Martial Arts to the Rescue: How Martial Arts Training Saves Others

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Most People Do Not Help

After a late night at work, twenty-eight-year-old Kitty Genovese parked her car less than a hundred feet from her Queens, New York apartment. As she closed her car door, she noticed a threatening man nearby. Sensing that she might be in danger, she tried to run to her apartment. She failed. Not only did the man catch her, he repeatedly stabbed her. She cried out for help, and people in nearby apartments stirred. A man leaned out his seventh-floor window to watch. He yelled for the attacker to leave Kitty alone, but he did not call the police. No one called the police. No one did anything to help. Thirty-eight people witnessed Winston Moseley, a full-grown man, stab one-hundred-five pound Kitty Genovese seventeen times, rape her, and ultimately kill her. It was forty minutes before anyone notified the police, but by then, it was too late.[1]

Once notified, it only took the police two minutes to report to the scene.[2] If just one person had picked up his phone when Kitty first cried for help, she may have lived. The country was shocked.[3] No one understood how thirty-eight people could watch something so gruesome and not help.

The tragedy begat a new line of psychological research, revealing that when a group is confronted with an emergency, such as the stabbing of Kitty Genovese, individuals do not reliably offer to help.[4] The years of research to follow illustrate that in emergency situations, bystanders go through five stages of information processing and decision-making.[5] A bystander must notice the situation, properly label it as an emergency, assume responsibility to help, decide how to help, and implement the decision to help. Successful and accurate completion of one stage is required to progress to the next stage, and according to the model, a person will only engage in helping behavior if she completes each stage.[6] A closer look at these stages compared to the psychological characteristics and development attendant to martial arts training reveals that in emergency situation a martial artist is more likely to intervene than a non-trained individual.

Stage One: The Bystander Must Notice

Clearly, the bystander must first notice the situation before there is any chance of offering help.[7] Empirical studies indicate that martial artists are more aware of their surroundings than non-trained individuals, suggesting that even at this simple stage martial arts training is helpful.

An Arizona State University study concluded that length of "training time [in taekwondo] was significantly related … to more socially perceptive behavior."[8] Furthermore, another study demonstrated

that martial artists rate their likelihood of being attacked higher than non-trained individuals.[9] It also reported that individuals rate their likelihood of being attacked higher after a year of training than they did before training, suggesting that it is the training that causes the awareness, not the awareness that causes the training.[10] Feelings of vulnerability to attack increases everyday vigilance, meaning a martial artist is more likely to notice a nearby emergency situation than a non-trained individual.[11]

The vigilance and observance of martial artists is evidenced in the actions of Nathan Ingram, a karate instructor who foiled a bank robbery attempt in New York.[12] The robber handed a note to the teller, and it went unnoticed by the other patrons. Mr. Ingram, however, observed that the teller looked frightened.[13] As the robber walked away from the window, Mr. Ingram struck him and then incapacitated him until the authorities arrived.[14] Mr. Ingram's heightened perceptions enabled him to help in this emergency while other bystanders were not even aware an emergency existed.

Stage Two: The Bystander Must Label the Situation an Emergency

Noticing a situation is not sufficient to make an individual intervene.[15] She must also properly assess the situation as an emergency before she will take any action.[16] Often, even when people initially notice a situation, they dismiss it as a non-emergency. For example, one of the neighbors who heard the Genovese attack later told the police that she thought

it was just a "lovers' quarrel."[17] She had noticed the event, but did not properly label it as an emergency.

