

An Analysis of the Psychological and Social Factors behind Bystanders' Complete Inaction during the Tangshan Restaurant Attack

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Abstract. This study analyzes the psychological and social factors contributing to bystander inaction during the June 2022 Tangshan Restaurant Attack. By examining surveillance footage and witness interviews through the frameworks of the fight-or-flight response, diffusion of responsibility, and conformity effects, this research aims to understand the motivations behind observer passivity. Results indicate various stress responses like freezing impaired emergency assessments by witnesses. Moreover, the diffusion of responsibility among the group and conformity to others' inaction diminished personal accountability. Therefore, the collective lack of intervention was partially due to physiological constraints hindering rational decision-making under crisis conditions, coupled with social pressures that obscured individual senses of obligation. This research provides context-specific insights into real-world applications of established bystander theories. Its multidimensional perspective expands beyond single-issue narratives, with implications for improving emergency response training to circumvent psychological barriers.

Keywords: Bystander effect, The fight/flight/freeze response, Diffusion of responsibility, Conformity and social influence.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the psychological and social factors that contributed to the lack of intervention by bystanders during the Tangshan Restaurant Attack in June 2022. By analyzing existing research on topics like the fight or flight response and the bystander effect, as well as interviews with eyewitnesses, this study aims to provide insights into the underlying motivations behind observer inaction in emergency situations.

1.1. Background

In the northeastern city of Tangshan on June 10, during the early hours, a distressing incident unfolded at a barbecue restaurant. A woman and her three friends were subjected to a brutal assault by a group of men after she turned down one of their advances. The surveillance footage of this assault depicted the woman being forcibly dragged by her hair, struck with bottles and chairs, and repeatedly assaulted with kicks to her head. This incident sparked outrage in China, with numerous individuals calling for the attackers to face consequences and urging the authorities to be held accountable for their perceived failure to respond promptly [1]. Yet most onlookers failed to intervene or promptly call for help. This incident sparked widespread public debate and scrutiny of bystander behavior during crises. This paper seeks to examine the psychological and social reasons for this phenomenon. Specifically, what psychological factors inhibited bystanders from taking effective action during the Tangshan Attack? How did social influences shape individual reactions in this context?

1.2. Literature Review

Previous studies have examined phenomena like the fight or flight response and diffusion of responsibility which can paralyze onlookers during emergencies [2,3]. However, less is known about how these concepts manifest in real-world cases, especially in the Tangshan Restaurant Attack. Examining eyewitness testimonials can provide valuable context-specific insights not captured through experimental research alone. Moreover, after the incident, much of the media discussion

centered around the feminist perspective of violence against women. This paper aims to provide a more nuanced and multi-dimensional analysis. By examining eyewitness accounts and applying psychological theories, the goal is to understand the incident from additional perspectives relating to factors like stress responses, social influence and diffusion of responsibility among bystanders. This more comprehensive approach seeks to provide deeper insights beyond a single-issue framing of the event.

1.3. Research Method

This study analyzes surveillance footage of the Tangshan incident alongside post-event interviews with witnesses. Applying theories of the fight or flight response, conformity, and the diffusion of responsibility, it conducts a textual analysis to identify psychological and social dynamics at play. It is found that during the Tangshan Attack, physiological and cognitive constraints associated with the fight or flight response, coupled with diffusion of responsibility and conformity pressures from peers, collectively inhibited rational decision-making and intervention among many bystanders on site.

