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The Kitty Genovese Murder and the Social Psychology of Helping:  
the parable of the 38 witnesses

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## Abstract

This paper argues that an iconic event in the history of helping research – the story of the 38 witnesses who remained inactive during the murder of Kitty Genovese – is not supported by the available evidence. Using archive material we show that there is no evidence for the presence of 38 witnesses, or that witnesses observed the murder, or that witnesses remained inactive. Drawing a distinction between the robust bystander research tradition and the story of the 38 witnesses, we explore the consequences of the story for the discipline of psychology. We argue that the story itself plays a key role in psychology textbooks. We also suggest that the story marks a new way of conceptualizing the dangers of immersion in social groups. Finally, we suggest that the story itself has become a modern parable, the telling of which has served to limit the scope of enquiry into emergency helping.

Key Words: KITTY GENOVESE; BYSTANDER INTERVENTION; PARABLE; GROUPS; HELPING.

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Several past presidents of the American Psychological Association (APA) have used the pages of *American Psychologist* to extol the virtues of ‘giving psychology away’ to the general public. George Miller’s 1969 presidential address to the APA was the first to argue for a socially engaged discipline that envisioned psychology ‘as a means of promoting human welfare’ (1969, p. 1064). This was echoed over three decades later in Philip Zimbardo’s APA presidential address in which he reflected on the capacity of social psychological knowledge to offer a more positive contribution to social welfare and social life (Zimbardo, 2004).

It is with these clarion calls in mind that we revisit one of the most powerful and influential moments in the history of social psychology. The story of the 38 witnesses who watched from their apartments (and then failed to intervene) while Kitty Genovese was murdered on the street below, has an iconic place in social psychology. The events of that night in New York in 1964 paved the way for the development of one of the most robust phenomena in social psychology – Latané and Darley’s (1970) ‘bystander effect’ (the finding that individuals are more likely to help when alone than when in the company of others). It also led to the development of the most influential and persistent account of that effect, the idea that bystanders do not intervene because of a diffusion of responsibility, and that their perceptions of and reactions to potential intervention situations can be negatively affected by the presence (imagined or real) of others.

And yet, as we will show with extracts from transcripts of the trial of Winston Mosley for the murder of Kitty Genovese (and other legal documents associated with the case), the story of the 38 witnesses is not supported by the available evidence. Moreover, despite this absence of evidence, the story continues to inhabit our introductory social psychology textbooks (and thus the minds of future social psychologists). It remains one of the key ideas that social psychology has ‘given away’ to the public at large and the story has appeared in a variety of popular cultural forms including a graphic novel (Moore & Gibbons, 1995) and a motion picture, *The Boondock Saints* (Duffy, 1999). We will suggest that, almost from its inception, the story of the 38 witnesses became a kind of modern parable

– the antonym of the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’. Where the ‘Good Samaritan’ parable venerates the individual who helps while others walk by, the story of the 38 witnesses in psychology tells of the malign influence of others to overwhelm the will of the individual. The power of the story comes from the moral lesson about the dangers of the group, and how the presence of others can undermine the bonds of ‘neighborly’ concern. We will argue that the repeated telling of the parable of the 38 witnesses has served to curtail the imaginative space of helping research in social psychology. Moreover, while we are keen to argue that the Kitty Genovese incident has been repeatedly misrepresented, our major concern is not so much with revisionist history as with the functions of it as a parable. We argue that these functions are particularly dependent on the form and content of the story as it is typically presented in social psychology texts. We argue that this story has been of considerable importance and requires correction or at least qualification (e.g. Harris, 1979).

Despite the fact that the ‘bystander effect’ has become one of the most robust and reproduced in the discipline (Latané & Nida, 1981; Dovidio, 1984), it has been noted that research on helping behavior lacks utility (Latané & Nida, 1981). A clear illustration of this is the failure of helping research to merit inclusion in Zimbardo’s catalogue of the positive contributions that psychology has made to social life (Zimbardo, 2004). We suggest that the story of the 38 witnesses, and its message that groups have a negative effect on helping, has meant that psychologists have been slow to look for the ways in which the power of groups can be harnessed to promote intervention. By looking at the generation, perseverance and consequences of the story of the 38 witnesses we reflect on how new, more positively orientated strands of helping research can be generated to sit alongside the canonical work in this tradition.

