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Social Psychology  
September, 2013



## The Day of Compassion

After receiving this assignment, the first question I considered was how to define compassion. Etymologically, it suggests *co-suffering*—an emotional connection with the suffering of others so strong that it leads to action. I live in India, and images of millions of poor people suffering in my country started coming to mind as I thought about the definition. For me, compassion means giving voice to these people and helping them in any way I can.

In the eyes of India's government, millions of people simply do not exist because they don't have official proof of their identity. One reason poor people lack documentation is that they travel from one place to another seeking employment. Another reason is that they're often illiterate and unable to fill out an application form. This latter obstacle leads to exploitation by middlemen who charge 30 to 50 Indian rupees just to fill out a government identity application form on behalf of poor people who earn only 100 rupees a day. Illiterate poor people pay this money because identity proof is required for government welfare programs offering food, medical care, pension facilities, and so on.

For the Day of Compassion, I therefore decided to help poor people in my community gain proof of their identity. I felt especially delighted and satisfied because I helped people obtain a *voter identity card*, which establishes their identity for life.

To carry out this activity, I went to an Election Commission enrollment booth in a slum near my home (an area with many migrants from Uttar Pradesh). I stayed there for 4.5 hours and completed application forms for all of the illiterate people who wanted to enroll as voters. In India, voter identity cards serve as a very important personal document that proves your identity. The cards not only allow citizens to receive welfare benefits but permit people to vote and make the democracy of India more vibrant and inclusive.



## Reflection and Analysis

In retrospect, I think that many Indians have become passive bystanders to the problems of these poor people (Lecture 5.1). We assume that someone else will intervene and help those who need it, ultimately leaving these people to continue suffering.

During the Day of Compassion, I pondered why people do not help others more often, and for that matter, why it took a Social Psychology assignment for me to offer help. I think the answer is at least partly due to conformity pressures that arise from ideologies adopted by our society, economy, and government. As Solomon Asch (1956) showed in his experiments, many people feel uncomfortable saying the correct answer when other members of the group give the wrong answer. In much the same way, capitalist ideologies put individual gain ahead of collective well-being and create conformity pressures that discourage altruism.

When I overcame these conformity pressures, people noticed a change in me. Interestingly, the administrators who allowed me to volunteer at the enrollment booth attributed my behavior to education, whereas the people I helped attributed it to me being an empathic person. This attributional difference is a great example of the "psychological construction of reality" discussed in Lecture 1.4 (e.g., Hastorf & Cantril, 1954).

To overcome the bystander effect and conformity pressures, and to inspire others to practice compassion, we need to use social psychological techniques that can mobilize the public. As William Ury said in his TED talk (Lecture 5.4), one of the best ways to solve conflicts and social dilemmas is for people to "take the third side." In India, this means collaborating actively to give poor people the opportunity to be heard and to participate in our democracy, even if it feels as though the effort is too small to make a difference.

Finally, I compared the costs and benefits of carrying out this assignment. Although it was painful to hear poor people's stories of corrupt lawyers and government officials who had taken advantage of them, it was great to see how happy people became when I offered to help. Overall, the benefits of doing this assignment far surpassed any costs that I incurred.

"Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it."

—Attributed to Mahatma Gandhi

If I were to predict my behaviour a month from now, my guess is that I will be more generous, empathic, and helpful. I will reach out to help people in need even if I feel conformity pressures not to become involved.

## References

Asch S. E. (1956). Studies of independence and conformity: A minority of one against a unanimous majority. *Psychology Monograph*, 70 (9, whole number 46).

Hastorf, A. H., & Cantril, H. (1954). They saw a game: A case study. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 49, 129-134.