2. The Difficulty of Emergency Reaction

2.1. The Fight/Flight/Freeze Response

The principal catalyst for bystander inaction is the difficulty of emergency response. In the throes of crises, events unfold rapidly, often leaving bystanders immobilized. Consequently, they grapple with formulating an effective response to the unexpected situation. This was substantiated by a 2016 study published in the scholarly journal *Prehospital Emergency Care* [4]. The study posits that heightened emotional states are akin to the classic fight/flight/freeze response elicited by stressful situations. Individuals engulfed by the chaos of a disaster may not be capable of discerning and executing rational decisions. The fight/flight/freeze response is an involuntary human reaction triggered in emergency scenarios. The stress emanating from the situation often overwhelms individuals' cognitive abilities, rendering them incapable of rational thought or action. Consequently, rather than initiating immediate action, they may become physically inert. It is clear from an analysis of the behavior of the victims of the Manchester Air Disaster. Many of the delays were due to freezing. In fact, several people were seen staying in their seats until they were engulfed in flames. Research has found that the act of "freezing" is a common response among disaster witnesses. over the years, Witnesses of various disasters have testified to the death of victims who could have escaped had an appropriate response to the emergency occurred [3].

2.2. The Fight/Flight/Freeze Response during the Tangshan Restaurant Attack

Bystanders must first understand the context before intervening: what occurred, the severity, the parties involved, and the nature of the dispute (civil, criminal, etc.). This requires rapid assessment and judgment in high-stress situations. The incident in question unfolded over just three minutes, insufficient time for clear-headed analysis.

Upon scrutinizing video footage of the incident, this paper identified several behaviors indicative of this response, thereby offering insights into the underlying motivations. For instance, several bystanders depicted in the video appeared visibly shocked by the unfolding events, yet remained stationary and unresponsive for several moments before exhibiting any reaction.

Nonetheless, relying solely on individuals' visible actions to deduce their motivations presents a challenge. To address this, post-incident interviews with witnesses should be conducted to unmask their motivations during the event. The responses elicited during these interviews shed light on the influence of freezing response in the lack of intervention by some witnesses. For example, one anonymous witness recounted, "I was stunned. I didn't know the correct course of action" [4]. Another witness, Xuanxuan, confessed, "The conflict erupted so abruptly that I was shocked. Upon seeing the bleeding victim, I couldn't help crying" [5]. Yet another witness admitted that their peers were gripped by fear, requiring efforts to calm them down [6]. In less than four minutes, the perpetrators had fled

the scene, leaving everyone in a state of shock from which they struggled to emerge. These testimonials suggest that the witnesses were taken aback by the situation, thereby inhibiting their capacity to formulate an effective response. These reflect the hallmark psychological and physiological effects of freezing – cognitive paralysis, emotional liability, and dissociation from the realities of the present moment. Psychologically, freezing induces cognitive paralysis. Visible only to outside parties as motionless yet internal witnesses experience overwhelmed emotionality and confusion impeding rational decision-making. Physiologically, the prefrontal cortex, responsible for rational decision-making, becomes temporarily impaired, while the amygdala triggers an extreme stress reaction centered on emotional processing rather than immediate action.

Further, it can disrupt people's ability to think rationally, preventing them from making rational judgments about whether or not they should come to the rescue when things go wrong. Numerous bystanders were plagued by feelings of regret or guilt in the aftermath of the incident. As one individual reflected, "If I could revisit the moment, I would never have allowed the situation to escalate to such a degree" [6]. Another male witness echoed these sentiments, stating, "I deeply introspected whether I could have managed the situation more efficaciously. Perhaps there were more effective intervention strategies" [5]. Both testimonies underscore the confusion and lack of objectivity most eyewitnesses experience when freezing overrides rational assessment of risk. They were unable to determine the best response amidst the emergency's time-sensitive demands and complex dynamics. This highlights the challenge all bystanders face in transmuting their post-incident clarity back into informed action during a crisis before physiological reflexes take over. Chronic feelings of self-blame can persist as a result of this discrepancy. The witnesses' struggle to determine the most appropriate response amidst the urgent demands and intricate dynamics of the emergency is a testament to the challenges inherent in translating post-incident clarity into informed action during a crisis before physiological reflexes take over. The discrepancy between their retrospective analysis and the constraints of the moment can contribute to the persistence of chronic self-blame and remorse.