### *The parable of the 38 witnesses*

We begin with some important clarifications. Firstly, in seeking to challenge the story of the 38 witnesses this paper draws a clear distinction between the story itself and the research tradition that emerged in response to it. The story of the 38 witnesses undoubtedly prompted Latané and Darley to begin the work that demonstrated the bystander effect (Evans, 1980). These laboratory studies were elegant, inventive and extremely persuasive. By focusing on real life behavior in

emergencies – but varying the number of people believed to be present – Latané and Darley were able to argue something which was counterintuitive (for the historical moment); that the presence of others inhibits helping. It does not matter to the bystander effect that the story of the 38 witnesses may be misconceived. As Merton and Barber (2006) point out, there are plenty of important discoveries in the history of the human sciences that have emerged from such serendipitous circumstances. We are not therefore claiming that challenges to the story of the 38 witnesses invalidate the tradition of work on bystander intervention. Nor are we saying that bystanders fail to intervene in serious incidents when it would appear that they both could and should.

Moreover, we will not here explore in detail why this particular murder at this particular time and place led to such a major research effort and why it appears to have so captured the imagination of psychologists, police and public. However, just as certain crimes become ‘signal crimes’ (Innes, 1995), that is incidents constructed as warning signals about the distribution of risks across social space, so too the 38 witnesses story that envelops the Kitty Genovese murder seemed to signal something about the wider culture.

Finally, we want also to avoid perpetuating the unreflexive collapsing of the sexual assault and murder of Kitty Genovese with the story of the 38 witnesses. As Cherry (1995) points out, they have been folded together within the discipline of psychology with particular consequences. Outside psychology the focus has been on other things. For example, Brownmiller (1975) explores the fate of Kitty Genovese as a way of examining forms of male violence in a patriarchal society. The story of Kitty Genovese is much more than the story of the 38 witnesses. However, what does matter for the present purposes is the perseverance of the story of the 38 witnesses and the way it has populated and dominated the imagination of those who think about helping behavior in emergencies.

### *The murder of Kitty Genovese*

Kitty Genovese was murdered and sexually assaulted early in the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> March 1964 in the Kew Garden’s district of Queens, New York. While a report of the killing appears the same day in the Long Island Press (“Woman Knifed”, 1964), the story of the 38 witnesses was developed by two journalists, Martin Gansberg and A.M. Rosenthal. Gansberg wrote the first article on the 38

witnesses for the New York Times two weeks after the Genovese murder. Gansberg's now famous article, published on 27<sup>th</sup> March on page 1 of the New York Times, opened under the headline '37

Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police. Apathy at Stabbing of Queens Woman Shocks Inspector':

For more than half an hour thirty-eight respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens. Twice the sound of their voices and the sudden glow of their bedroom lights interrupted him and frightened him off. Each time he returned, sought her out and stabbed her again. Not one person telephoned the police during the assault; one witness called after the woman was dead. (Gansberg, 1964, p. 1)

Later in 1964 the story was developed into a short book, 'Thirty Eight Witnesses', by the then Metropolitan Editor of the paper A. M. Rosenthal (Rosenthal, 1964).

Just as the original 38 witnesses story provoked Latané and Darley's landmark research program, reports of the incident in social psychology (commonly found alongside the work of Latané and Darley) are pervasive. As an illustration, we took ten of the most popular textbooks aimed at the undergraduate market (Aronson, 1988; Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2005; Baron & Byrne, 2003; Brehm, Kassim & Fein, 2002; Brown, 1986; Franzoi, 2003; Hogg and Vaughan, 2005; Moghaddam, 1998; Myers, 2005; Sabini, 1995). The Kitty Genovese story appears in all of them. In seven books it is accorded its own text box, subsection or picture. In two, the story is used both as an exemplar of helping behavior and as a guide to best practice in research methods (Aronson et al, 2005; Moghaddam, 1998). All textbooks give the impression that Kitty Genovese was killed on the street where the murder could be seen by others. Almost all texts suggest that the 38 witnesses watched from their windows as the murder unfolded before them (the exceptions are Hogg & Vaughan, 2005, who suggest that most of the witnesses could hear rather than see, and Moghaddam, 1998, who suggests that only some of the witnesses could see). All claim that nobody intervened, or called the police, until after Kitty Genovese was dead. Here is a typical example taken from Eliot Aronson's *The Social Animal*, a text we have chosen not because we think it bad, on the contrary, because we think it good (it was a course text in one of our departments for a number of years):

