

Kitty Genovese and culturally embedded theorizing¹

Facts are not pure and unsullied bits of information; culture also influences what we see and how we see it. Theories, moreover, are not inexorable inductions from facts. The most creative theories are often imaginative visions imposed upon facts; the source of imagination is also strongly cultural.

(Gould 1981: 22)

It has not been common in social psychology to think of theorizing as an occasion for cultural or historical analysis. Social psychology as practised within the discipline of psychology has for several decades presented the social psychologist as a stereotypically isolated scientist at work in the laboratory searching for the laws of social behaviour that transcend cultural and historical circumstances. The main task of theorizing is presented as a cognitive one.

I learned the practice of social psychologizing in a more sociopolitical milieu – around my grandparents' dinner table. Adults speculated on the causes of world tensions and interpersonal conflicts, and voiced their solutions to both types of problems. The world of the interpersonal was continually and unashamedly juxtaposed with larger social collectivities – groups, organizations and even nations. Theorizing 'the social' and solving social problems were conjoined in my earliest recollections. As time progressed, I added in my own accountings and theorizings about events that concerned me.

Often, I think this early training at the dinner table in 'accounting for' and 'making sense of' was the kind of pre-theorizing activity that made social psychology attractive to me. As an undergraduate student in the 1960s and reading the kind of work social psychologists do, I took the field to be largely preoccupied with understanding social interaction between people and among groups. As I moved on to graduate school, the academic dinner table demanded that I become more experimental, more analytical and precise in my attempts to make sense of social situations. Graduate school 'theorizing' made my family's 'opinionizing' seem rather amateurish. For a time, the better goal seemed to be to set

aside trying to account for things that concerned me personally. I was encouraged to make my 'subjects' the 'objects' of my study, to step back from the 'real' world and account for a narrower band of individual behaviour that happens in a usually narrower space/time world called a laboratory. At a later point in my life as a social psychology professor, my family's dinner table theorizing made a comeback and, combined with some of the more sensible demands of scholarship, conspired to return me to the task of making sense in morally, politically, and culturally grounded ways.

When I reflect on how I generate hunches or come up with explanations for contemporary events I am often aware of the boundedness imposed by my experiences thus far. Often I can see the assumptive framework in the family that shaped me, the larger society that shaped my family, the educational system in which I learned, the books I've read, the communities and countries I've lived in and the people with whom I've shared my life. Construed this way, I am unable to think of the social scientist as an isolated individual with sound and rational private abstractions about cultural experience. Rather, the social scientist appears to me as a passionate and public person. As one such person, the social psychologist constructs an understanding of the social world that she or he inhabits. An imagined line is broken between the past and the present, between 'historical research' and 'social science research'. Social psychology becomes a powerful post-dictive science of meaning more than a predictive science of control based on the model of the physical sciences.² Generating hypotheses about social situations involves constructing meaning from one's own cultural experience, sharing that meaning publicly, and finding tension and conflict with other points of view through public discussion and enquiry. It necessitates more than one understanding of the same event and exposes the difficulty of resolving conflicting viewpoints.

The link between an historical event and the social and political practice of theorizing about it that engages me as a social psychologist can be illustrated by my discipline's account of bystander intervention. Through introductory social psychology textbooks most North American students of social psychology have become familiar with the murder in 1964 of Catherine (Kitty) Genovese in Queens, New York. We have learned to think of this event as an instance of the failure of bystanders to intervene in emergency situations. Our contact with the event has for three decades been shaped by the social psychological research of Bibb Latané and John Darley, who both graduated with PhDs in 1964 and 1965 respectively. They were responding to the event in 1964 and to numerous headlines, many of which reported the incident as an instance of 'apathy': 'Apathy at stabbing of Queens woman shocks inspector' (*New York Times*: 27 March 1964); 'Apathy is puzzle in Queens killing' (*NYT*: 28 March 1964).

In a later interview with Rand Evans (1980), Darley described their thinking. 'Latané and I, shocked as anybody else, met over dinner a few days after this terrible incident had occurred and began to analyze this process in social psychological terms ...' (Evans 1980: 216). These researchers were not satisfied to think of the event in terms of the 'personality' characteristics of the onlookers, such as apathy, or to set the event in the context of social norms. Instead, they explained the passivity of the onlookers to this murder by using theoretical concepts that focused on immediate situational factors that might inhibit helping in emergencies. Concepts of group-inhibition and diffusion of responsibility in large groups were invoked and became the focus of later empirical work.

