small child with him and I was angry that he was letting a child see what he was doing.

I just felt a huge adrenalin rush, I didn't think for a second that I shouldn't do it. I still think I did the right thing, even though I got hurt. I would always step in to help and think people who don't are usually just in a state of shock."

- Former government crime adviser Louise Casey warned back in June 2008 that Britain was becoming a "walk-on-by" society. She based her conclusion on a major study which revealed that people were terrified they would be attacked if they intervened, or feared they would be arrested by the police themselves.

And in May this year the new Home Secretary, Theresa May, joined the chorus of people calling for the public to "have a go" if they witness violence on the street, promising legislation to protect "good Samaritans" from falling foul of the law themselves.

But new studies are now casting doubt on the assumption that the British are a "walk-on-by" society. Psychologist Mark Levine, from Lancaster University, has been studying thousands of hours of CCTV footage of late night violent incidents (including the one at the top of this page) . He has discovered that in the great majority of cases people do step in and try to defuse violent situations.

"It's like choreography," he says. "It's as if they are following some sort of sequence. You can see how determined people are to fight and how much intervention there is by bystanders."

What marks his research out is that it is based on real violence, whereas previous studies have involved analysis of statistics and clinical experiments. What he found is that people within a group generally try to defuse violence, by making placatory gestures, such as putting an arm around the aggressor's shoulder, or getting between combatants or pulling them away.

Virtual reality

"What is not often thought about this kind of event... is that the group who are out there can be a force for good. We normally think people are drinking... and therefore are much more likely to be prone to violence. Our research shows that in fact this doesn't tend to be the case. People are much more likely to be trying to stop the violence happening rather than joining in to escalate it."

He doesn't believe Britain has ever been a "walk-on-by" society.

He has studied court transcripts of the trials of the killers of Kitty Genovese and Sophie Lancaster and says both incidents were massively misreported. Press reports assumed that "witnesses" who may simply have been in the general area, heard a distant commotion or perhaps saw someone running away, were actually eye-witnesses to the murders. In fact there were no eye-witnesses to the actual killings in either case.

, presented by Nick Ross and produced by Brian King, explores how onlookers respond when they see violent behaviour

- Or listen to it on the

The research goes against most other studies that have been done into the topic. He is now working with Professor Mel Slater, a computer scientist at University College London, to test public response to violent incidents, using virtual reality.

Volunteers are confronted by life-size avatars who act out a frighteningly realistic violent confrontation. And again, early results suggest that more often than not people feel compelled to intervene.

"Most of us are good Samaritans trying to prevent violence," says Mr Levine. "When violence does happen it is the result of a failure of those norms of control, rather than something that people simply like to do."

People are much more likely to intervene if they feel some sort of group kinship with the victim, he also concludes. The problem is that in an increasingly fragmented modern society, people feel less and less part of the same social group.

"I think we could use the force of the group much more," he says. "Why is it that those people get involved and take responsibility? How can we make wider society take responsibility for the behaviour of those among them who are behaving in an anti-social way?"

Story from BBC NEWS:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/magazine/8761745.stm

Published: 2010/06/29 08:42:40 GMT

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