Several years ago, a young woman named Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death in New York City ... What is interesting about this event is that no fewer than 38 of her neighbors came to their windows at 3:00 AM in response to her screams of terror – and remained at their windows in fascination for the 30 minutes it took her assailant to complete his grisly deed, during which time he returned for three separate attacks. No one came to her assistance; no one so much as lifted the phone to call the police, until too late. Why? (Aronson, 1988, p. 45)

The account is typical, if rhetorically a little more florid than some: the 38 people are ‘neighbors’ (implying community); they are at their windows (by implication, having a good view of the events); they all remained there for fully 30 minutes in ‘fascination’ (there is something unsavory about their attention); yet no one ‘so much as lifted the phone’ (implying that effective action was easy and obvious). Like other accounts, Aronson’s depends heavily on Gansberg’s newspaper article from 1964. Yet, as we will now demonstrate, the story of the 38 witnesses as presented in Gansberg’s article, which forms the basis of these popular accounts of the murder of Kitty Genovese, is not supported by the available evidence.

#### *Challenging the story of the 38 witnesses*

An analysis of the court transcripts from the trial of Winston Moseley, plus an examination of other legal documents associated with the case and a review of research carried out by a local historian and lawyer (Joseph De May Jr.), suggests a rather different picture of the events on that night. De May Jr’s meticulous analysis has taken place over the last several years and it has deservedly begun to attract attention (e.g. Rasenberger, 2004, Takooshian et al, 2005), though the implication of our argument is that it deserves still more. De May Jr has identified errors of fact and misleading wording in the original report by Gansberg. For example, in Gansberg’s first paragraph, De May highlights the following: not all of the 38 witnesses were eye witnesses (some only heard the attack); witnesses have since claimed that the police were called immediately after the first attack; none of the eye witnesses could have watched Kitty or her attacker for the full 30 minutes because

they were only visible to them for a few moments; there were two separate attacks not three (a point which was corrected in later New York Times articles, e.g. Dowd, 1984); the second attack occurred inside part of a building where only a small number of potential witnesses could have seen it; Kitty was still alive when the police arrived at the scene.

Each of these points deserves some expansion. At the trial, five witnesses from the apartments overlooking Austin Street were called (Robert Mozer, Andre Picq, Irene Frost, Samuel Koshkin and Sophie Farrar). Of these, three were eyewitnesses who saw Genovese and Moseley together. It is of course possible that there were other eyewitnesses who refused to come forward or to testify, or whom the prosecution declined to call (though it is likely that the prosecution would call those witnesses with the best and most complete views of the incident). However, Charles Skoller, the Assistant District Attorney at the time of the murder has stated “we only found about half a dozen that saw what was going on, that we could use” (quoted in Rasenberger, 2004, p. 14). Skoller is in no way attempting to defend the residents of Kew Gardens, stating “I believe that many people heard the screams...It could have been more than 38” (quoted in Rasenberger, 2004, p. 14) and that two witnesses to the attack were not called as witnesses in court as “their horrible conduct could distract jurors from the death penalty Moseley deserved” (Takooshian et al, 2005, p. 67). However, the evidence suggests that there were rather fewer than the 38 eyewitnesses referred to in the textbooks and no list of the 38 has ever been made available.

As De May has noted, the three eyewitnesses who gave evidence at the trial all report that their first glimpse of the emergency did not easily afford a judgment that a murder was taking place. For example, witness Frost describes how when she first looked out of her window, she saw Moseley and Genovese ‘standing close together, not fighting or anything’ (People v. Moseley, 1964, p. 63) and so went back to bed. A second witness (Picq) describes seeing Genovese ‘laying down and a man was bending over her and beating her’ (People v. Moseley, 1964, p. 60). Finally, a third witness (Mozer) reports that he ‘looked out of the window and looked across the street and...saw this girl at the book store, kneeling down, and this fellow was over her in a kneeling position’ (People v. Moseley, 1964, p. 58). None of the witnesses reported seeing the stabbing, and Mozer