At the time, others made sense of the event differently. On 27 March 1964, a lengthy piece appeared in the *New York Times* (NYT). The main headline read '37 who saw murder didn't call the police'. A *Times* editorial on 28 March asked, 'Who can explain such shocking indifference on the part of a cross-section of our fellow New Yorkers?' and answered, 'We regretfully admit that we do not know the answers'. 'Behavioral specialists hard put to explain witnesses' failure to call police' none the less offered their analyses (NYT: 28 March 1964). A police commissioner thought that 'this tendency to shy away from reporting crimes is a common one', while a lawyer wanted a 'Law Day' held throughout the United States to 'fight this tendency to look the other way' and to 'indoctrinate the public with their responsibility'. One sociologist commented on how our inability to defend each other brings us close to being 'partners in crime'. Another sociologist likened the reaction of the witnesses to a 'disaster syndrome' as if one witnessed a tornado. One psychiatrist assigned blame to living in a big city that alienates the individual from the group. Another psychiatrist saw it as typical middle-class behaviour in a city like New York where people 'have a nice life and what happens in the street, the life of the city itself, is a different matter', further warning that action might lead to one's own victimization. One reverend noted that his society 'is as sick as the one that crucified Jesus' and another reverend talked of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In a later article, another psychiatrist suggested that 'the murder vicariously gratified the sadistic impulses of those who witnessed it' (NYT: 12 April 1964). Each commentator constructed his version of the incident within the framework that he had chosen to interpret life, chosen to answer the essential questions of theorizing: What's going on here? Why is this happening? What is it about?

In the *Letter to the Times* section of the *New York Times* that followed from 31 March to 24 May, numerous attempts to find a meaningful way to interpret this event were submitted. These constructions represented diverse views: there was a failure of morality at its worst in large cities; people were immersed in themselves; they were apathetic, much as the

Germans were to the plight of the Jews; there was a fear of police reprisal; a failure of the American male to do the manly and courageous thing; what could one expect with so much violence in the mass media? What better argument for keeping weapons in one's house! On 3 May 1964 A.M. Rosenthal, then Metropolitan editor for the *New York Times*, wrote a lengthier analysis for the *New York Times Magazine* (NYTM) focusing on the apathy of the bystanders, but noting also that

Each individual obviously approaches the story of Catherine Genovese, reacts to it and veers away from it against the background of his own life experience, and his own fears and shortcomings and rationalizations.

(Rosenthal, in NYTM 1964: 69)

A professional identification with experimental social psychology carries with it a strong tendency towards behavioural and situational explanations. Not surprisingly, the analysis offered by Latané and Darley in the 1960s was a theoretical construction based on the immediate situational determinants of behaviours such as noticing, judging and taking personal responsibility through action. An inverse relationship between group size and helping behaviour figured prominently in their empirical work, and reflected a longstanding preoccupation with social psychology defined as the influence of people in one another's lives (Latané and Darley 1970). However, by moving in as closely as possible to the behavioural phenomenon and casting the event in terms of independent variables such as size of group that affect dependent variables such as intervening behaviour, these researchers chose to 'veer away' from a sociocultural analysis of the event.

Here's how I think theorizing happens. During an initial period of reflection, the social psychologist, like other members of society, asks him/herself and others, 'Did you see the headlines?' 'Did you read about Kitty Genovese?' 'So what was that about?' 'Why did that happen?' In addition, the academic theorizer is subtly guided by his or her socialization into a discipline's normative beliefs about appropriate intellectual frameworks and scientifically respectable methodologies for bringing together hunch and evidence.³ It is in this effort to *construct* the meaning of an event where we also *constrict* our vision, where we fail to ask the question, 'Of what else is this event an instance?' Here is where 'normal science' begins, where Kitty Genovese's murder becomes an instance of a seemingly larger category of social behaviour designated as 'bystander intervention'.

