

The Enlightenment Effect

I don't mean to say that thinking and reaching decisions have no influence on behavior. But behavior does not merely enact whatever has already been thought through and decided. It has its own sources, and is my behavior, quite independently, just as my thoughts are my thoughts, and my decisions my decisions.

Bernard Schlink

In 1964, Kitty Genovese was brutally attacked and killed in New York City in the presence of 38 individuals who observed her killer stalk and stab her in three separate attacks over the course of a half hour. Not one of the 38 bystanders came to her aid or called the police before she was killed. This incident "shook" the soul of New York and galvanized social psychologists into a program of research on the failure of bystanders to come to the aid of distressed individuals.

I always spend a good deal of time reviewing this research in my social psychology class. Last year, after we had completed our discussion, a student wrote to me about an experience she had while driving to the University one day. She said she had always considered herself a helpful person and that when we had discussed the Kitty Genovese case in class, she found it hard to believe that no one had come to her aid or even called the police. She told me that she was the daughter of a retired police officer and had learned from a very early age to help others when she could and, in fact, had often come to the aid of

individuals in distress. She added that she liked to believe that she'd help in almost any situation. She then recounted the following experience:

"I dropped off my daughter at her childcare and hurried off to school. I had a mid-term to take at 8am and I had to get to the park-and-ride pronto, before I missed my morning bus. I was *running late* [Italics mine] and knew that bus was the only way I'd get to school on time. As I crossed an intersection I noticed an accident off to my left...My instincts said, "Go see if anyone is hurt!" but I was in a hurry to get to my mid-term. I found myself driving down the road on the way to take a silly test, instead of stopping to help people who could have been seriously injured."

The student recalled how she had invoked all sorts of justifications for her inaction as she was driving by the accident. She reported there were other people on the road who she thought would stop to help or use their cell phone to call for assistance. The accident didn't appear to be that serious, so she thought the people were probably fine and would only be irritated by her interference. Finally, she said her mid-term exam was important and she wasn't sure if the instructor would allow her to make it up

Although she made it to the exam on time, she was troubled by the experience. In thinking back over it, she felt that none of the excuses justified her failure to intervene. She recalled the many studies we had considered in class about the failure of bystanders to come to the aid of distressed individuals. In one, seminary students on their way to deliver a speech on the Good Samaritan, passed right by a victim slumped in a doorway when they had to hurry to arrive

on time for their talk.¹ She recognized that this study had much in common with her own experience. In both instances, the need to hurry somewhere had taken precedence over behaving helpfully. She concluded her note with this comment:

"I had an added factor that is important to mention. I knew of the studies and had that information in my mind, even as I drove past the accident. I took the time to mentally note that my situation resembled the seminary student study. *Prior knowledge* [Italics mine] of helping behaviors or non-helping behaviors didn't cause me to stop and help. At most, that knowledge simply caused me to recognize my behavior and reflect on it."

I was taken aback by the intelligence of her remark. For it confronts squarely one of the most vexing questions in the behavioral and social sciences: Does scientific knowledge influence future behavior? The student hoped that it would, hoped that she would be more likely to help in the future in light of what she had learned about the bystander problem. At the same time, she admitted that she wasn't sure she would and that even *knowing* about the research on the bystander problem would not overcome the influence of more pressing demands.

The student's prediction about her own behavior flies in the face of ordinary beliefs about the role of knowledge and information on behavior. Ask anyone in advertising or marketing, for example. Almost without exception, the communication campaigns designed by the individuals in these fields are

¹ Darley, J. & Batson, D. (1973). "From Jerusalem to Jericho:" A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 27, 100-108. In this experiment theological students were asked to give a talk on job opportunities for seminary students, or the parable of the Good Samaritan. While walking to another building to give their talk (either late or on time), they passed a victim (coughing and groaning) slumped in an alleyway. The theological students going to give a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan were no more likely to help than those giving a talk on job prospects for seminary students. *Thinking* about the Good Samaritan did not increase helping behavior. Being in a *hurry* decreased it.

information intensive, in spite of all the evidence demonstrating that, by itself, information often has very little or no impact on behavior.