(corroborated by Picq) reports shouting at Moseley enough to scare him off. Perhaps most importantly, when Moseley was frightened off after the first attack, witnesses describe Kitty Genovese as getting to her feet and walking (slowly and unsteadily) around the corner of the building on Austin Street. It appears she was trying to make her way to the entrance of her apartment, which was round the back of the building. In doing so, she went out of sight of the eyewitnesses in the Mowbray and West Virginia Apartments who had no line of sight to the back of the building. The second and final attack took place *inside* the building in the stairwell of 92-96 Austin Street, where none of the trial witnesses could see. The spatial arrangement of the buildings in which witnesses were located, and the site of the first and then the second and fatal attack, make it impossible for all but one of the known witnesses (Carl Ross, see Takooshian et al, 2005) to observe the attack unfold in its entirety or to witness the sexual assault and the murder itself in the stairwell.

As for the question of the lack of bystander intervention, there was clearly sufficient intervention to cause Moseley to abandon the first attack<sup>1</sup>. In addition, a sworn affidavit by a former NYPD police officer, at the time a 15-year old eyewitness, claims that his father did make a call to the police station after the first attack (Hoffman, 2003). Similar claims have been made on behalf of other residents. For example, a cluster of newspaper reports accompanying Moseley's unsuccessful application for a retrial in 1995 report Kew Gardens' residents' claims that calls were made to the police (Fried, 1995, Sexton, 1995; Taylor 1995). These reports also make the point that calls were made despite the difficulties of contacting the police at the time. There was no 911 system in place in 1964 and calls to the local police station were reportedly not always welcomed by officers who would often give callers 'the bitter edge of their tongues' (Rosenthal 1964, p. 67, although, according to Charles Skoller, "response time was still excellent in 1964", Takooshian et al, 2005, p. 67). The negative reaction of the police was suggested to be a particular issue for reports from places like Austin Street as there was a bar on the street that reportedly had a reputation for trouble (Taylor, 1995; Weiland, 1964). In fact, one report suggests that it had shut earlier than its usual 4:00am closing on the night of the Genovese murder because fighting had broken out (Girsky, 2001). Finally, Skoller also reports how one resident of Austin Street (Sophie Farrar), having been

telephoned by Carl Ross about the incident, “immediately phoned the police then rushed to Kitty’s side” (Takooshian et al, 2005, p. 67). While, of course, this collection of retrospective accounts does not necessarily provide adequate grounds on which to accept or reject claims regarding the lack of intervention, again the available evidence fails to support the parable of the 38 witnesses watching and doing nothing while a woman was murdered.

Thus the three key features of the Kitty Genovese story that appear in social psychology textbooks (that there were 38 witnesses, that the witnesses watched from their windows for the duration of the attack, and that the witnesses did not intervene) are not supported by the available evidence. Outside social psychology, and prior to De May’s work, concerns about the status of the story have been raised at various points over the years. For example, in a newspaper article marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder, the Daily News reporter John Melia concluded that on investigation he too ‘began to have doubts ... as to the number of people who saw something that night’, and makes the claim that a journalist sent to investigate the original story came back and told his editor not to run the story because the witnesses did not exist in the numbers claimed (Melia, 1984). However, although alternative and apparently more accurate accounts of the incident are becoming more readily available (see for example Rasenberger, 2004, 2006; Takooshian et al, 2005), most recent social psychology textbooks persist with versions of the story that resonate with Gansberg’s original account. It is interesting to speculate why that might be.

The grip that the original story has on the popular and professional imagination seems impervious to correction thus far. In some respects this has similarities with Harris’s (1979) analysis of the perseverance of misrepresentations about Watson and Rayner’s (1920) attempts to condition the infant ‘Little Albert’. Harris points out that textbook writers are prone to reliance on secondary sources and once a story becomes established it is simply echoed by later versions. Harris also suggests that textbook writers are motivated to reduce complexity, keeping the story simple in an attempt to engage undergraduates. As Samelson (1974) argues in his analysis of origin myths in psychology, the mythmaking process is not designed to defraud the public. It emerges as “a byproduct of pedagogy: as a means to elucidate the concepts of scientific specialty, to establish a

tradition, and to attract students” (Samelson, 1974, p. 233). This tradition is also highlighted by Lubek and colleagues (Lubek, 1993; Stam, Lubek & Radtke, 1998) who suggest that social psychology textbooks “serve a knowledge-conserving function for the discipline...there is a great deal of temporal consistency, a shared core of material and authors to be discussed, and the adoption of a homogenous, conservative perspective” (Stam et al, p. 156). Thus this example of the perseverance of factual inaccuracies regarding the circumstances surrounding the murder of Kitty Genovese is arguably a particular instance of a more general feature of textbooks.