Consider for a moment that Kitty Genovese and her assailant, Winston Moseley, were living in a society at a time when its members did little to intervene in violence directed towards women. Such details were not the central part of the abstraction/construction process by which 'general

processes' of social behaviour were hypothesized and later empirically tested. In the mid-1960s, what was abstracted as the general phenomenon of interest was something like this: there was an emergency and no one intervened to help.

As a graduate student in the early 1970s, in the heyday of bystander intervention research and at the pre-dawning of my own feminist consciousness, I can't claim to have seen anything other than Latané and Darley's point of view. Only later, while reviewing literature relevant to the social psychology of rape (Cherry 1983), did I come across information that shifted the context for the event and altered my framework for thinking about the meaning of Kitty Genovese's death.⁴

The murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 was described in detail by Susan Brownmiller in her book on rape, *Against Our Will* (1975). Brownmiller was writing about known rapists who continued unchecked by police, and to her the 'event' symbolized something quite different from the inaction of bystanders:

It comes as a surprise to most people that the murder of Kitty Genovese, stalked and stabbed to death shortly after 3 a.m. on a bleak commercial-residential street in Queens on March 13, 1964 – a much discussed case in the nineteen sixties because thirty-eight people heard the victim's cries or witnessed some part of her ordeal without calling the police – ended in her rape as she lay dying. Winston Moseley, Genovese's 29-year-old killer, later made an extraordinary confession. 'I just set out to find any girl that was unattended and I was going to kill her,' he calmly announced in court.

(Brownmiller 1975: 199)

Brownmiller, writing in the mid-1970s for a North American audience becoming increasingly vocal about violence towards women, called attention to the 'stubborn particulars' of gender implicated in this incident. By the 1980s, my thinking about this incident might be better expressed this way: violence was directed at yet another woman by a man and no one intervened to help her. What has changed over the years is the way I name the incident as well as the cultural framework in which the incident is reinterpreted.

In early accounts, only one onlooker was reported to have expressed a reluctance to intervene in what might have been a 'lovers' quarrel' (Rosenthal 1964), thereby specifying something gendered about the meaning of the situation. In fact, what followed this incident at the time were the numerous experimental simulations of generalized bystander behaviour in emergency situations: hearing someone having an epileptic seizure and reporting it; reporting a room filling with smoke; coming to the aid of a woman in distress as she is heard to fall and apparently hurt herself. None of these simulations involved situations of attack.

However, all were excellent examples of how research can strip meaning from events at the creative phase of theorizing about the world. Sex/gender violence was excluded at the phase of abstracting hypotheses about social reality. The link to the Kitty Genovese incident was stripped of its original gendered particulars, that is, an *attack* on a woman was no longer an essential component in the laboratory exploration of what the event meant.

This is not surprising given that in 1964 we lived in a world that did not recognize by name the widespread abuse of women. Feminist movement throughout the 1970s 'enlarged our definition of violence to take in abuse of children, and the discussion of rape, spousal abuse, incest and pornography, clitorrectomy' (Apfelbaum and Lubek 1983). The increasing momentum of the women's movement to confront violence in the 1970s allowed for a different framework for my understanding of the murder of Kitty Genovese. This shift in framework was part of a larger ongoing shift to view social psychology as an interpretive rather than predictive science. In my own training as an experimental social psychologist, I was urged to conceptualize my understanding of events in terms of 'variables' rather than 'persons'.⁵ I would more easily ask the question – 'Is sex of subject a significant variable in my multivariate analysis of helping behaviour?' than 'What is this about for people particularized with respect to their sex, race and class, namely those aspects of persons which form the material and psychological experience of the world?' I remember being trained to think that it is more elegant to strip questions of their social embeddedness, such that 'bystander behaviour' is considered scientifically purer than what you can learn from trying to make sense of the specifics of the murder/rape of a woman. However, my own experiences with the women's movement and my own feminist politicization prevented me from seeing this event exclusively within the framework of unresponsive bystander intervening behaviour. Rather, I found myself returning to view Genovese's murder first within the framework of sex/gender relationships and then within an even larger framework of multiple structures of powerlessness (sex, race, age and class) that play themselves out in our daily lives.