Psychological literature suggests that martial arts training is advantageous at this stage also. First, martial artists' heightened awareness, as aforementioned, increases the likelihood that they will notice details signaling an emergency that others might miss. Moreover, an extensive 2003 study concluded that people trained in martial arts recognized dangerous situations more often than their non-trained counterparts.[18] Over three-hundred participants were presented with various situations, and those with martial arts training properly assessed situations as dangerous more often than those without training.[19]

Additionally, at this stage of processing, people are likely to take cues from those around them.[20] A person is more likely to assess a situation as a non-emergency if another bystander does not react to the situation as if it is an emergency.[21] Psychological research illustrates that martial arts training increases an individual's independence from others.[22] Because independence makes an individual less susceptible to following the actions of others, a martial artist is more likely than a non-trained person to decide a situation is an emergency, even if those around her do not.[23]

Again, the positive effects of training are evident in Mr. Ingram's story. Although Mr. Ingram was seemingly the only person perceiving the actions at the teller window to be an emergency, he did not second-guess himself as many would.[24] He acted anyway and effectively stopped the robber.[25] A non-

trained person may have thought the calm behavior of everyone around him meant that he was misinterpreting the station and it was not an emergency, leading him to remain unhelpful.

Stage Three: The Bystander Must Assume Responsibility to Help

In addition to noticing and properly assessing an emergency, a bystander must also conclude that she has a responsibility to act before she will intervene. It is clear that the witnesses to the Genovese murder noticed it, and many undoubtedly realized it was an emergency, but they did not conclude that they had a responsibility to act. Years of research has shown that as the number of witnesses to an emergency increases, each individual's feeling of responsibility decreases.[26] This is known to psychologists as the "bystander effect."[27] While the phenomenon is widely-experienced, studies have demonstrated that some individuals are less susceptible to it than others.[28] Because the bystander effect is so powerful, it is at this stage that martial arts training can make the most difference.

The most accepted explanation for the bystander effect is diffusion of responsibility, i.e., that each person believes someone else will act, and thus no one thinks of herself as responsible.[29] Further research has reported some personality traits and characteristics that tend to make individuals accept responsibility even in group situations. Many of these traits are the same traits psychologists have noted present in martial artists.

A few studies have revealed that leadership traits make an individual more likely to respond to a situation, even when others are present and unresponsive.[30] At the same time, a plethora of studies illustrate that martial arts training encourages leadership characteristics in individuals.[31] Thus, by virtue of their leadership characteristics, martial artists are more likely to resist the bystander effect than non-practitioners.

Furthermore, research shows that people who readily accept responsibility are much less prone to the bystander effect.[32] Many martial artists have observed that the longer a person trains, the more she accepts responsibility.[33] The very structure of many programs also integrates the acceptance of responsibility into their rank system. Often higher ranks are responsible for instructing lower ranks, and even when they are not officially charged with such responsibility they undertake it by default. Lower ranks habitually look to higher ranks for guidance, sometimes even beyond technical requirements of their program, and the higher ranks respond accordingly. Research indicates that taking responsibility in one facet of life often creates a global personality trait.[34] Because martial artists have to accept responsibility as part of their training, they therefore often become responsible individuals in general, and are less likely to be affected by the bystander effect.

Research into the bystander effect also illustrates that those with special expertise or knowledge are more likely to take responsibility for helping in an emergency than the average individual.[35] Martial arts

provide such expertise and knowledge for dealing with an interpersonal attack. Thus, a martial-arts-trained individual is more likely to intervene in a physical altercation, by virtue of her martial arts training, than non-trained individuals. Additionally, martial arts training improves dexterity, so a martial artist may feel she has the expertise to help when the situation calls for dexterity and athleticism, not only when it calls for traditional defense against an attack. Moreover, many martial arts programs entail some training in cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and First Aid, giving practitioners in those programs the special knowledge and expertise needed to respond to many medical emergencies. Thus, by arming its practitioners with the special knowledge and expertise to deal with emergencies, martial arts training makes an individual more likely to intervene in an emergency situation.

Similar to having expertise to help, those who are confident in their ability to help are also more likely to feel responsible in emergency situations.[36] For example, a person may have once watched a video explaining CPR, but if she did not get an opportunity to practice, she might not feel responsible to try. While she technically has the knowledge needed to help, she lacks the confidence to do so. This is where training (and rank) versus a single self-defense class may make a difference. While a person who participated in a short-term class may have the knowledge of how to fend off an attack, she may not be confident in her ability to do so successfully. On the contrary, an individual who has been practicing the techniques for years will to be more confident

that the techniques will be successful, and is therefore more likely to step forward.