*The functions of the parable.*

Given this relatively benign account of the perseverance of stories like the 38 witnesses, does it matter that they continue to thrive inside social psychology? We suggest that the continued presence of the 38 witnesses story in introductory textbooks is particularly problematic. As a number of scholars have pointed out (Morawski, 1992; Smyth, 2001a, 2001b), textbooks (in general) are important because they present the content and parameters of a discipline to potential new members of that discipline. In addition, they are one of the key transmitters of psychological knowledge to those outside the discipline – how psychology is ‘given away’ (Morawski, 1992). It is important therefore that the information contained within them is accurate. However, we suggest that there is a particular importance attached to stories such as the Kitty Genovese episode when they appear in psychology textbooks. The importance lies in a key difference in the way knowledge claims are made in psychology compared with other science disciplines. For example, Smyth (2001a, 2001b, 2004) has compared the presentation of material in textbooks in biology, physiology, statistics and psychology. She argues that, while the other science disciplines present information as abstracted ‘facts’, psychology textbooks tend to use experiments to demonstrate generalizations and to qualify claims by extensive reference to previous literature. More specifically Smyth claims that, where textbooks in other science disciplines describe the facts that readers must digest, “psychology textbooks present experiments and other evidence as the content that the beginner must learn. Psychology presents paradigms of doing, not knowing” (2001b, p. 609). In the absence of a written tradition that describes uncontested facts, illustrative stories (such as the 38 witnesses narrative) play a key part in linking the

catalogues of experimental and empirical material with the world of the known. They populate the psychological imagination of those who seek to integrate the psychological research with the social world.

It is here that the parable of the 38 witnesses who failed to help has its power. It provides a 'cautionary tale' about dangers to neighborliness that result from the conditions of modern life. It defines the parameters of the problem that social psychology needs to address. Attention is focused on the psychological consequences of the presence of others. For example, Francis Cherry (1995) points out that in concentrating on the number of bystanders present in an emergency, Latané and Darley neglected to translate other important features of the Kitty Genovese murder into the experimental paradigm. Cherry argues that gender relations and violence, for example, were key social and psychological aspects of the case, both of which failed to receive the empirical attention they deserved in the strand of social psychological research prompted by the story. They were crowded out by the shock of the failure of the group. Thus, the first consequence of this parable is that it contributes to defining the phenomenon of helping in emergencies in terms of the pathology of the group.

A second important consequence of the parable is the way Darley and Latané use the story to link together the figure of the group with the figure of the crowd. Of course, it is arguable whether individuals standing at the windows of their apartments, physically separated by bricks and mortar (though perhaps aware of each others presence) should be described as a group, let alone a crowd. And yet, from the outset, Darley and Latané suggest that the interpretation of such events should be understood in terms of crowd phenomena. For example, in their 1970 book, *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He [sic] Help?* Latané and Darley argue that the behavior of the bystanders was neither helpful nor heroic; but it was not indifferent or apathetic either. "Actually, it was like crowd behavior in many other emergency situations" (p. 4). By seeking to locate the explanation in crowd terms, they are attempting to move away from explanations based on individual pathology. In fact, the motivation of researchers such as Latané and Darley seems to be to redeem those accused of

immoral or unfeeling behavior. However, by drawing analogies with crowd behavior they import the contemporary intellectual suspicion of collective phenomena. For example, in one of Latané and Darley's (1968) earliest papers on the bystander effect they argue that, "it has often been recognized (Brown, 1954, 1965) that a crowd can cause contagion of panic, leading each person in the crowd to overreact to an emergency to the detriment of everyone's welfare. What is implied here is that a crowd can also force inaction on its members." (p. 217). This is a subtle but important transformation of the dangers of the crowd. Latané and Darley are proposing that the danger of the crowd (and by extension the group) comes not through excitation (and thus disorder) – but rather through inhibition (and the enforcing of inaction on the reluctant bystander).