As my perspective shifted, I began to take more seriously the view of social psychology as a science that thrives within historical and cultural contexts and with that my views on experimentation were also altered. I found it difficult to believe that there were critical experiments rather than just historically important ones that foster a greater understanding of the world we live in. Social experiments are not crucial tests of the truth of competing hypotheses but reflect the experimenter's cultural knowledge by locating an appropriate social context for displaying that knowledge (Gergen 1978). Given this approach, understanding and insight will be augmented by research that does not decontextualize

social phenomena, but rather attempts to address the social context in which phenomena are located.

There were two such experimental studies in social psychology that I kept for a long time in a file folder marked 'these mean something'. The two studies were conceptual anomalies in the unresponsive bystander literature which later allowed me to see how social context informs hypothesis generation. The studies did not decontextualize the Genovese incident but rather viewed her plight as an aspect of generalized sex-role reactions to women under attack. In the first study Borofsky *et al.* (1971) conducted a role-playing experiment with male and female dyads where an attack was simulated. They found that none of six male observers tried to stop a man assaulting a woman while in other dyads, male helping was at a higher rate. Women were unlikely to intervene in any of the four role-played dyads, a finding that received no explanation. The researchers explained the male behaviour by the possible 'vicarious sexual and/or hostile gratification from seeing a man injure a woman' (Borofsky *et al.* 1971: 317). It was too early for this study to become an overnight classic spawning further research on the general question of unimpeded violence towards women.

A second study, by Shotland and Straw, appeared in 1976, at a time when feminist activism was becoming increasingly focused on collective intervention in the form of rape crisis centres and homes for battered wives run by women. The authors conducted a rather elaborate set of experiments to examine more carefully the Genovese attack as it occurred in its original context. In their study of staged assaults and reactions to these assaults they found that 'intervention occurred much more frequently when subjects perceived the attacker and victim as strangers (65%) rather than married (19%)' (Shotland and Straw 1976: 992), and subjects were more likely to infer an intimate connection between the man and woman when they were unsure about the relationship. In the 1960s, bystander behaviour was the general phenomenon of which sex-paired dyads were a subcase. In the 1980s, gender-role expectations became the general phenomenon and bystander behaviour became a subcase.

Shotland and Straw ended their research by making a plea for knowing one's neighbours as a way of reducing faulty inferences and as a means of facilitating 'social control' in the community. They were operating on the assumption that violence (rape included) is largely a phenomenon between strangers, which we now know is not the case. They concluded: 'If we could obtain this control in terms of a man beating up a woman, we might be able to restrict the victimization of women to their husbands or close associates' (Shotland and Straw 1976: 999), acknowledging in a footnote that 'If bystanders and, one would guess, society do not regard wife beating seriously, this act cannot be controlled' (Shotland and Straw 1976: 999). It should be remembered that these authors were writing at a

time when the extent of wife battering was not well documented, when a wife could not legally claim to have been raped and when violence against women was interpreted from the perspective of psychopathology of either the offender or the victim. Despite such limitations, the two studies managed to produce an experimental analogue for another interpretation of the original Kitty Genovese incident.

These two anomalous studies were not focused on bystander apathy or diffusion of responsibility as the major theoretical explanation but on the nature and perception of male-female relatedness. Despite all the training to see the world in gender-neutral terms, these two studies were early evidence that some researchers could not ignore what was going on around them, namely, an increasing awareness of the prevalence of violence towards women. A footnote in the Shotland and Straw study bears this out. Describing the social milieu on the campus on which the study was conducted in 1974, Shotland and Straw stated that 'approximately six to nine months prior to the experiment there were a number of assaults, on campus and in town, on women, of both a sexual and non-sexual nature. The attacks had caused much concern and a great deal of publicity' (Shotland and Straw 1976: 991). These two studies⁶ form a bridge between understanding Genovese's murder in terms of the unresponsive bystander paradigm and understanding it in the context of changing sex/gender relations.

