

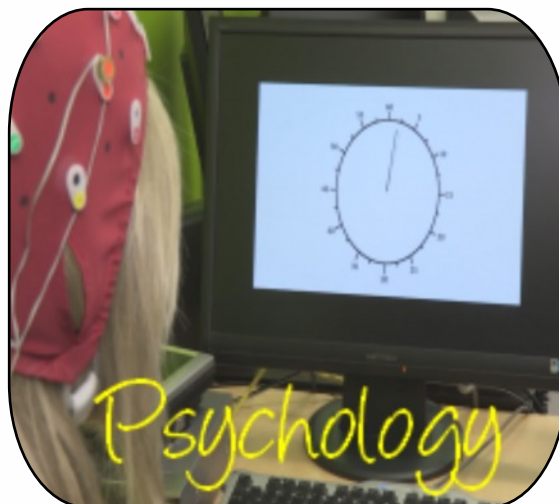


Psychology



Why Did No-One Help James Bulger?

Steve Taylor



Why Did No-One Help James Bulger? 1

We'll probably never really know what made two 10 year olds, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, abduct, torture and then kill two year old James Bulger on a terrible February day a quarter of a century ago. But there's another question arising from the James Bulger murder that has implications for all of us. Why did no-one intervene to help the defenceless toddler?

James wasn't spirited quickly away to some quiet place. He was taken from the crowded Strand shopping mall in Bootle then walked, and occasionally dragged, by Thompson and Venables through busy Liverpool streets in broad daylight for two and a half hours before they killed him. For much of this time, he was visibly injured and clearly distressed.

Of the hundreds of people who must have seen the boys, 38 came forward to give evidence.

Most of the witnesses who came into close contact with the boys noticed the fresh injury on James' forehead and that he was crying and clearly unhappy. Others actually saw mistreatment. A woman on a bus saw one of the boys throwing James over his shoulder and she called to the other passengers in horror, a woman looking out of her window remembered seeing him being punched, a driver for a dry cleaning firm said the boys were dragging James along the street, a cab driver saw one of the boys kicking him, and a woman out shopping remembered seeing the toddler trying to run away and being caught by one of the older boys. In spite of all this, only two of the 38 witnesses made any attempt to intervene.

The 'Liverpool 38' were shamed in some sections of the press for not doing more and, in some reports, this apparent indifference to others was even seen as a characteristic of Liverpool society. But this was nonsense. There are reports from all over the world of bystanders failing to act in circumstances where the danger was far more obvious than it was in the case of James Bulger. For example, a man drowned off the coast Alameda, California, as dozens of people, including police and fire-fighters, stood watching. A woman who collapsed in the ER of a Brooklyn hospital was ignored by other patients and security guards. By the time medical help arrived she was dead. In Fosham, China, a two-year-old girl, Wang Yue, was run over twice in a side street and later died from her injuries. Close circuit television recordings show 18 pedestrians walking by and ignoring her as she lay bleeding in a gutter.



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Psychological research has consistently shown that lack of intervention towards people in trouble is far from unusual. While most people say in interviews they would help if they saw a person injured or at risk of harm, the bleak truth is that most of them don't. As part of a film we were making on bystander intervention, we arranged for an actress to collapse in a busy shopping mall then watched in disbelief as the majority of shoppers passed by ignoring her, even though they had clearly seen her. Our data analysis showed that approximately only 1 in 25 people stopped to offer help. More dramatically in New York, security expert, Bill Stanton, staged the kidnap of a 7 year old actress. Even though the girl was screaming for help as she was dragged across a street, most bystanders either ignored her or moved quickly away.

So what makes bystanders more or less likely to get involved when they see someone who, like James Bulger, may be at risk? Well, one explanation lies in the number of people who witness an incident. It's often said there's safety in numbers, but as far as helping people in trouble, it seems it's just the opposite. The presence of others usually discourages people from intervening in an emergency situation. This is known as the bystander effect and it was first demonstrated experimentally by Columbia University psychologists, John Darley & Bibb Latané half a century ago.