Finally, the general personality trait of self-efficacy is connected to assuming responsibility in an emergency.[37] Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief about her capability to exercise influence over events that affect her life.[38] A person with low self-efficacy will often feel hopeless and victimized when bad things happen in her life, for example, whereas a person with high self-efficacy will consider what actions she may take to mitigate the problem and prevent it in the future.

Researchers have recorded high levels of self-efficacy among those trained in martial arts.[39] One study tested individuals before and after a year of training and found that after a year of training individuals felt more control over things that happen, over avoiding an attack, and over preventing injury.[40] Those who studied martial arts also felt more in control of these things than those who participated in other physical activity for a year.[41] Furthermore, another study reported that the self-efficacy growth resulting from self-defense training was not limited to the context of their training; instead, those individuals showed an increase in the global personality trait.[42]

If one connects the studies indicating that individuals who have leadership traits, are accepting of responsibility, have special knowledge and expertise for handling emergencies, feel confident, and have high self-efficacy are less susceptible to the bystander effect, with the studies that reveal these traits in marital artists, it is not surprising that martial artists are often the individuals who intervene in emergencies.[43]

For example, when a woman in a burning building in New York cried for help, it was a martial arts instructor, Mr. Sam Gibbs, who immediately ran to help.[44] He caught a woman who jumped from the second story, then ran into the burning building to save her child, while others just stood watching.[45] For some reason, Mr. Gibbs felt he had the responsibility and capacity to help, when others did not. He was not affected by the bystander effect, and his martial arts training may explain why.

Stage Four: The Bystander Must Decide How to Help

Of course, noticing an emergency and feeling responsible to help is not quite enough. A person must also decide *how* to help, before she will do anything.[46] Here the connection to training is quite simple: A person with martial arts training may know how to intervene, whereas a person without training may not. For instance a trained person may know how to disarm or incapacitate an aggressor, while other onlookers do not.

Sometimes, however, no specific training is needed. Kitty Genovese did not necessarily need someone to fight her attacker. A call to the police would have sufficed. The problem is that most people do not even get to this stage because they do not successfully pass through the previous stages (notice, emergency assessment, and responsibility). In this regard, martial arts training is helpful because it increases the likelihood that an individual will get to this stage in the first place and will be able to help, even if that simply means dialing 9-1-1.

Stage Five: The Bystander Must Implement the Decision to Help

It is possible for an onlooker to notice a situation, assess properly that it is an emergency, feel responsibility to help, decide how to help, and yet, not actually help.[47] Psychologists recognize that fear of injury to oneself is a major contributory factor in an individual's decision not to help at this stage.[48] Because martial artists are more likely to feel competent to respond appropriately, and to control the situation, they are less likely to feel that their own injury will result. In fact a study confirmed that martial artists feel they have a greater ability to prevent injury during an altercation than non-trained individuals.[49] Moreover, many studies have reported that martial artists experience less general anxiety than non-trained individuals,[50] and also that individuals experience less general anxiety the more years they train.[51]

Psychologists also recognize that a person's mood affects her decision to help.[52] A person in a positive mood is much more likely to help than a person in a negative mood.[53] The most common explanation for this phenomenon is that people in good moods are less concerned with themselves and more sensitive to the needs of others, and are also more likely to think positively about those around them.[54] Many studies have recognized the psychotherapeutic benefits of martial arts training.[55] While the connection is indirect, the psychotherapeutic benefits of martial arts may mean that a trained person is more likely to be in a positive mood when a given situation arises, and therefore more likely to help.