If theorizing is an historically situated activity, it becomes dangerous to canonize events and the research that follows as having one meaning for all time. Over the course of a decade, the 'Genovese incident' changed for me from being about the behavioural problem of bystanders failing to intervene in emergencies to being about the social problem of violence towards women. In summarizing ten years of research on group size and helping behaviour, Latané and Nida asked:

After 10 years and over 50 studies, what can be concluded? . . . [T]he original phenomenon discovered by Latané and Darley has a firm empirical foundation and has withstood the tests of time and replication. Although we have not discussed it in this review, the research has also led to interesting theoretical advances . . . To our knowledge, however, the research has not contributed to the development of practical strategies for increasing bystander intervention. Although the original experiments and the continuing interest in the topic were certainly stimulated, at least in part, by the dramatic, real-world case of the failure of 38 witnesses to intervene in or even report to the police the murder of Kitty Genovese, not one of us has been able to mobilize the increasing store of social psychological understanding accumulated over the last decade to devise suggestions for ensuring that future Kitty Genoveses will receive help.

(Latané and Nida 1981: 322)

Their lack of finding practical strategies within the bystander paradigm for 'ensuring that future Kitty Genoveses will receive help' needs to be reconceptualized in the context of the past twenty-five years of the legal, medical and social-psychological support network operated by women that includes rape awareness campaigns, rape crisis centres, transition homes for battered women and more.

At some point, I began to reconsider that Genovese's murder, while an instance of violence towards women, had still broader implications. It signalled a growing expression of a community's sense of powerlessness to prevent violence. Increased reporting of attacks on women also seemed to indicate that some communities were more vulnerable than others, because of race and social class. I became curious to discover whether race or class were ever presented as part of the understanding of Genovese's murder. I turned back to the press coverage in the *New York Times* that covered the initial murder-rape and has continued to discuss it.⁷ I systematically traced each reference to Genovese and/or Moseley in the *New York Times* from 1964 to 1988, including Letters to the Editor, editorial opinions and special comments in the *Times Supplement*. The original report of the murder of Catherine Genovese appeared on 14 March 1964, with the headline 'Queens woman is stabbed to death in front of home'. In the course of this analysis, the contexts of gender, race and class emerged at different points to provide an understanding of the event as part of a more complex picture of violence in American communities than could be revealed in laboratory studies of bystander intervention.

The story of the murder did not end with a brief one-column report but accelerated when an in-depth investigation revealed that thirty-eight onlookers (safe in the privacy of their own apartments) failed to intervene even by contacting the police. Rosenthal subsequently interviewed witnesses and other professionals, and he quite candidly described the race and class dimensions of victimization that affected the very way in which the story was constructed. He wrote in his book, *Thirty-Eight Witnesses*:

The truth also is that if Miss Genovese had been killed on Park Avenue or Madison Avenue an assistant would have called the story to my attention, I would have assigned a top man and quite possibly we would have had a front-page story the next morning. If she had been a white woman killed in Harlem, the tension of the integration story would have provided her with a larger obituary. If she had been a Negro killed in Harlem she would have received a paragraph or two. (Rosenthal 1964: 16)

We know about Catherine Genovese partly because she was a white woman killed in a predominantly middle-class neighbourhood, and no

one intervened to help her. As for the assailant, Rosenthal wrote further that 'during the life of the story we received a few nasty letters demanding to know why we had "concealed" the fact that Moseley was Negro. The answer is really quite simple. Where the fact that a man is a Negro is directly relevant to the story we print the fact. Where it is not, we do not' (Rosenthal 1964: 18–19). In his testimony, Moseley indicated that he went out looking for 'any girl' and the *New York Times* coverage made little of his actions as racially motivated.⁸ More was made of how such a thing could have happened in a middle-class neighbourhood.

In all the social psychological experimentation that followed the focus shifted to the bystanders, away from the victim and the assailant. At the time of the murder and subsequent trial, Moseley was in his late twenties. He was married to a registered nurse and they had two children. He worked as a business-machine operator. Other details emerged as I traced what happened to Moseley through the press coverage in the *New York Times*. His lawyer's opening remarks 'dwelt in some detail on the frustrations of his client's early years in Detroit and Pittsburgh, describing him as an "intelligent, quiet, shy, retiring boy" who somehow developed from an introvert into a maniac' (NYT: 9 June 1964). We learn that his crime was painstakingly calculated, that he confessed to and subsequently recanted the murders of two other women. Brownmiller, in her analysis some years later, described him as one of the 'fairly typical, if unusually dramatic examples of the men who commit rape-murder . . . better understood as brutalized, violence-prone men who act out their raging hatred against the world through an object offering the least amount of physical resistance, a woman's body' (Brownmiller 1975: 206).

