

The Missing Child Experiment

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“The missing child experiment” refers to a popular, non-academic, social experiment that was first conducted in 2008 by a Local 6, a news station in Orlando, Florida. The “experiment” has since been replicated and adapted in popular culture and by psychological researchers. In the “experiment,” the news crew arranged for a child actor to sit on a bench inside the entrance of a local shopping mall. Mock missing child posters featuring the child actor’s face were posted at the mall’s entrance. The child was observed by the news crew and security personnel, with her father seated in a nearby café (Cosmo’s Weblog, 2008). The news crew recorded dozens of people entering the mall and passing the missing child posters. According to the news crew, many people failed to notice the posters; most of the people who did see the posters also saw the child but passed by without taking action. People who walked by and were interviewed on scene reported either not actually noticing the child, being uncertain of what to do, or being hesitant about approaching an unknown child in public due to fears that their interaction could be misunderstood by a nearby parent.

Two individuals in the original “experiment” did directly interact with the child. One sat down next to the child and started asking questions, while the second initially passed by but returned 10 minutes later to check if the child was okay. Two others read the posters, noticed the

child, and went to nearby stores to ask a manager to call security. Thus, four individuals in total noticed the child and took steps to address the situation.

In addition to individual factors such as hesitance to approach unattended children in public, the behavior of the participants in this study is consistent with the phenomenon known as the bystander effect, first shown experimentally by Darley and Latane (1968). The bystander effect describes the diffusion of responsibility felt by individuals in groups or public settings, resulting in apathy or hesitation to address perceived emergencies or dangerous situations. Due to diffusion of responsibility, the presence of more people means that individuals are less likely to act. This effect is mediated by the urgency of the situation, the perceived danger, and support of others present (for a meta-analytic review of the topic, see Fischer et al., 2011).

Another factor contributing to the results may be that missing child posters are ineffective at raising public awareness. In a scientific field experiment conducted by Lampinen, Arnal, & Hicks (2008), the posters of eight missing children were posted at the exit of a grocery store. Cooperative customers exiting the store were given short anonymous surveys on their ability to recall information from the missing child posters. While the customers agreed that finding missing children was important, most admitted to not looking at the posters or only looking briefly. Customers were also unable to recognize faces seen in the posters more often than predicted by chance.

Finally, it is important to note that the “missing child experiment” study may not have adhered to what is generally considered ethical psychological research practice. As articulated in the Belmont Report (United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979), informed consent is an important aspect of research involving human subjects. Informed consent would entail providing possible participants with the opportunity to make an informed decision

about the risks and benefits of participants in a study, and would allow for uncoerced participant choice to participate in a study. The subjects in the experiment conducted by the news station were unaware that they were part of an experiment and they were not given an opportunity to provide informed consent. Further, it is not clear if the “experiment” was overseen by an Institutional Review Board. Institutional Review Board oversight is especially needed in cases of deception of participants in order to evaluate whether the benefits of the research outweigh the potential risks to participants. It is also important to provide an appropriate debriefing describing the purpose and objectives of the study following participation. It is unclear to what degree that took place in this study.

References

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