The "enlightenment effect" is the term Kenneth Gergen, a social psychologist, has given to the effect of scientific knowledge on behavior. According to Gergen, knowledge about social psychological research "liberates" one from its influence. With respect to helping behavior, Gergen, puts it this way "...knowing that persons in trouble are less likely to be helped when there are large numbers of bystanders may increase one's desire to offer his services under such conditions."²

Gergen suggests this can happen for any one of three reasons. He claims, for example, that psychological principles tend to be prescriptive, that is, they tell us how we should behave. In the future, armed with this information, we might want to behave in the ways the principles indicate are desirable, say, by helping another person in distress. Secondly, knowledge of psychological findings can sensitize us to alternative courses of action, so we will not be so constrained in responding, when we are subsequently faced placed a comparable situation. Finally, Gergen suggests that sometimes individuals come to *resent* the control implied by psychological principles. After learning about them, they may attempt to reassert their freedom by acting contrary to their behavioral implications.

Do we behave any differently once we know about psychological research than we would if we had not been so informed? Fortunately, the question lends itself to empirical research. A few years ago, with the help of a college senior working on her senior thesis, I decided to conduct a field experiment on knowledge of the

² Gergen, K. 1973, Social Psychology as History. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26, 309-320.

bystander problem. I wanted to find out if students at a local high-school would be more likely to help a person in need if they had studied the bystander problem than if they hadn't. I also wanted to find out if their willingness to help would vary as a function of how much they knew about the research. To do so, I selected four classes and varied the amount of information the students in each were given about the bystander problem.

One group, the high information condition, was shown two films that explored the research on helping behavior. They also read a journal article on the bystander problem, discussed both the films and the article in class, and were asked to write a brief essay on the topic. Another group, the moderate information condition, viewed only one of the films and discussed it briefly afterwards. The third group, low information condition, simply saw the film without discussion. Finally, these three groups were compared with a control group of students who were not given any information about the bystander problem.

The day after the films were shown, the students were asked to take a brief psychological test in another part of the school. As they were on their way to the testing room, they were confronted with an individual who needed assistance. Half of the students passed by a confederate who dropped a load of books in the hallway, while the other half passed a wheezing confederate who was staging an asthma attack on a stairway.

The outcome of the study was clear.³ Only about 50% of the students stopped to help the confederate, regardless of whether it took the form of picking up dropped books or asking the asthma victim if there was anything they could do

³ Katzev, R & Averill, A. 1984. Knowledge of the bystander problem and its impact on subsequent helping behavior. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 123, 223-230.

to help. More importantly, the amount of information individuals had about the bystander problem had no influence on the likelihood that they would render assistance. Students in the high information condition were no more likely to help than students in the control or other treatment conditions. In this experiment then, having been informed that bystanders often fail to come to the aid of distressed individuals and, in some cases reading and discussing the topic with their classmates, did not lead these students to be any more helpful than those who had not been so informed.

This is not an isolated finding. It has been observed in a surprising number of other situations where individuals who have been informed of psychological research do not behave any differently than those who are naive with respect to this information. In a striking study, Shelton gave subjects complete information about Stanley Milgram's well known experiments⁴ on obedience and disobedience in which subjects appear to inflict increasingly severe pain on others when they were asked to by an authority. After giving her subjects a detailed account of Milgram's methods and research findings, Shelton asked them to serve as experimenters in a similar study. Of her 24 informed subjects only 1 resisted the demands of the authority to continue the experiment in spite of the clearly visible distress of the confederates in her study. She says:

"For these participants, knowing that people are willing to coerce others and cause distress to obtain a scientific understanding and feeling the original Milgram study to be personally distasteful, did not preclude behaving in a manner similar to that obtained in the original Milgram study."

⁴ Shelton, G. A. (1982). The generalization of understanding to behavior: The role of perspective in enlightenment. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

The increasing public awareness of Milgram's research provides an additional test of the enlightenment effect. His research has been widely written about in the media, portrayed in television plays and films, and was the subject of at least one popular song. The studies have been discussed in countless public forums and many academic disciplines. Milgram's work is as well known as any program of research in psychology. If, as a result of this dissemination process, individuals have become more "enlightened" about unreasonable demands of authority, one might expect a diminution in the overall level of obedience in ensuing replications of his work. However, a recent analysis of these replications, which covered a 22 year period, from 1963 to 1983, found no systematic decline in obedience during this time. The overall level of obedience in the most recent studies was just as high (65% of the subjects) as it was in the earlier ones ⁵

The enlightenment effect has been explored in many other situations. Investigators have given individuals a good deal of information about the "risky shift" that occurs in group decision making situations. This effect refers to the fact that a group of individuals often makes riskier decisions than individuals who are asked to decide the issue alone. Giving individuals in a group setting complete information about the risky shift did not make their decision any less risky than it was when they had no knowledge of the effect.⁶

