

Book Tearing and the Bystander in the University Library

Book tearing was performed by a stooge in two different kinds of university libraries and in front of individual students or groups of students. Eleven per cent of the students responded. Forty-three per cent did not notice the book being loudly ripped a few feet from them. Neither the type of library nor the size of the audience influenced the response. Nothing in the biographical data of the students distinguished those who responded from those who did not.

IN THE SPRING of 1967 a pair of students who were in Miami University's new undergraduate library noticed a fellow student systematically tearing pages from a volume and placing them in his own notebook. The couple followed the culprit, reported him, and assisted in his apprehension. Investigation revealed that this was not the first time he had behaved this way. Apparently he had a habit of obtaining his material for study by removing the needed pages from the books they were in and thereby avoided the bother of checking the books out and worrying about them becoming overdue.

The issue of noninvolvement or of passive bystanders is of current interest

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in social sciences.¹ The students who reported the book ripper were not behaving as passive bystanders, and their action raised the question of whether this behavior was usual or unusual. Since the offender had apparently performed his deviant act at other times, perhaps these students were exceptional in reporting him, or, perhaps these other acts had gone undetected.

Therefore, an investigation of the reaction of students to book ripping in the university library was carried out. Two kinds of variables which might influence the reaction of the bystanders were examined: first, the findings of experimental studies² illustrate the influence of the number of bystanders. This research demonstrated that when a group of bystanders is present the likelihood of a response is, paradoxically, less than when one individual is present. This result is not inconsistent with a theory of social comparison³ which suggests that

¹ J. M. Darley and B. Latane, "Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, VIII (April 1968), 377-83. B. Latane and J. M. Darley, "Group Inhibition of Bystander Intervention in Emergencies," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (in press).

² *Ibid.*

³ L. Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations*, VII (May 1954), 117-40.

in ambiguous situations a person is unsure of how to respond, so he looks to others for guidance. In some instances, such as emergencies of varying sorts, the person to whom he looks for some clue as to how to behave is, in turn, looking for the same help in him. Therefore, no one responds, but instead each person waits to see what the other person will do. The diffusion of responsibility is another possible explanation of the paradox.⁴ When a group is witnessing a deviant act, the individual may feel less responsible himself for stopping the act or reporting it.

Since the influence of the group in suppressing responses to emergencies and to deviant behavior has been reliably demonstrated in experimental studies, it should show a similar influence in a natural setting. Therefore, in the present investigation, book tearing was performed in front of individuals and in front of groups.

The second variable which was examined was the effect of the physical environment in which the act occurred. Miami University recently completed a new undergraduate library which was constructed to give the student easy access to books and journals through the use of open stacks. Furthermore, the library permits the student to obtain his books without the aid of a librarian and to study without any librarians nearby. The student is allowed to smoke and study in an area of comfortable chairs, carpeting, and airy stacks. This plan, the designers felt, should cause the student to feel more responsible for the library and its contents. In contrast, Miami University's older library, which is now used mainly by graduate students and seniors, forces the student to go through the necessary authorities to get to his study space which is usually a cramped carrel next to stacks which extend from the floor to a very low ceiling and smoking

is not permitted. Student complaints about this library are numerous, and the librarians feel that the students using it are generally unconcerned about the material it contains.

The reaction of students to book ripping was examined in both library settings with the expectation of more responses being obtained in the new library than in the old library.

Generally, the following procedure was used to perform the book tearing act. A tall, blond, male senior acted as a stooge. An observer went into the study area of the library before the stooge entered. The observer selected a subject or group of subjects and signalled the stooge to enter. The stooge, who was empty-handed except for a small slip of paper of the kind that is often used by students to jot down a book's call number, walked in, passed close by the subject, and went to the stacks near where the subject was sitting. Quite often the distance between where the subject was sitting and where the stooge stood was very short. It ranged from a few feet in the old library to sometimes several feet in the new library. In any case, the sound of the ripping easily carried the distance between the stooge and the subject.

