

# RARELY COURAGEOUS

TEXT: MARTIN TSCHECHNE

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Civil courage is essential in a free society. Yet, when it comes to the crunch, few people dare to protect the victims of crime or to take an active stance against hatred and racism. Psychologist Anna Baumert of the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods is conducting research into the motives and conditions for civil courage – a work in progress.





Imagine a young person walking into a research laboratory with bare walls, ceiling lamps, and seminar tables. Some of the Institute's friendly staff explain the procedure of the study, take down personal details, and hand out some questionnaires. They then ask whether the visitor would like to accept a small payment as a thank you for his or her time and effort, or whether he or she would prefer the study to count as credits for their degree. No, he or she replies: forget credited hours; I'll take the payment.

## Shock, outrage or silence

So let us assume that the test subject had worked through a stack of test questions, then in a second session two weeks later, had untucked their top and put on a strap to measure their heart rate. Following the researchers' instructions, he or she has memorized a text, answered questions about it, and willingly provided information about his or her own feelings – nervous, anxious, bored, each of which rated on a scale of zero to five – and then, at some point during the experiment, overhears a conversation between two of the project staff. Although they are whispering with their heads close together, our test subject hears a short but unmistakable proposition: "Some of our test subjects do have their work credited to their studies; so if we also issue a receipt for payment in their names, then we could collect the money ourselves and no one would be any the wiser ...". How would such a study participant react? With shock? Outrage? Embarrassed silence?

Psychologist Anna Baumert of the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods has come up with some sophisticated, differentiating hypotheses. According to her, the test subject's reaction depends on his or her personality, the presence or absence of others, the subject's experience of dealing with authority, and the expectation of being able to take the initiative rather than being at the beck and call of others. During the course of her research, Baumert has developed a system of concepts in collaboration with many colleagues, representing a guideline for distinguishing between character types: whether one's perspective of the world is as a casualty or a beneficiary of events, whether he or she observes and analyzes situations solely from the outside or experiences him- or herself as playing an active role, and with pride and satisfaction or with guilt and shame. It is a question of moral courage – whether to stand up for the interests of others, even if one's own suffer as a result. It is about the whistleblower's determination to bring secret data and practices into the public domain for the communal good, even under the threat of imprisonment. It is about standing against discrimination and prejudice, racism, sexism or hatred, especially when it affects

others, or standing up in the subway to put a bully in his or her place or intervening when someone is being hassled. It is also about protesting when many people are doing their best to protect public health, while a small minority get together to party in spite of everything. Baumert interviewed people who had been awarded crosses of merit for their civil courage. One

**"Those who tend to look into a situation themselves will probably take more decisive action to intervene."**

ANNA BAUMERT

woman had driven off a gang of hooligans who were kicking a man while he lay on the ground. A man had chased after someone who had burgled a neighbor's house, keeping in cell phone contact until the police arrived on the scene. Are such people different? Yes, says the psychologist. They get angry about things more intensely and perhaps more readily and they may have a lower tolerance for unresolved situations. "I suspect that sensitive observers are also more likely to clarify a situation for themselves and then to intervene in a more decisive manner. I'm extremely interested in this approach to dealing with uncertainty or ambiguity."

For decades, the Kitty Genovese case has been considered a textbook example of the failure of all virtues within a community. The young woman was stabbed, raped, and murdered outside her house in the New York borough of Queens on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1964. As a reporter for the New York Times discovered, 38 people in the immediate vicinity witnessed the crime. They had been awakened at 3:15 am by the woman's screams but had stood at the window, hesitated and waited – for almost an hour! One had even turned his radio up to drown out the horror. Finally, one had ran out the door to hold the dying woman. But no one really came to her aid.



The search for courageous personalities: psychologist Anna Baumert heads the Max Planck Research Group “Civil Courage” at the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods and teaches at the University of Wuppertal.



PHOTO: FRANK VINKEN FOR MPG

Of course, Baumert is aware of the literature relating to the case; it is standard reading in her field. A few years later, for example, Bibb Latané and John M. Darley, both social psychologists, founded an entire research tradition relating to the question of when and why people fail to intervene. “There is clear evidence,” she says in summary, “that the presence of others who fail to take action can cause people to not intervene themselves.” And yet, she remains skeptical, explaining that the evidence in many of the studies is too anecdotal, and the explanations, which are often collated in a rather random manner, are too speculative. “We have to define a given context ourselves,” says Baumert, explaining her approach: “Only in the context of a controlled study can the relevant personality traits be re-

corded and subjects be interviewed in parallel with events. It’s about causality.”

Victim, observer, perpetrator, beneficiary: in the course of her studies, the psychologist has identified four perspectives on everyday perceptions of injustice, each of which results in a distinct level of sensitivity – a disposition to confront challenges to public morality. These represent the conditions necessary for active civil courage – or for inactivity. Victim sensitivity, for example, initially arises when someone experiences an injustice firsthand, which may lead to anger and rage or else hesitancy, mistrust, and a tendency to withdraw. “Both are plausible,” Baumert confirms, “and we have observed both in our studies.” In one project she carried



Helpful Anger:  
people who  
intervene  
against injustice  
are often driven  
by a sense of  
anger.

ILLUSTRATION: DOROTHEA PLUTA



## SUMMARY

It is difficult to gauge people's willingness to take action that requires civil courage under controlled conditions.

Clear predictions cannot be made based on personality traits.