In another study, investigators examined the role of knowing about the primacy effect in forming an impression of another individual. This effect refers to the fact that personal adjectives appearing at the beginning of a list used to form an

⁵ Blass, T (2000). The Milgram paradigm after 35 years: Some things we now know about obedience to authority. In Thomas Blass (Ed) *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

⁶ Bermant, G. & Starr, M. (1972). Telling people what they are likely to do: Three experiments. In *Proceedings of the 80th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

impression of someone else have more influence than adjectives at the end of the list. Informing individuals about the primacy effect had no influence on the ratings they formed of an individual in a subsequent impression-forming task.⁷

These findings are consistent with recent research on informing individuals about common errors and biases in making social judgments. For example, in a recent study individuals were told about research findings on the hindsight bias - the tendency of individuals to overestimate the accuracy of their prior judgments.. The participants in these experiments were given information about the hindsight bias and full details of the experimental procedures that they would experience. The task required them to answer difficult questions that called for numerical estimates. After completing this task, they were given the answers to the questions and then asked to recall their initial estimates. The amount of bias they displayed in recalling their *initial* judgments was unaffected by their knowledge of the hindsight bias, nor were they less biased than the participants who had no knowledge of the bias.⁸ In both cases, individuals tended to overestimate the accuracy of their earlier estimates.

The increasing application of compliance techniques in sales and marketing situations led me to conduct one other test of the enlightenment effect. As compliance techniques have become more sophisticated and increasingly subject to misuse, I have been led to wonder if there is anything a person can do to resist their influence. Robert Cialdini, who has carried out an influential program of research on compliance techniques, has argued that greater awareness of the principles of compliance is our strongest defense. He suggests that recognizing

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Pohl, R. F. & Hell, W. (1996) No reduction in hindsight bias after complete information and repeated testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 67, 49-58.

when such techniques are being used and knowing something about how they work should help individuals to resist their influence.⁹

To test Cialdini's notion I asked individuals to participate in an experiment in which they were first asked to prepare for a reading comprehension test by reading materials on compliance techniques. One group read sections of one of Cialdini's studies on the Low Ball technique in which a target request to comply is preceded by a *less* costly one. Another group read an experiment he had conducted on the Reciprocal Concession technique, in which the target request to comply is preceded by a *more* costly one. The Control group read a report that had nothing to do with compliance techniques.

As they were nearing the end of the reading comprehension test, the participants were interrupted by a confederate who attempted to gain their compliance on another task by employing either the Low Ball or Reciprocal Concession procedure. A little over a week later, these two procedures were employed once again during a telephone call which asked the participants to complete a survey about the recent Presidential election.

We found that individuals who knew about either compliance technique were just as likely to comply as those who had not been previously informed.¹⁰ Thus, we could find no support for Cialdini's claim that knowing about compliance principles will protect individuals from their influence. At least this knowledge was not sufficient to defend against the compliance pressures employed in this situation.

⁹ Cialdini, R. B. (1985). *Influence: Science and Practice*. Glenview, IL: Foresman.

¹⁰ Katzev, R. & Brownstein, R. (1989). The influence of enlightenment on compliance. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 129, 335-347.

Taken together then, it appears that the doubts expressed by the student in my social psychology class about the influence scientific knowledge were well founded. She had hoped that information she acquired about the bystander problem would make her a more helpful person and that something as trivial as a test or social obligation would not take precedence over the health and welfare of others. However, she wasn't entirely sure that it would and she knew that she would probably be largely influenced by conditions in the immediate social situation--her own schedule and the presence of other people.

A lifetime of studying psychology has convinced me that this point of view is essentially correct, that all too often we overestimate the influence of thinking on behavior. As we have seen, knowledge of social psychological principles does not appear to have a strong effect on behavior. Instead, it represents only one of the many factors that influence behavior, especially in situations where there are strong external pressures. In these situations, individuals may find it very difficult to translate their knowledge into action.

The task before us now is to learn how to overcome this effect, to learn how to make our knowledge more salient in those situations where it might prove useful. This often occurs naturally, when, for example, newly acquired information is still readily available. However, the information becomes less and less available with the passage of time. Individuals then need to be reminded with a personal appeal or a conspicuous signal, or learn how to prompt themselves in those situations where the information is clearly applicable. Once its relevance is recognized, individuals may be more likely to bring their knowledge to bear on their actions. Until we develop more effective ways to accomplish this, we must be careful not to overestimate the extent to which a psychologically informed public will behave any differently than an uninformed one.

