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Social Psychology  
August, 2014



## The Day of Compassion

I define compassion not only as a feeling of sympathy for someone who is suffering or in need but actually taking action to ease their pain or help them out of a difficult situation.

### A Bit of Personal Background

I have very strong faith in compassion, and I try to live by this faith. I've done volunteer work 30 hours a week for three years. I've stopped two thefts on the street when the other bystanders did not respond. I frequently help the old, the blind, or the young whenever a helping hand is needed. But when this particular task was assigned to us, I found myself in a predicament. Being a stay-at-home mom with a 14-month-old son, it's really hard for me to complete tasks during weekdays. Even finding someone to watch my son for a few hours is difficult because my husband works on weekdays, my family lives in another city, and all my friends work, so I was worried that I might not be able to complete the assignment.

### My Day of Compassion

One night after I put my son to bed, I discussed the assignment with my husband. My anxiety was growing because the official Day of Compassion had already passed three days earlier, and I hadn't done anything worth writing about. As we were talking, I heard high-pitched screams mixed with cries and angry curses coming from the hallway of our apartment building. After a few seconds, I realized that it was our neighbors "educating" their teenage son. In Chinese culture, there's a deep-rooted practice of using physical punishment when it comes to educating and disciplining children. For instance, I myself was beaten countless times during my youth. Although things have changed since then, there still are quite a few families that actively follow the tradition of physical punishment. The neighbors in question moved into our apartment building only four months ago, and we've already heard them beat their son several times.

If it had not been for my thoughts about the Day of Compassion assignment, I'd probably have let the noise slip by or said to my husband, "What a poor boy!" as I had before. But at that very moment, I happened to be thinking about *compassion*—how could I let myself do nothing? I told my husband that I wanted to get involved.

He praised my courage but voiced concern. One factor that made it hard to intervene was the "bystander effect" (there were four other families on the floor who probably heard the noise yet chose not to respond). It's true that my husband and I felt group pressure when other bystanders kept silent, but there was a deeper issue; in China, outsiders generally have no say in family issues, especially when it comes to parenting. Instead, outsiders are typically seen as unwelcome intruders whose advice is not appreciated. Still, knowing that the boy was suffering physical and psychological pain, I resolved to do the right thing.



I walked down the hallway and knocked on the door. As you can imagine, it took my neighbors longer than usual to open the door. The scene was not pretty, I must say. The couple clearly knew why I was there, and they didn't conceal their annoyance at my intrusion. I pretended not to notice their unfriendliness and told them that I understood their deep love for their son and their frustration with him. After indicating that I also was a parent, ingroup bias came into play. The neighbors dropped their guard (especially the wife) and agreed to talk with me about what happened that day. I sent the sobbing boy to my home to be comforted by my husband. I then sat with the parents and listened to them complain about their son's bad behavior, poor performance at school, disobedience, and other things. After spitting out all their resentment, they became more calm and rational.

I couldn't help but lose sleep that night. I knew that a one-time intervention would not be enough to prevent future beatings, so I began considering whether I could apply social psychology to improve the situation. Once I thought about it, lots of ideas came to mind, and I decided to give my neighbors a presentation about the following three topics:

1. How to perceive their son more positively
2. The effects that their attitudes were having on their son
3. The nature and influence of violence

The next day, I prepared my speech and a four-page informational handout, and my husband and I visited our neighbors in the evening. To make the presentation as persuasive as possible, my husband introduced me as a respected teacher with more than ten years' experience with children (the principle of *authority* covered in Lecture 2.7). I also applied the principle of *reciprocity* by bringing some fresh bread that I had baked.



To my surprise, the presentation turned out to be a lot more successful than I had thought it would be. My experience as a parent and teacher did seem to have an effect on them. We had a very nice conversation that lasted almost two hours. I discussed the concept of "self-fulfilling prophecies," and we watched the part of Lecture 1.6 that described the school experiment conducted by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen. By sharing this material, I wanted to convey how strongly social perceptions and expectations can affect the people around us.

I suggested to my neighbors that if they stopped regarding their son as a bad child and instead treated him as a promising boy, they might help him improve his behavior. I also pointed out that they were wrong to convince themselves that beating their son was for his own good. In my view, they made this claim only to avoid cognitive dissonance; deep down, they knew that physical punishment was wrong and ineffective. But most of all, I wanted to help my neighbors understand their anger and the danger that it posed to their son. I even used a fear-appeal by warning them that their son might become more aggressive by being exposed to violence.

During the conversation, I could see that they were very interested in the information I shared, even though they weren't completely convinced by it. From my perspective, I considered the visit a success because it opened their mind to new ideas about how to treat their son. It also opened my mind about how to address domestic violence. After this experience, I invited interested moms in my building to form a group dedicated to reducing domestic violence in our neighborhood. So far, only five other mothers have joined, but my hope is to expand this effort in the future and hold regular meetings on Sunday evenings.

### **Final Reflections**

As I'm writing this essay and thinking back on what has happened over the past week, I still feel very emotional. To be honest, I didn't think social psychology could be so applicable to daily life, but the beatings seem to have stopped. And I am really proud of myself for stepping out of my comfort zone to do the right thing. The next time that I want to offer a helping hand but fear being rejected or taunted, I will draw strength from my Day of Compassion!



**Note from Professor Plous:** Two months after the Day of Compassion, Qian reports that she has developed a trusting relationship with the mother, has close contact with the boy (whom she is helping with his English studies), and believes that the beatings have ended.