3. Bystander Effect

The bystander effect has emerged as a prevailing framework for interpreting the incident, as evidenced by its widespread adoption in media discourse and scholarly literature. This theoretical construct posits that as the number of bystanders increases, the sense of personal responsibility diminishes among individual onlookers. Within the context of this particular incident, two primary factors can be identified as contributing to the manifestation of the bystander effect.

3.1. Diffusion of Responsibility

The phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility plays a significant role in the emergence of the bystander effect. This effect refers to the decreased likelihood of individuals providing help in the presence of others, since the presence of multiple bystanders reduces the cost of nonintervention and thus inhibits helping behaviors [7]. It reduces the perceived personal cost of nonintervention, as individuals believe that others will bear the responsibility instead.

In the context of the Tangshan Restaurant Attack, witnesses found themselves in a situation where fellow bystanders were present. The perceived cost of not intervening diminished. The presence of bystanders creates a diffusion of responsibility, where each individual feels less personally responsible to take action. This diffusion occurs because the responsibility for helping is distributed among all bystanders, leading to a diffusion or dilution of individual accountability. As a result, individuals are more likely to assume that someone else will intervene, leading to a collective state of inaction.

A study conducted by Darley and Latané further illustrates this dynamic. In the experiment, participants were placed in an emergency situation where they believed they were engaged in a discussion with other participants. However, the other participants were actually pre-recorded voices. The researchers hypothesized that as the number of participants in the discussion increased, the time

taken for the subjects to receive help would also increase [8]. The findings of the study supported the researchers' hypothesis, highlighting the influence of diffusion of responsibility on the bystander effect. The smaller the group size, the more likely it was for the "victims" to receive timely assistance. Interestingly, even when help was not provided, the participants who witnessed the emergency displayed signs of stress and concern for the victims. This suggests that the lack of intervention was not necessarily due to indifference but rather a result of individuals grappling with the diffusion of responsibility and experiencing uncertainty about the appropriate course of action.

3.2. Conformity and Social Influence

3.2.1 The Dynamics of Conformity and Social Influence in Emergency Situations

Social influence is a psychological process whereby individuals interpret the inaction of others as a signal that the expected behavior in a given situation is to refrain from taking any action. In emergency situations, bystanders often rely on cues from their peers to determine how they should respond. If they observe other bystanders failing to take action, they may interpret this as an indication that the situation is not urgent or that intervention is unnecessary. Consequently, perceiving the lack of action among others leads the bystanders to perceive the situation as less critical and reinforces the belief that inaction is the normative behavior [7]. This social influence can give rise to a conformity effect, wherein individuals conform to the behavior of their peers, even if it conflicts with their initial inclinations. In social life, people tend to imitate the actions of others in terms of their behavior and conduct. This is more prominent in special situations.

In social life, individuals often exhibit a tendency to imitate the actions and behaviors of others, particularly in situations that deviate from the norm. This phenomenon becomes even more pronounced when individuals find themselves confronted with emergency situations. Despite being cognizant of their responsibility to intervene and provide assistance, people commonly succumb to the influence of unanimous behavior exhibited by those around them. This is because people have an innate desire to be accepted and approved by their social group. In situations where the majority of onlookers remain passive, individuals may fear deviating from the perceived social norm and potentially facing disapproval or social sanctions. Consequently, they conform to the behavior of others, even if they internally recognize the importance of taking action. The interplay between informational and normative social influence creates a powerful dynamic that can hinder individual agency and impede the initiation of help. For instance, a study involving male undergraduates placed participants in a room filled with smoke, either alone, with two non-reacting individuals, or in groups of three. Consistent with predictions, participants were less likely to report the presence of smoke when in the presence of passive individuals (10%) or in groups of three (38%) compared to when they were alone (75%) [9]. This finding suggests that the interpretation of the ambiguous situation played a mediating role. Seeing others remain passive caused participants to conclude that the smoke was not dangerous. This conformity to the actions of others perpetuates the bystander effect and contributes to the collective inaction observed in many emergency situations.