Finally, to be motivated to take action a person must believe her actions will be effective. Again, a person may technically be trained in CPR, for example, but not having opportunity to practice, she may be hesitant to actually perform it in an emergency. The repetition in martial arts training solidifies effectiveness of techniques in the minds of practitioners. Thus, a well-trained martial artist is unlikely to lack confidence that her actions will be successful. Once more, we can look to Mr. Ingram (the karate instructor who stopped the bank robber) as an example. A less experienced person may not have been confident in his ability to incapacitate the robber, but Mr. Ingram had been practicing karate for fourteen years.[56] After fourteen years of training, he was surely familiar with how his strike would affect the robber, and that his technique to subdue him would be effective. Fear of failure did not prevent him from helping.

Incorporating Emergency Response Directly Into Training

As demonstrated herein, there are many ways in which the study of martial arts can make an individual more likely to intervene in an emergency situation. Instructors should be cognizant of this fact, and prepare their students even more directly. They should emphasize that training is not just for the protection of self, but also for the protection of others. Studies show that mere awareness of the bystander effect helps overcome it.[57] Therefore, by simply introducing their students to the phenomenon, martial arts instructors can even further ensure that their students

will act appropriately in an emergency.

Knowing that their students are more likely to help in an emergency than others, martial arts programs should offer or require more holistic training, such as CPR, automated external defibrillator (AED), and first aid training. Martial artists have the personality traits to act in the face of emergency. Instructors should embrace that fact and make sure their students have the comprehensive to training to support their personality characteristics. It could save lives.

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Endnotes

1 See generally: Rosenthal or Crime Library.

2 Crime Library.

3 Crime Library.

4 Bordens, p. 416.

5 Darley, p. 377.

6 Bordens, pp. 416–17.

7 Bordens, p. 417.

8 Kurian, Verdi, et al.

9 Madden (1995).

10 Madden (1995).

11 Abramovitz.

12 Smothers.

13 Smothers.

14 Smothers.

15 Bordens, p. 417

16 Bordens, p. 417

17 Crime Lab.

[18] Hughes.

[19] Hughes.

[20] Bordens, pp. 418–420.

[21] Latané: Subjects were placed in a room to complete a questionnaire, and while in the room smoke was introduced into the room through a vent. Seventy-five percent of the subjects left in the room alone reported the smoke. Ten-percent of subjects reported the smoke when two passive-bystanders were planted in the room. Later interviews revealed that those who reported the smoke believed the smoke to be a sign of an emergency, while those who did not report it believed the smoke to be non-emergency in nature.

[22] Kurian, Caterino and Kulhavy.

[23] Hughes.

[24] Smothers.

[25] Smothers.

[26] See, e.g., Buys or Soloman.

[27] Bordens, p. 416.

[28] Bordens, p. 421–422.

[29] Bordens, p. 420.

[30] Bordens, p. 421.

[31] See, e.g.: Kurian (1993); Layton (1988); or Layton (1990).

[32] Schwartz.

[33] See, e.g.: Seitz or Columbus.

[34] Weitlauf.

[35] Schwartz.

[36] Bordens, p. 422.

[37] Sherrod.

[38] Bordens, p. 416.

[39] See, e.g.: Madden (1995) or (1990); Allison; or Finkenberg.

[40] Madden (1995).

[41] Madden (1995).

[42] Weitlauf.

[43] Smothers.

[44] Martin.

[45] Martin.

[46] Bordens, p. 422.

[47] Bordens, p. 423.

[48] Bordens, p. 423.

[49] Madden (1990).

[50] See, e.g.: Madden (1990); Chapman; Layton (1988); Layton (1990); or Foster.

[51] See, e.g.: Madden (1990); or Kurian, Verdi, et al.

[52] Bordens, p. 423–424.

[53] Bordens, p. 423–424.

[54] Bordens, p. 423–424.

[55] See, e.g.: Weiser; Gottlieb; Seitz; Finkenberg; or Guthrie.

[56] Smothers.

[57] Beaman.