The stooge scanned the stacks and selected a book which had just been placed near him by the observer from the other side of the stacks. The book closely resembled a library book; although, of course, it was not. After paging through the book for one minute the stooge selected a page and ripped it out. He continued ripping out pages for three minutes—three pages in the first minute, two pages in the second minute, and one page in the third minute. At the end of this period he walked out of the area, again passing closely by the subject. Before the stooge had started ripping, the observer positioned himself so that he could see the subject without the subject being able to see

⁴Darley and Latane, "Bystander. . . ."

him. If the subject said nothing to the stooge and did not leave his seat within ten minutes after the ripping started, the observer went to him and interviewed him. If the subject said anything to the stooge or went to a librarian before the end of ten minutes, the observer intervened, saying that a psychological experiment was being conducted which he would explain but first he wanted to ask the subject a few questions. He then interviewed the subject. After being interviewed, all subjects, whether they had responded or not, were told the nature and purpose of the investigation and were thanked for their cooperation.

In the first part of the interview the subjects were asked whether or not they had noticed anything unusual occurring in the library. Then they were asked another question or two depending upon their responses to the first question before being asked whether or not they had noticed anyone ripping a library book. If they said that they had not, then the interviewer went on to the biographical section of the interview. If they said that they had noticed someone ripping a book, they were asked what, if anything, they considered doing about it. Another question or two concerning their intentions might also have been asked depending upon how they had answered the preceding questions.

In the biographical section of the interview information concerning the following was obtained: name, age, class, major, hours per week spent in the library, number of brothers and sisters, father's occupation, length of time at the university, and the community in which they were reared.

The major results are presented in Table 1. Reactions of groups in the old library were not examined because the physical arrangement of this library did not allow for the book ripping to be performed in front of groups.

By examining the proportions of the first three columns it can be seen that a larger proportion of individuals responded in the old library than in the new library. It appears, however, that this was due to a greater proportion noticing the deviant act in the old library than in the new library. A few chi-square analyses support this conclusion.⁵ Again, because of the physical arrangement of the old library—the stacks are closer to the carrels—the stooge tended to rip the

⁵ A chi-square analysis of the proportions presented in the table would be quite inappropriate because of the small expected proportions in three of the cells. The data for individuals and groups in the new library were combined to make the analysis more appropriate. The resulting chi-square was 6.20, $df=2$, $p < .01$. A further combination of those who noticed but did not respond with those who responded yielded a chi-square of 4.04, $df=1$, $p < .05$. Comparing the responders with a combination of those who noticed and those who did not notice yielded a result which was not significant ($X^2 = 1.15$, $df=1$, $p > .10$).

TABLE 1
PROPORTIONS AND NUMBERS OF STUDENTS WHO DID NOT NOTICE, WHO NOTICED BUT DID NOT RESPOND, AND WHO RESPONDED IN EACH CONDITION

	Old Library Individuals		New Library Individuals		New Library Individuals in Groups ^a		Total Individuals		New Library Groups ^b	
	n	p	n	p	n	p	n	p	n	p
Did Not Notice . . .	4	.20	14	.48	17	.52	35	.43	3	.25
Noticed But Did Not Respond . . .	12	.60	13	.45	13	.39	38	.46	7	.58
Responded . . .	4	.20	2	.07	3	.09	9	.11	2	.17
Total . . .	20		29		33		82		12	

^a Twenty-seven of these individuals were in groups of three, and six individuals were in groups of two.

^b Individuals in groups were combined for group scores: if one or more individuals in a group noticed, then it was counted as if the group noticed. Similarly, if one or more individuals in a group responded, then it was counted as if a group responded.

book at shorter distances from the subjects in the old library than in the new library. This most likely accounts for the greater proportion of students noticing the ripping. It must be pointed out that the accuracy of some of the subjects' statements that they had not noticed anything is questionable. The observer watched the subject quite closely when the ripping began (in fact, it was originally intended to relate the speed of noticing and the speed of stopping or reporting the stooge to the type of library and the group-individual conditions). In several instances the subject was seen looking at the stooge ripping the book, but said in the interview that he had not noticed anything unusual and did not notice anyone ripping a book. Furthermore, the sound of the ripping appeared exceedingly loud to someone who was anticipating the stooge's act. But since a student's concentration is often able to withstand even such intense distractions as attractive members of the opposite sex, it was decided to use the verbal response to determine whether or not anything was noticed.

