The term bystander effect, or bystander apathy, was first employed by psychologists in the early 1960s. Its significance was exemplified in the 1964 murder in New York of Kitty Genovese. This lady was attacked outside her apartment building. While 40 neighbours heard her desperate cries for help, none came to her aid or called the police. Researches have explained several components of the bystander effect. It is believed that the observers must perceive the situation as an emergency in order to take an action. Where others are present during a bad situation and no one takes action or all the witnesses behave as though nothing were wrong, all the observers will tend to view the situation as a non-emergency. This is what psychologists have described as pluralistic ignorance, meaning that the group behaviour causes each individual to be lulled into inaction.

I am not sure as to whether Lt General Romeo Dallaire took any psychology lessons in the military. I am not even sure as to whether all those who have studied the bystander effect act as required when the occasion arises. However, what is clear is that when Lt Gen. Dallaire warned of the imminent genocide in Rwanda in 1994, no one who heard responded.

It is argued that individualism and a sense of individual responsibility are the tools for counteracting the bystander effect. Lt Gen Dallaire must have a great sense of individual responsibility. From his mouth came a warning about genocide in the crafting, but few heeded his warning. As a soldier, he is better placed to speak with confidence about the ills of child conscription and that is what he is doing now. As one who was forced to carry arms at a tender age, and who knows the physical and psychological effects of being a child combatant, it is my hope that the bystander effect will not prevail, and instead, action be taken in combating this atrocity.

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