**Case 1-3 NYC Subway Death: Bystander Effect or Moral Blindness**

On December 3, 2012, a terrible incident occurred in the New York City subway when Ki-Suck Han was pushed off a subway platform by Naeem Davis. Han was hit and killed by the train, while observers did nothing other than snap photos on their cell phones as Han was struggling to climb back onto the platform before the oncoming train struck him. Davis was arraigned on a second-degree murder charge and held without bail in the death of Han.

One of the most controversial aspects of this story is that of R. Umar Abbasi, a freelance photographer for the *New York Post,* who was waiting for a train when he said he saw a man approach Han at the Times Square station, get into an altercation with him, and push him into the train’s path. He too chose to take pictures of the incident, and the next day, the *Post* published the photographer’s handiwork: a photo of Han with his head turned toward the approaching train, his arms reaching up but unable to climb off the tracks in time.

Abbasi told NBC’s “Today” show that he was trying to alert the motorman to what was going on by flashing his camera. He said he was shocked that people nearer to the victim didn’t try to help in the 22 seconds before the train struck. “It took me a second to figure out what was happening . . . I saw the lights in the distance. My mind was to alert the train,” Abbasi said. “The people who were standing close to him . . . they could have moved and grabbed him and pulled him up. No one made an effort.”

In a written account Abbasi gave the *Post,* he said that the crowd took videos and snapped photos on their cell phones after Han’s mangled body was pulled onto the platform. He said that he shoved the onlookers back while a doctor and another man tried to resuscitate the victim, but Han died in front of them.

Some have attributed the lack of any attempt by those on the subway platform to get involved and go to Han’s aid as the bystander effect. The term *bystander effect* refers to the phenomenon in which the greater the number of people present, the less likely people will be to help a person in distress. When an emergency situation occurs, observers are more likely to take action if there are few or no other witnesses. One explanation for the bystander effect is that each individual thinks that others will come to the aid of the threatened person. But when you are alone, either you will help, or no one will.

**Questions**

1. **Do you think the bystander effect was at work in the subway death incident? What role might situational ethics have played in Abbasi's response? How might the bystander effect translate to a situation where members of a work group observe financial improprieties committed by one of their group that threatens the organization? In general, do you think that someone would come forward?**

The bystander effect seems to be at work in the subway death. There were many observers; many were using their cell phone to take pictures. It is possible that the bystanders did not recognize the situation as dire an emergency as it was or many thought someone else would handle the situation or some may not have known what to do about the situation.

In Abbasi’s response to the situation, he might have used both bystander effect (others are closer and can help) as well as situational ethics. But even saying that Abbasi was using situational ethics may be a rationalization or a cover for using egoistical reasoning. As freelance photographer, he receives payment only for selling the photos he takes. It is possible that when the confrontation between Han and Davis took place, Abbasi thought what a great photograph it would make. He may have been diverted by the thought of how he might be the only professional photographer at the scene, and that he would get top dollar for the photo of this crime.

In a work situation a team member might observe a financial impropriety taking place and think that as the low man on the totem pole, someone else surely would speak up. Or, he may not know what to do or who to go to; he may feel he needs the job too much or feel threatened to speak up. He might think that other team members who have been working at the company longer will know the culture better and may come forward.

A corporate culture where the leaders cut corners, reward blind loyalty to leaders, and strive to meet budgets no matter what for bigger bonuses discourages team members from speaking up about possible improprieties. On the other hand, a corporate culture that fosters honesty and openness would encourage the bystander to come forward with his concerns so that corrective action can be taken sooner rather than later.

1. **Another explanation for the inaction in the subway incident is a kind of *moral blindness,* where a person fails to perceive the existence of moral issues in a particular situation. Do you believe moral blindness existed in the incident? Be sure to address the specific moral issues that give rise to your answer.**

Moral blindness may also describe someone who can’t tell right from wrong, rather than just choosing to ignore doing the right thing. In the subway death, bystanders may not have recognized the emergency and the urgency of helping Han. One may have thought that he was not close enough to Han or thought someone closer would help Han. In this case, the situation was moral and the difference between acting and not acting meant life or death for Han. In this day and age some may even have thought it was a ‘photo-op’ for a You Tube posting or part of a new realty TV show.

It’s hard to know what was in Abbasi’s mind. It does seem clear that saving Han was not foremost in his actions. He acted instinctively and what is clear is that it was an egoistic action, which seems to support the moral blindness theory.

1. **What would you have done if you were in Abbasi's place and why?**

I hope that I were in Abbasi’s place, I would be trying to help Han in some way. I imagine yelling, drawing attention to the situation, and rushing forward to see if I could get close enough to help. Grabbing others to pull Han from the tracks seems reasonable.

You might ask students what they would do if a terrorist held off passengers on a subway train at gun point. Moral sensitivity, judgment and action might lead to enlisting the aid of others to tackle the terrorist to prevent him from causing a mass tragedy much as did the passengers of Flight 93 on 9/11/2001.

More recently, on August 23, 2015, three U.S. citizens -- Anthony Sadler, Spencer Stone and Alek Skarlatos -- were aboard a high-speed train en route to Paris from Amsterdam when a gunman opened fire. Along with two others -- a French national and a Briton -- they charged, tackled and subdued him. Applause poured in from world leaders and citizens alike as more details emerged on the chaotic, bloody scene aboard the train.

Video Links

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UkS8VfotU8> NYC Subway

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVIt4xsz5RM> Paris train