Winston Moseley was found guilty of murder in the first degree and sentenced to the electric chair amidst handclapping and the cheers of women in the courtroom. The judge told the jurors that he didn't believe in capital punishment, but added this note, 'I must say I feel this may be improper when I see this monster. I wouldn't hesitate to pull the switch on him myself' (NYT: 16 June 1964). During the trial the prosecution introduced evidence of other women's encounters with Moseley that included physical and sexual assault. He entered Sing Sing Prison in July 1964 to await execution, which was delayed by the appeal process. That process resulted on 1 June 1967 in a reduction of his sentence to life imprisonment. He had been considered legally sane for the purposes of being tried but was still suffering from mental illness which the court ruled, 'while not a defense to the crime, may have rendered it impossible for him to exercise any self-control' (*People v. Moseley* 1967: 765; see note 7, pp. 115–16). The appeal acknowledged his legal sanity but argued that mental illness should have played a role in sentencing. In 1965, the State of New York had abolished the death penalty and

Moseley had already been advised that his sentence would become life imprisonment.

Moseley was transferred to Attica State Prison and in 1968 was taken to Meyer Memorial Hospital in Buffalo for minor surgery. He escaped while being taken back to Attica and was considered dangerous. The press coverage in the *New York Times* from 19 March to 23 April reminded readers repeatedly of his earlier offense and he was eventually captured by the FBI, arraigned for rape, burglary, robbery, unlawful escape and unlawful possession of a firearm and returned to Attica State Prison.

In the course of involving several people in his escape, a black woman was held hostage and raped. She was later charged with aiding his escape. She did not report his hiding place because he threatened to kill her children if she told. Despite her own victimization by Moseley, she could have received a year in prison. The case was dismissed but not before Mrs Barbara Sims, the only black woman lawyer on the prosecuting staff, refused to prosecute the case and was quoted as saying 'If this had been a white woman raped, do you think they would have brought her into court and charged her with a crime?' (NYT: 3 April 1968). Sims was dismissed for insubordination. These events of 1968 were only a small part of the racial turmoil in many American black communities anguished further by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr on 4 April 1968.

Does it end there with Moseley going back to jail? Actually not. On 16 April 1977, an editorial written by Winston Moseley appeared in the *New York Times*. The letter bears out earlier information that Moseley was intelligent and expressed himself well. At his trial, he had said that murder was an idea that came into his mind and that he could not put it aside. One defence psychiatrist had labelled him catatonic schizophrenic, 'incapable of stopping himself once he got the urge to kill', and another defence psychiatrist said he 'knew enough to take escape measures but that otherwise defects of reason had severely impaired his judgement', and in rebuttal another psychiatrist believed he was aware of the wrongdoing of his actions, showing 'good logic, judgement and intelligence in carrying out his plans' (NYT: 11 June 1964).

In his editorial Winston Moseley describes his life. In 1971, he was part of the Attica prison uprising, an experience that he says accounts for the beginning of his learning 'that human life has great value'. He earned a BA degree in sociology when courses were offered in prison. He cites two women, Sister Mary Frances Welch and Dorothy Tishler, who assisted him in a personal transformation. He has been president and vice-president of the inmate liaison committee of Attica and assisted in prison reform and a peaceful demonstration at Attica in 1977. He tells us 'The man who killed Kitty Genovese in Queens in 1964 is no more' (NYT: 16 April 1977).

On 28 April 1977, two letters to the editor of the *New York Times* appeared with the heading 'Convict rehabilitation: unconvincing evidence'. In one, the writer argues that murder is not a rational crime and Moseley's education and greater social awareness hardly convince her that he is rehabilitated. She says 'Mr. Moseley should demonstrate that those factors in his personality which motivated him to kill Kitty Genovese will not reassert themselves'. Another writes:

The Moseley article? Proof that writing can be taught. I would feel much safer if I were sure that some do-gooder doesn't try to get him out of Attica. The Kitty Genovese murder will continue to haunt us all.

