

## **Fifty years later: What have we learnt from the 1964 Kitty Genovese tragedy?**

Examining the origin of the “bystander effect” and the societal implications since the brutal murder of Kitty Genovese.

By Harold Takooshian, PhD



What is the moral legacy of the Catherine "Kitty" Genovese murder, 50 years later? It was back on March 13, 1964, at 3 a.m. that petite 28-year-old Kitty repeatedly screamed for her life when she was brutally attacked on her way home, but none of the reported 38 neighbors who heard Kitty's screams so much as phoned the police, as the psychopath brutally sliced Kitty to death in two attacks over an excruciating half-hour. The neighbors' inaction was so inexplicable that New York Times Editor A.M. Rosenthal was moved to write his classic book, "Thirty-Eight Witnesses," which transformed Kitty's tragedy from an unreported incident to a front-page headline around the world, which still impacts our society a half-century later.

In his book, Rosenthal asked a series of behavioral scientists to explain why people do or do not help a victim and, sadly, he found none could offer an evidence-based answer. How ironic that this same question was answered separately by a non-scientist. When the killer was apprehended, and Chief of Detectives Albert Seedman asked him how he dared to attack a woman in front of so many witnesses, the psychopath calmly replied, "I knew they wouldn't do anything, people never do" (Seedman & Hellman, 1974, p. 100).

Though Genovese surely felt horribly alone and unheard that final night, it is hard to overestimate the immense and diverse impacts her unanswered cries have had on western society: the national 9-1-1 phone system, victim services, rape prevention, community self-help groups, Guardian Angels, Good Samaritan and duty-to-aid legislation, anti-stalking programs and, of course, new research in the behavioral sciences. Thanks to "Thirty-Eight Witnesses," Kitty's tragedy is now part of our popular culture, as even those not yet born in 1964 know of the "38 witnesses" and the "Kitty Genovese syndrome." Any social psychology textbook is incomplete if it omits the "bystander effect" and the Genovese tragedy.

Now, looking back 50 years later, we see at least four ironies about this Genovese tragedy and its moral implications for society today.

### **Known yet unknown**

As the New York Times has often reported, Kitty has become an icon recognized around the world, and her name is cited each time a person is not helped by inactive onlookers. Moreover, for years, journalists and scientists have meticulously examined those final minutes of Kitty's life. Yet at the same time so much is unknown, and new facts continually emerge about her tragedy. In March of 2014, two new volumes by Kevin Cook and Catherine Pelonero examine

the same case and reveal dramatically different conclusions about her death. And what do we know about the first 28 years of Kitty's life? In a nation full of talented authors, it is simply inexplicable that it took 50 years to see the first biography in 2014, of this mysterious young woman with the soulful eyes looking at us in that 1964 Times "mug-shot" photo.

### **Common yet unique**

Thanks to 38 witnesses in 1964, we quickly learnt that the Genovese tragedy was not unique, but probably occurs daily--people injured in front of inactive witnesses. Behavioral science has identified and probed examples of the "Kitty Genovese syndrome"--like the infamous 1984 "New Bedford bar-room rape," or the needless death of homeless hero Hugo Tale-Yax in Jamaica, New York in 2010, and other tragedies of bystander inaction across places and years:

- Esmin Green at Kings County Memorial Hospital in Brooklyn in 2008.
- Angel Arce Torres in Hartford, Conn. in 2008.
- Jayna Murray in Bethesda, Md. in 2011.
- Ilan Halimi in Paris, France in 2006.
- Raymond Zack in Alameda, Calif. in 2011.
- Axel Casian in Turlock, Calif. in 2008.
- Shanda Sharer in Madison, Ind. in 2009.
- Bonnie Bush in Manhattan in 1978.
- Andrew Mormille in Brooklyn N.Y. in 1965.
- Baby Wang Yue in Foshan, China in 2011.
- James Patrick Bulger, age 2, in Liverpool, UK in 1992.

Yet the Genovese tragedy remains unique in many ways - a non-celebrity homicide victim who is better known than her killer. Like Anne Frank, Kitty was an unknown person who became a international public figure only in her death. Kitty is known only for the last 28 minutes of her life, not the first 28 years.

### **Behavioral sciences**

In the 60s, the Genovese tragedy moved three separate teams of psychological scientists in New York to create what became new, data-based psychology specialties:

- Stanley Milgram at the City University of New York used field experiments to introduce what is now known as "urban psychology," studying the impact of city life on the individual.
- Harry Kaufmann at Hunter College used surveys to study what is now cognitive forensic psychology, the impact of law on moral reasoning.
- Bibb Latane at Columbia and John Darley at New York University used lab experiments to study what we now term "prosocial behavior."
- We might belatedly add Philip Zimbardo's recent research on heroism and "the heroic imagination," developing data-based methods to promote heroic responses in Genovese-type situations.

### **Truth?**

There is a trend for some to point to exaggerations in the original reports of the Genovese tragedy, which they now term a "myth," or even a "fraud" or a "hoax." When Charles Skoller, the prosecutor of Kitty's killer in 1964, began hearing such reports in 2003, he was moved to

travel from Florida to New York at his own expense to address an audience about this; in his seventies, Skoller pledged to write the precise facts as he knew them in the first, first-person account of the trial of Kitty's killer. Skoller's book indeed appeared in 2008 before his death, *Twisted Confessions*. As Skoller would agree, there are actually two spellings of the five-letter word, "truth." First, truth with a small "t" refers to the surface facts in a report. Second, Truth with a capital T refers to the enduring and underlying veracity of a report. It is the difference between myth and parable. Whether or not it was 38 or eight witnesses, Genovese felt horribly alone, and would have survived if inactive neighbors responded to her cries.

In 1983, Wilfred Perera and other psychology student researchers examined the three New York dailies for three months to study media accounts of bystander behavior during crises. What they found, in part:

- Initial bystander reports typically contained inaccuracies that were tweaked in later editions.
- Such reports were used as filler that rarely appeared in more than one paper.
- When they did, reports in the two papers varied greatly. The Genovese case was no exception.

So we ask, "What is the legacy of the Kitty Genovese murder, 50 years later?" On March 8-9, 2014, Fordham University in New York City hosted "The Kitty Genovese Memorial Conference," where 150 people heard an interdisciplinary group of 24 experts discuss this question, included four psychologists: Bibb Latane (North Carolina), Scott Plous (Connecticut), Harold Takooshian (New York), and Philip G. Zimbardo (California).

Surely a prime reason why people around the world 50 years later remain so touched by Kitty's tragedy is the haunting image of this terrified young woman, as she watched her neighbors ignore her desperate screams. Because of Kitty, we behavioral scientists now understand more about the dynamics of bystander inaction, and the moral choices that accompany this - that citizens should not ignore screams in the night. Yes, Kitty saw her screams ignored that night but these screams have reverberated around the world for five decades, and our society is now the better because of it. Yes Kitty, we hear you now, and we are not the same because of it.