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Midterm Paper

Harm does not only come from a hurtful act, it also come from inaction when a person requires aid. The world was stunned when twenty-nine-year-old Catherine Susan Genovese (Kitty Genovese) was murdered and raped outside her apartment building on March 13, 1964 while thirty-eight people in the building stood watch and did nothing. Another dreadful case of significant inaction occurred on October 27, 2009 when an unnamed female sophomore who was currently attending Richmond High was brutally assaulted and raped by ten men whilst over twenty witnesses stood watch and did nothing. Societies inaction is influenced through several factors ranging from The Bystander Apathy Effect to The Asch Effect. These factors influence the behavior, actions, and judgments made by individuals in society. Social Psychology has explained and interpreted the causes of such inaction and societies indifference.

Bill Genovese (Catherine’s Brother) gives a personal documentary in “The Witness”, a film regarding the murder of Kitty Genovese. Kitty Genovese was driving home and parked her car at the Kew Gardens Railroad Station parking lot close to her apartment building while she was being following by her assailant Winston Moseley. Kitty Genovese was attacked twice by the same man at the Kew Gardens Railroad and the final time near her apartment building. On March 13, 1964 Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death between three and four in the morning and twice the bedroom lights of bystanders frightened the assailant away yet he came back to stab her again along with raping her. Reported by Martin Gansberg in the Times that Kitty’s screams were heard by dozens of neighbors all of which did nothing to help. Bill Genovese found contradicting reports regarding his sisters murder such that people yelled at the attacker, another held Kitty in her arms and another called the police. This reports were contradicting to the published report in the TIMES which was a very trusted source that made this case a phenomenon worldwide. Interviewed by Bill, Rasenberger (A Times editor who assigned the story) said “If the story had been reported more accurately, it still would have been a two- or three-day, maybe even four-day story, but it would not have been a fifty-year story”. It is considered that many of the witnesses had assumed that there was a drunken argument from The Old Bailey, a nearby bar or that it was a domestic conflict that was playing out in public or that it was some lovers fight but I believe that these are all lies. Thirty-Eight witnesses hearing the screams and witnessing a man rape and stab a woman several times within a long duration of at least thirty-minutes cannot be mistaken for anything else than what it is. I believe that Social Psychology plays and immense role in this inaction which leads me to the Bystander Apathy Effect. I believe that these thirty-eight witnesses were all bystanders who were influenced by a diffusion of responsibility which weakens a group member’s obligation to help and become personally involved. They believed that since the building was full of capable people who heard the screams that “surely someone else” will help. The Diffusion of Responsibility effect grows stronger on a bystander when other people are present which makes the bystander believe that it is not their responsibility to help and that others will. I have observed this first hand when two men were threatening to beat another man in public and a crowd of at least twenty-five people formed. Within the crowd of people, I heard someone say “Someone should call the police” although no one did so and the crowd failed to act. The same thing happened in Kitty Genovese’s case when people who failed to intervene in the murder were observing and conforming to the behavior of other people who were doing nothing. Solomon Asch (1907-1996) developed the Asch Effect which states that the influence of a group majority has a major impact on the judgment of an individual which has become the classic illustration of conformity-(the tendency for people to adopt the behavior and opinions presented by other group members). The inaction of the witnesses of Kitty Genovese’s murder can be explained by the Asch Effect as the majority of the witnesses did nothing, the individuals made an unconscious judgment not to do anything although action was as simple as calling the police from the safety of their homes. Conformity caused the bystander witnesses at Kitty’s murder to adopt the behavior presented by the other bystanders which was complete inaction during the entirety of the crime. Social Roles also had part to play in the inaction of the witnesses in Kitty Genovese’s Murder as a social role defines the behavior that is expected of a person in a certain setting or situation. The thirty-eight inactive witnesses were bystanders who examined their social roles unconsciously and decided that it was not expected of them to help Kitty Genovese since no other person did in the same setting and situation. Another dreadful case which resembles The Genovese Murder shares similar behavior of inaction and failure to respond.

On October 27, 2009, an unidentified fifteen-year-old sophomore who attending Richmond High School was brutally assaulted, beaten and raped by ten men for two and a half hours during the High School Homecoming dance which was taking place in the school gymnasium. Ten witnesses stood around laughing and taking pictures with their cell phones and eventually the crowd number grew above twenty. No one among the crowd called police or alerted a security guard on campus who could have intervened in the situation. The assistant principal of the school had noticed several grown men standing near the scene of the crime whom did not have any identification badges (It was required). The Assistant principal ignored them completely and returned to his job. I believe that situationism which states that the environment can have effects on behavior and social norms at the time of the incident created the conformity that the crowd of witnesses experienced. The witnesses’ inaction may be considered as the social norm of the homecoming party such that a group of men having sex with a sophomore was not necessarily rape but the height of the party and the situationism assumed a party where anyone who called the police would be a party crasher and this created the conformity of inaction. Although these ideas are plausible it is very likely that the inaction of the crowd was caused by the diffusion of responsibility which would have weakened each group member’s obligation to help and become personally involved. The Asch Effect may have also influenced the crowd at the crime scene as the majority of the crowd did not act to aid the unidentified girl, individuals made a judgment not to aid the girl either.

The Murder Case of Catherine Susan Genovese (Kitty Genovese) and the case of rape and assault of the unidentified fifteen-year-old girl both have several similarities and differences. In both cases over twenty people witnessed the crimes yet not one person acted to aid either victims. The Bystander Apathy Effect applied to Genovese’s Murder and the Richmond High Rape since none of the witnesses acted due to reliance on other bystanders to act for them. The Diffusion of Responsibility was applied to both cases as groups in both incidents denied to believe it was their obligation to help since others would have helped in their place. Conformity had played a role in both cases as the thirty-eight witnesses adopted the behavior of inaction due to the behavior of inaction of the other residents in the building and this applied to the Richmond Rape Case where over twenty witnesses decided to adopt the behavior of inaction due to the inaction of the other members of the crowd. Finally, the Asch Effect impacted both groups of witnesses in both cases as the majority of both groups made the judgment not to aid either girls, the individuals left also made the same judgments influenced by the majority. A difference in each case was that the group of witnesses in Genovese’s Murder Case was further apart in separate apartments while the witnesses in The Richmond Rape Case were in a crowd immediately close to each-other. This impacts the witnesses in the Richmond Rape Case in a proprietary way because situationism assumed an environment where the witnesses were so close to each-other that the behavior of a single witness would have a more forceful impact on the behavior of another individual witness. Both cases were phenomenon’s worldwide in society and in Social Psychology.

Harm does not only come from a hurtful act, it also come from inaction when a person requires aid. The Murder and Rape of Catherine Susan Genovese stunned the world due to the circumstances surrounding the notorious case. The situation of the witnesses has been studied in Social Psychology and has been a significant contribution to Social Psychology by giving it a first-rate example of several theories and ideas. The Rape Case of Richmond High School has been a notorious case which could have ending in a more positive manner if social inaction did not spread. Both cases have been prime examples of inaction in society and how it spreads through people unconsciously through several different ways. Inaction of a single individual could impact an entire community and how it acts for the greater good.