(NYT: 28 April 1977)

Indeed, this particular historical event will continue to raise questions about how we are to prevent violence towards women. However, if we stay too focused on violence towards women, we lose sight of other systemic factors that structure violence – poverty, race and class. While not absolving Moseley of his crime, we still need to understand the world that formed him in his 'early years in Detroit and Pittsburgh' in the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, the 'commitment to anti-sexist and anti-racist work' (hooks 1990: 64) requires that we are always looking at the political context of the crime despite our outrage at the victimizers. The daily experience of violence in people's lives is a story too easily decontextualized by social psychological theories that operate at the individual behavioural level. If we theorize at the level of community, then we begin to consider that some groups or communities are more vulnerable to violence than others and have been so historically. By understanding the overlap of racism, sexism and poverty, we can understand both the personal suffering and the political significance of any particular attack. Theorizing about the Genovese incident involves us in theorizing about the relative power or powerlessness of groups and communities to protect themselves from violence. This theme slowly emerged through the 1980s and was reflected in some of the later commentary on the Genovese murder.

Maureen Dowd, in a piece entitled '20 years after the murder of Kitty Genovese – the question remains: Why?', wrote that this murder 'crystallized what people were only beginning to feel about urban life in America: the anonymity, the lack of human contact, the feeling of not being able to control one's environment' (NYT: 12 March 1984). Indeed, the incident occurred before American national crime rates soared. Dowd reported on views put forward at a Catherine Genovese Memorial Conference at Fordham University marking the twentieth anniversary of Genovese's murder. In the opinion of a university administrator:

Kitty Genovese died because we didn't have a sense of community. We're finally coming out of it now because people are tired of being afraid to walk on the streets or go in the subways.

(Sexter, in Dowd *NYT* 12 March 1984)

And of subsequent incidents, the conference was told by the then Surgeon General of the United States that they would decline:

[W]hen people learn to care, when they accept the fact that there may be risks to caring, and when they agree to take those risks in order to preserve their place in the community.

(Koop, in Dowd *NYT* 12 March 1984)

The speaker claimed that risks are required to preserve 'community' but one wants to ask whose community will be preserved? Since 1964 several stories have been reported in the *New York Times* that were reminiscent of the Genovese incident. By the mid-1980s, a magazine editor, L.J. Davis, living nearby the scene of another woman's murder lamented that 'fights - violent, destructive fights, often accompanied by the display if not the use of murderous hardware - are roughly as common as trips to the post office. The wonder, therefore, is not that many people failed to summon the police; the wonder is that anybody bothered' (*NYT*: 19 December 1984); and that poorer communities were more vulnerable: 'everyone knows what happens when you lock a sane man up in a madhouse. . . . Until we address the reality of the poor, they will remain locked in the same hermetic and unbroken cycle of rage, and sometimes they will kill each other' (*NYT*: 19 December 1984).

Rosenthal, whose accounts of the Genovese murder and the police's response to crime were cited earlier, wrote an article entitled 'The 39th witness' (*NYT*: 12 February 1987). He described his reaction to New York City's homeless, perhaps the most powerless community of all:

I hoped that I would never be a silent witness. . . . Almost every day of my life I see a body sprawled on the sidewalk. . . . They do not scream, as did Catherine Genovese, but if they did I would probably walk even faster, because they are dirty, sometimes foul persons, a most unattractive and unsympathetic kind of victim. . . . Sometimes I get very angry. . . . Then, sometimes and more often recently, I think of Catherine Genovese and the way she died and the 38 witnesses. I check out a little book I wrote about the case then and find that I didn't really attack the 38 and wrote that any one of us might have done the same. I am glad I was not too high and mighty about them because now I am the 39th. And whether you live in New York or any other city where living bodies lie in the streets or roam them in pain, and walk by, so are you.

(Rosenthal in *NYT*: 12 February 1987)

When we theorize about violence in communities, it is important to look at how understanding and experience are structured by the material conditions of poverty and systemic exclusion from power. Intervening or turning away are behaviours best understood in historical and cultural context. The circumstances of Genovese's murder that I originally understood in individual behavioural terms became, during the 1970s, an instance of the general failure to intervene in the prevention of violence towards women. Now I use that incident as a springboard to understand how whole communities can be seen as vulnerable to unchecked violence. I think it is the task of social psychology to theorize a socio-politics of intervention starting with increased knowledge of the long and complex history of non-intervention in instances of violence against powerless groups - women, the aged, children, racial minorities and the poor, among others.