This figure of the group as the source of *collective inaction* is an important moment in the history of social psychology. Until the emergence of the bystander tradition, the most common way that the dangers of group presence could be imagined was in terms of its capacity for violence – in other words, its capacity for action. As Reicher (1984, 1987) has argued, this preoccupation with groups and violence was a consequence of shifts in social and spatial relations. The social changes brought about by industrialization and the rise of the urban masses had led to a fear of the potential power of the collective for the existing social order. In an urban setting, groups provided the conditions for anonymity, which in turn created the potential for violence. However, with the story of the 38 witnesses comes the opposite possibility. The threat to social stability and social values still comes through the anonymity of the collective, but now the danger lies in passivity and inaction.

*From groups as active threat to groups as passive threat*

In many different historical periods groups, especially groups described as crowds, have been portrayed as dangerous entities. It was at the end of the nineteenth century that crowds and crowd behavior became a particular focus of interest in the social sciences (Nye, 1975, van Ginneken, 1992). Most commonly, these were attempts to explain crowd behavior in terms of universal aspects of human nature. The features of accounts from this period have become a familiar intellectual backdrop to psychological work on crowds and collective behavior in general (Herman, 1995). In

this tradition, crowds are a dangerous threat to social stability; crowds and people in crowds lack rationality; the irrationality of crowds is contagious; crowds are suggestible and credulous; the behavior of crowds reveals a primitive nature stripped of the constraints usually provided by other psychological qualities; people in crowds lose their sense of individuality and so on. Many of these features have found their way into empirical and laboratory based theories of group behavior. For example, classic deindividuation theory incorporates several of the assumptions about dangers of violence and instability that might result from immersion in the group (Reicher, 1987). It comes as no surprise therefore that Zimbardo's (1970) seminal work on classical deindividuation theory is entitled 'The human choice: Individuation, reason, and order versus deindividuation, impulse, and chaos'.

In recent years there have been critiques of this classic approach to deindividuation phenomena (Deiner, 1980; Postmes & Spears, 1998). However, these critiques have focused on the question of rationality – or more specifically whether the violence that sometimes emerges under deindividuation conditions can be explained not in terms of pathology, but in terms of the qualities of the social context or the social identities that are salient at the time. What none of these critiques draws attention to, perhaps because it seems so obvious as not to require comment, is that in all of these accounts of the negative impacts of the collective, the dangers are always manifested in the potential for action. The ability to act was at the root of the power of crowds and was a key source of their perceived social threat. The associated notions of energy and excitement were also frequently invoked in explaining crowd behavior. For example, in his theory of crowd behavior, Floyd Allport (1924) developed the notion that crowds provided a great deal of stimulation, and this stimulation acted as an energy source that could result in an over excitation that removed the 'protection' of learned reflexes to set free unconstrained instinctual behaviors. Le Bon (1895), and the later experimental analogues of Zimbardo (1970), also describe the presence of the group as creating the conditions to release energy which was had the potential for destruction. Yet in reports of the Kitty Genovese incident, the bystanders are most often described as if they were a group who remained 'at their windows in fascination'. It is their inability to act – the suppression of action as a result of the presence of others – that undermines social values and social order. Within the social sciences, part of the force of the

Kitty Genovese narrative comes from its articulation of the opposite of crowds as acting. Instead, the story of the murder made it clear that crowds, and groups more generally, could be dangerous because they promoted inactivity. Similar ideas are explored in Milgram's (1970) work on the cognitive overload that results from living in cities. However, where Milgram is concerned with the impact of the presence of others on individual cognitive functioning, the bystander tradition introduces the concept of the power of the collective to impose inaction on individuals. In the bystander tradition, failure to act does not come from an overloaded information processing system, but from the psychological inhibition that results from the presence of others.

### Conclusion

Through the parable of the 38 witnesses, urban crowds or groups became more dangerous than ever before because they threatened social disintegration whether they were active or inactive. Latané and Darley's ingenious experimental work and developing theoretical work added to this impression because the more people there were, within limits, the more dangerous the onlooking crowd became. One might be tempted here to conclude that the tale exemplified the aphorism attributed to Edmund Burke that: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing" - except that this quote too is a myth. As far as we know, Burke never wrote such sentence. (Instead, it appears to have gained currency in the second half of the twentieth century starting with its mistaken inclusion in the edition of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations of 1968, see Boller and George, 1989<sup>2</sup>). By challenging the story of the 38 witnesses, we begin to uncover alternative formulations of the potential of the group in the context of helping behavior.