In a famous experiment, volunteer student subjects from Columbia University were taken to a room and asked to fill out a questionnaire. As they were doing this, smoke started billowing into the room from an air vent. When subjects were alone in the room, 75% of them got up to investigate where the smoke was coming from. However, when there were others in room who were part of the experiment and had been instructed to ignore the smoke, only 10% of subjects got up to investigate. Film of the experiment shows them coughing, rubbing their eyes and waving smoke away from their faces, but they're still sitting there doggedly filling in their questionnaires. In another experiment, where subjects filling in the

questionnaire heard a woman apparently calling for help from an adjoining room, the results were the much same. When subjects were alone, 70% got up to investigate the cries for help. However, when they were with others who appeared indifferent to the calls for help, only 7% went to investigate what was happening next door.

Darley and Latané explained the bystander effect by what they called diffusion of responsibility. If we witness someone who needs help when we're alone, then we have a responsibility to intervene whether or not we choose to act on it. However, when there are other people around who are also capable of helping that responsibility is diluted. There are others there who can help. Maybe they're better qualified? Why should it be me? Besides, as the smoke experiment showed, if there are others around who don't seem too concerned then maybe it's not that much of a problem.

The bystander effect can *help* us explain the lack of intervention for James Bulger. The Strand and the streets around it were full of people and even if you did notice a toddler with a bruise on his face looking upset, well, there were plenty of other people around to help. However, according to Mark Levine, Professor of Psychology at Exeter University, the bystander effect doesn't tell us the full story. Levine studied the evidence given by the 38 witnesses at the trial of Thompson and Venables. Most of these accounts don't reflect simple bystander apathy. What they do suggest is a more complex reaction: an initial concern for James followed by reassurance because they believed, or they were told, that the boys were brothers. For example, one witness said she thought at first that James had got separated from his mum, but as she got up to go over to him she noticed one of the boys waving him over. 'I thought that's OK then', she said, 'that must be his brother'. Another, when asked when she didn't inquire further about James' injuries replied, 'Well I automatically thought they were brothers'. And a witness

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who did ask about the lump on James' head was told by one of the boys that he had fallen down and that they were taking him home. Whereupon the witness told them to 'hurry up and get home and show his mum his head because it's sore'. It's clear from her account that she believed they were all going to the same home.

Not only were witnesses reassured by the belief that the injured toddler was in the care of his siblings, there was also the question of whether or not they even had the authority to take further action. 'There is something about the category *the family*', Levine says, 'that often appears to rule intervention on the part of non-family members'. And this was something Venables, in particular, exploited to prevent further witness intervention. One of the last witnesses to see James was man on his way home from work. 'What's up with the little fella?' he asked bending down to look at crying toddler. Venables replied quickly that was fed up with having to look after his little brother. 'It's always the same', he added, 'I'm going to tell my mum I'm not having him no more.' And reassured that the boy was in loco parentis and that this was family business, the witness continued on his way home.

It's also significant here that the witnesses who came closest to rescuing James had been given a different version of the older boys' relationship to James that was much closer to the truth. It was starting to get dark and the boys were approaching their final destination when an elderly woman with a dog stopped them to ask them about James' injury. Venables replied that he didn't know. They'd found him like that in the Strand and were taking him to the police station. A younger woman, with a little girl, overheard this and without the cloak of 'family' around the boys, she was instantly suspicious. She hadn't liked the look of the older boys from the start. And why, she asked herself, had they walked all that way from the Strand? She decided that she would take James to the nearby Walton Lane police station. But her little girl was tired