It could be suggested that the more frequent detection in the old library was because the students there were more likely to be graduate students or seniors than in the new library. However, a series of analyses of variance and correlations failed to show any significant relationship between age, class, or, in fact, *any* biographical variable and the likelihood of noticing, not noticing, or responding. From the data that were collected there was nothing which allows one to say what kind of student is most likely to notice a person ripping a book or who is most likely to respond to such behavior.

The most disconcerting result is the proportion of the total who responded: slightly more than 10 per cent. It should be remembered that the stooge was not trying to hide his act but was ripping several pages from what was apparently

a library book while standing very close to a student or group of students. It is particularly disquieting to ponder the likely proportion of responses which would occur when one was truly pilfering pages from a library book.

Of the nine subjects who responded, the majority, seven, reported or attempted to report the stooge's act to a librarian.⁶ One subject stopped the stooge from continuing, and another subject, after the stooge left, found the book and discovered that it was not a library book.

The thirty-eight students who said that they had noticed the stooge ripping a book but did not respond gave a total of forty-six reasons why they did not do anything. In order to summarize these reasons they were grouped—admittedly arbitrarily—into five categories. The majority of reasons which were given fell about equally into three categories: (1) Noninvolvement (included: "I didn't want to get involved"; "I didn't care"; "It was none of my business"; "It didn't bother me"; "I was studying for an exam"; "You just don't tell on people") 30 per cent. (2) Vacillation (included: "I thought about reporting him to a librarian, but decided not to"; "I was going to ask him what he was doing, but thought he knows what he's doing"; "I thought I might write a letter to the student newspaper") 27 per cent. (3) Irrelevant (included: "I thought he had permission"; "I thought it wasn't a library book"; "I thought he was too obvious") 24 per cent. Of the remaining

⁶ Two of the subjects who responded in the undergraduate library were not the students who were originally chosen as subjects but instead happened to be passing by when the ripping was occurring. Because of this and because a few subjects said they thought the stooge had permission or "was too obvious," the stooge attempted to be more sly with three subjects. He ripped once near the subject then glanced at the subject—apparently noticing him for the first time—then went around the stacks and continued ripping. None of the three subjects noticed the stooge ripping a library book. The observer felt that the stooge's sly behavior gave the subjects an excuse for "not noticing." Therefore, this condition was discontinued.

18 per cent some suggested that the subjects thought the stooge was too big or appeared too mean for them to do anything, and the rest of the subjects said either that they flatly had not considered doing anything or that it was just too bad but that they did not know what to do. Whether or not these are the actual reasons or rationalizations is, of course, impossible to know.

Under the circumstances investigated in this study it appears that besides the responses not being related to any of the biographical data, they are also not related to the kind of library in which the misbehavior occurs, and the group does not suppress the bystander's response to the act. On the latter point it should be noted that since the likelihood of a response by individuals was so low, there was not much of a response for groups to suppress.

The various results: the small proportion of students who responded, the proportion of students who said that they did not notice when a book was being ripped a few feet from them, as well as the kinds of reasons which were given for not responding suggest that

ripping pages from a library book is not seen as a very serious misdeed. The authors did not expect these results, and it seems unlikely that the readers expect them either. However, in the course of professional endeavors many academicians have had the experience of trying to find a particularly important article in the library, only to find it torn from the only volume which contained it, producing in them an extreme anger at the thief. Perhaps because of less experience, this is not as likely to be true for the subjects in this study.

In future investigations the authors intend to examine the question which was just raised as well as what might be done to make it more likely that a bystander will respond to book ripping in a university library.

Unfortunately, these results offer comfort to the book ripper since they suggest that he has little to fear when committing his offense. Also, it could further happen that this article would be one which is quickly removed from this volume so that the publicity will be deterred.

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