Of course, there is important research that suggests techniques for enrolling individuals to become involved in emergencies (see Cialdini, 2001 for example). These usually involve making direct appeals, engendering responsibility or creating 'social proofs' so that individuals can overcome the negative impact of the presence of others and act collectively. These are not quite the same as research which attempts to harness the power of the collective in the first place (but see Reicher, Cassidy, Hopkins & Levine, 2006). The relative paucity of work on the positive contribution that groups can make to helping is somewhat surprising. In his seminal work on the importance of

argumentation for the development of psychological theory, Billig (1987) argues that psychological knowledge is always a balance of argumentative positions. Every argument is opposed by its opposite (what Billig, following the Greek philosopher Protagoras, calls the opposition of *logoi* and *anti-logoi*). In the helping tradition, the argument that groups inhibit helping should be haunted by the possibility (at least) of the opposite – that groups can facilitate helping. In addition, in line with the urgings of Miller and Zimbardo with which we opened, if psychology is to be given away then surely this potential avenue of investigating the facilitation of helping deserves as much attention as its inhibition.

It is important to acknowledge that stories of heroic helping do make their way into both introductory and other social psychology texts. But when they do they are often stories of individuals who act in a pro-social way *in spite* of the presence of others (see for example Oliner & Oliner, 1988). There are very few attempts to explore the potential contributions that groups and group processes can bring to promoting collective intervention in emergencies. There are, of course, elements of the literature where, in part due to the investigative spirit of the original researchers testing the boundaries of their developing theory, a more positive story has attempted to get a foothold. For example, even as he was helping to establish the early bystander effect literature, John Darley was also publishing papers such as ‘Do groups always inhibit individuals responses to potential emergencies?’ (Darley, Teger & Lewis, 1973). Darley et al’s answer was that the possibility of communication between bystanders inoculated against the bystander effect. In similar fashion, Rutkowski, Gruder and Romer, (1983) have argued that the opportunity for groups to become more cohesive in advance of an emergency would also prevent group inhibition of helping. However, these research strands are few and far between. As a focus for research, the study of the possible conditions under which groups can facilitate helping seems to have withered on the vine.

We argue that stories like Kitty Genovese and the 38 witnesses play a key role in populating the psychological imagination in a way that precludes thinking about the positive contributions that groups can make to intervention. The point here is not to challenge the findings from the wealth of research that has led from this story. Rather that by problematising the story that has such a



conceptual grip on the discipline, the power of the story itself is challenged, and we might begin to look at this area of inquiry in new ways. The incident and its report played a historic role in promoting research on helping behavior and in presenting the notion of social inhibition as potentially dangerous. However, while the reported nature of the event was important in opening up an area of research and, indirectly, its most well known and influential social psychological explanation, it also ensured that attention remained diverted from the possibility of groups and crowds as promoters of positive behaviors. The fact that the story is a stubborn and intractable “urban myth” (Takooshian et al, 2005, p. 66) makes its continued presence at the heart of the social psychology of helping even more unfortunate. By debunking the myth, and reconsidering the stories that we present in textbooks, we might open up the imaginative space for social psychologists to develop new insights into the problem of promoting helping in emergency situations. A focus on group level approaches to emergency helping – to complement the existing research cannon on the bystander effect – might serve to establish the social psychology of helping as one of the more positive traditions of research that psychology can give away (Zimbardo, 2004).

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this attempt at intervention is also noted in Gansberg's (1964) original article. While this feature of the story also appears in textbook accounts, rather than being presented as a form of intervention (shouting out of the window so that the perpetrator runs off, the victim gets up and walks away out of sight, presumably giving some reassurance that the intervention attempt was successful), it is instead fitted into the overall 'inaction' narrative. It also is worth noting that this example illustrates the need to understand bystander behaviour from the bystander's perspective – as Latané and Darley were often keen to point out. By starting with the death of Kitty Genovese and working backwards, we exclude a consideration of the experience of those present at the time.

<sup>2</sup> Who knows, given the dates, the Kitty Genovese story may even have helped the beginnings of the misquoting of Burke.