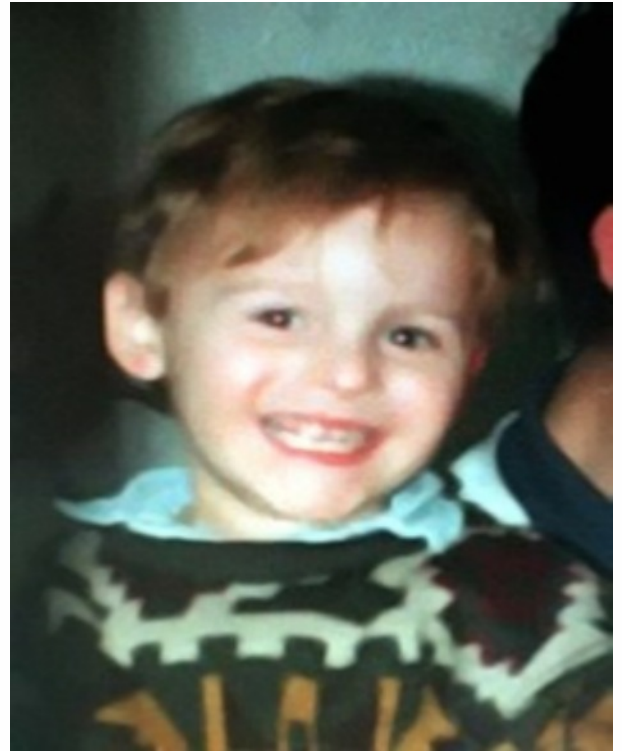
so she asked the older woman if she'd look after her for a few minutes. However, the older woman refused. Her dog didn't like children. So the boys went quickly off assuring the women that they knew the way to the police station. The last realistic chance of saving James had evaporated.

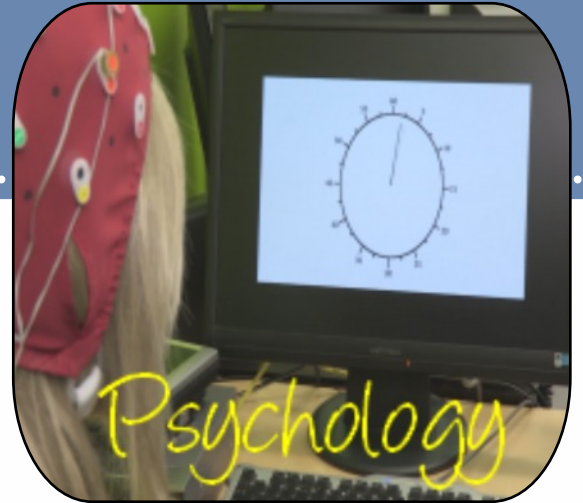
Bypassing the police station, the boys made their way to the railway bridge on the corner of Walton Lane and Cherry Lane and from there they pulled James up the steep, grassy embankment that lead to the railway line and the derelict Walton & Anfield station. And it was here that they tortured James. They tossed blue paint into his face, threw stones at him, beat him with bricks, almost certainly sexually abused him, and finally battered him with an iron bar. When they thought he was dead, they dragged his half naked body to the railway line, covered it, and laid it on tracks in the hope people would think it was an accident. Then they went off to the video shop.

The failure of any of the witnesses to step in and prevent this appalling tragedy was not, as we have seen, due to bystander indifference so much as the perception that the boys were family and therefore intervention neither necessary nor appropriate. Only the state intervenes in family life. And this seems to be a belief shared by most of us. When we showed a sample of people a film of what appeared to be a parent hitting a child in supermarket and asked them what they would do, almost everyone said, some of them reluctantly, they would not intervene. But maybe legislation could help to change this attitude and widen our sense of responsibility. Mark Levine thinks so. He compares Britain to Sweden where since 1970 it has been illegal for anyone, including parents, to hit a child. As a consequence of this he says, 'Swedes began to feel all adults had responsibility for the welfare of all children'. Should Swedes see a child smacked in a supermarket everybody there has responsibility as a crime has been committed, so they're more likely to intervene and the boundaries surrounding families become less exclusive.

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It also seems there may be a strong case for making people more aware of bystander intervention, or good Samaritanism, in schools, in universities and even in work places. There is evidence that it would pay dividends. For example, psychologist Arthur Beaman gave a sample of students a workshop on bystander apathy which looked at research, such as Darley and Latané's experiments and also at case studies that illustrated some of the dreadful consequences of non-intervention. All students said they were glad they had attended and follow up research showed that those who had attended the workshop were twice as likely to intervene and offer help than a control group who hadn't attended. The more strategies we devise like this to try to encourage more individual responsibility towards others who may in need of help, the more likely it is we can prevent tragedies like the appalling death of tiny James Bulger, that leave some bystanders thinking for the rest of their lives, I wish I'd done something.





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