One such mechanism is known as informational social influence, where individuals look to others for guidance and rely on their actions as a source of information. The more uncertain the individual is about the correctness of his judgment, the more likely he is to be susceptible to both normative and informational social influences in making his judgment [10]. When faced with uncertainty in an emergency situation, bystanders may interpret the lack of response from others as a signal that no action is necessary or appropriate. This collective inaction then reinforces the bystander effect, leading to a diffusion of responsibility among the group.

3.2.2 The Conformity and Social Influence during the Tangshan Restaurant Attack

Considering this underlying mechanism, a disconcerting phenomenon becomes evident when examining the surveillance video footage of the incident: a notable absence of individuals taking proactive measures to intervene. The collective inaction exhibited by all parties involved not only perpetuated a prevailing sense of apathy but also reinforced the notion that no individual should have

extended assistance. This outcome highlights the reinforcing nature of inaction, wherein the lack of response from bystanders engenders a diminishing desire among others to engage, ultimately reinforcing the societal norm of non-intervention.

After reviewing some aftermath interviews, this paper discovers that during the Tangshan Restaurant Attack, many witnesses' action was intervened by their companions. One female witness's attempt to help was thwarted by her companion's action. The companion's intervention can be seen as an enforcement of an unspoken rule against getting involved in troublesome situations, thus reinforcing bystander inaction. Another witness revealed in her interview, "My friends didn't want me to mind my own business. My friends pulled me out, they didn't want me to get into trouble" [6]. This statement underscores the influence of peers in shaping behavior, further highlighting the role of normative social influence. The desire for group acceptance and fear of social sanctions from her friends shaped her reaction in the moment. In this case, the presence of cohesive groups heightens conformity pressures as individuals seek guidance from influential members. The friend group's cohesion and unanimous signal that "getting into trouble" by intervening was not acceptable overwhelmed the witness' personal inclination to aid the victim.

4. Summary

This paper sought to answer the research question concerning the psychological and social factors that inhibited bystander intervention during the Tangshan Restaurant Attack. The analysis found that the collective inaction of witnesses was partially due to the cognitive and physiological constraints associated with the fight-or-flight stress response, often referred to as "freezing". When confronted with a sudden crisis, many onlookers experienced shock, confusion, and an inability to rationally assess the situation or determine an appropriate course of action within the tight timeframe. Additionally, social phenomena such as the diffusion of responsibility and conformity effects also significantly contributed to observer passivity. With multiple individuals present, each bystander felt less individually obligated to aid the victims. They assumed that others would intervene instead. Conformity pressures further reduced a sense of personal accountability, as onlookers took cues from the inactivity of others around them and interpreted this as a signal that no action was required. Peer influence even deterred some from helping, despite their personal inclinations.

A key limitation of this study was the reliance on available video footage and witness testimonials rather than experimental research. While these sources provided important context, their subjective nature presents interpretive challenges. Additionally, the cultural specifics of Chinese society, such as the emphasis on social harmony, were not fully explored.

This paper expands the discussion beyond single-issue framings to a multidimensional perspective. Its analysis of real-world application contributes valuable insights for emergency management. Better awareness of the psychological barriers posed by the innate human fight/flight/freeze response could enhance response trainings to help circumvent freezing effects and allow conscious thought to override unconscious reaction during crises. Understanding the social drivers of passivity may also aid reforms focused on cultivating a sense of individual responsibility among crowds. Placing more emphasis on individual responsibilities to take action during emergencies could help mitigate the diffusion of responsibility and lead to the "tag effect", wherein the first bystander to act serves as a cue inspiring others to follow suit. This work provides a foundation for future research integrating cultural dimensions. Examining how societal factors like emphases on social cohesion or conflict avoidance may impact intervention could offer additional policy considerations around modifying group dynamics to support emergency responses. Overall, this study enhances knowledge to inform improved management of bystander dynamics during crises.

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