People who tend to anger more rapidly or more violently are more likely to exhibit civil courage.

out in collaboration with South American researchers in Chile, for example, she found that it was the direct victims of exploitation and oppression whose angry determination made them stand out during the protest movement.

And, what is to prevent uninvolved observers from becoming keenly aware of the unjust nature of a particular situation, or people who develop a special empathy precisely on the basis of an introspective awareness of their own behavior, or undeserving beneficiaries, who become aware of the privileges they enjoy and question them? "Yes, that happens too," Baumert laughs. "Just think of the elderly white man who stands up for women's rights – perhaps there should be a few more of them."

In her empirical studies, Baumert collects and dissects various contexts and narratives that influence an experience and stimulate an interpretation. She surveyed

students and was surprised to discover that their sensitivity to injustice seemingly tends to diminish when they start a university course. That was until she realized that their lives really had changed in one particular respect: their new circumstances were less regulated, freer and less structured, at least in comparison to the parental home and school, so they simply presented fewer opportunities to experience anything like injustice in their immediate environment. Baumert realized that any analysis of such complex conditions requires equally complex strategies, so she organized her study like a conspiracy, comprising an extensive battery of psychological tests, which she evaluated in detail, and the task of memorizing a text, whose result was irrelevant to her subject and simply served as camouflage. She recorded certain physiological parameters, which if they deviated from the norm provided her with proof that her performance shocked subjects and asked assistants to whisper to each other, while in fact ensuring that the genuine test subjects actually

overheard these seeming “secrets”. The entire experiment was designed around deceiving the participants (although, just to clarify, she explained everything to them later).

In spite all of this, however, unambiguous results failed to materialize. “The thing is,” she says, “none of our four personality traits actually predicts, with any great accuracy and in accordance with our theoretical expectations, who will intervene and who won’t.” Yet, she’s not discouraged: it may be that a truly functional analysis of morally guided action may have to be based even more closely on everyday life. It may be that the path between recognizing a given situation and deciding to take action to counter it needs to be traced in a more consistent manner. Perhaps even broader collaboration is required. “I would be extremely interested in collaborating with developmental psychologists,” she says. “Unfortunately, that hasn’t yet been possible.”

## One in four objected

At least the anger factor has been confirmed. Angry people tend to speak out. As the psychologist explains, this emotion is triggered when goals are thwarted or values violated. The signals for the observers were clear enough. And a quarter of the test subjects experienced feelings of anger and objected to the supposed attempted fraud, most of them spontaneously and directly to the staff members involved in the sham. “That’s what you find in this kind of study,” Baumert explains: “25 percent will say something while the rest keep quiet.” Where were they when Kitty Genovese was murdered? Where are they when vandals go on the rampage, strangers or women are threatened, children abused and neglected, when district administrators smuggle their families past the queue to get vaccinated, or protesters against coronavirus restrictions rip the masks off other people’s faces? Anyone who reads the papers can judge for themselves: 25 percent would be a remarkably high proportion in real life.

But there are limits, she believes, beyond which her research should not stray. All the effort is essential, she says. The laboratory, the staging – “there is no other way to record psychological differences and dispositions.” Not to mention blood pressure or breathing rate. But just how realistically should she shock her subjects in the name of science? Where are the ethical boundaries between curiosity and responsibility? Researchers find themselves in a dilemma. It’s something else Anna Baumert attempted to ascertain, as follows. One group of participants in her study was presented with the attempted deception solely by means of a video

recording, while another group was provided with a description of events in a written text. And, low and behold, all of the participants were outraged – the sensitive ones, the angry ones, the committed, timid, and indifferent – all joined in the chorus: yes, we would intervene to prevent that, immediately and decisively! Cost-free courage, as Baumert clarifies. “You can’t use hypothetical questions to predict behavior. What they reveal is how one sees oneself. How one would like to be.”

## A myth changed reality

The case of Kitty Genovese deserves an addendum. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1964, two weeks after the crime, the *New York Times* ran an article, and it was this article that first elevated the case to the level of a social phenomenon. “38 Who Saw Murder Didn’t Call the Police”; Apathy at Stabbing of Queens Woman Shocks Inspector. Stimulating public outrage was intentional, but no one could have foreseen its enduring character. Psychologists and sociologists took up the subject and were soon to be joined by urban planners, architects, and political consultants. What they found was that the murder confirmed the alienation and anonymity of life in the Moloch of a major metropolis, the stress caused by space restrictions, noise, and social tension, and in some studies even the limits of perception – being present but seeing nothing.

Only in 2015 did a documentary directed by James Solomon entitled *The Witness* reveal how the nocturnal murder had been stylized into a myth right from the start, a narrative of a cold and heartless city, and a cold and heartless society. It was a journalistic disaster: the original reporter confessed that there had not been so many witnesses after all – perhaps just twelve or only two, and not a single one of them had been able to witness the entire course of events. A year later, the *New York Times* also distanced itself from the article. Yet, the questions raised by the case are real as are the research projects that have taken up and studied the phenomenon. Anna Baumert continues to study the necessary conditions for productive anger and moral vigilance. At the same time, she is collaborating with computer scientists to look into potential ways of averting the devastating effects of online bullying and baiting – through courageous objections perhaps or through censorship? While the Kitty Genovese case did portray one, albeit distorted reality, it also created another reality: 911 was introduced as a nationwide emergency telephone number throughout the U.S. just four years after the murder.

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