

Applying The Witnessing Model to George Floyd's Murder

The witnessing model combines bystander theory and trauma theory, asserting that there is not just one witness position but rather four. The four witness positions are created by two dimensions: aware or not aware and empowered or disempowered. (See Figure 1). Our positions vary depending on the situations we witness. Sometimes we can cope with what we witness and sometimes we are overwhelmed. Position One occurs when one is an aware and empowered witness to violence or violation. Taking action, and clarity about what actions to take, goes along with the experience of this witness position. A person is likely to feel competent and effective in Position One. Although it is desirable to be in Position One all of the time, no one can be. We work toward it. Position Two may be the position that is most dangerous to others. People who witness violence and violation, who don't understand what they are witnessing, but nonetheless respond as if they know what they are doing, will be misguided. Their actions will be ineffective at best and harmful at worst. The negative impact of witnessing from this position may be far-reaching, particularly if the person witnessing occupies a position of power or is perceived as having power. In Position Three a person cannot register what is truly happening and therefore takes no action to make things better. A witness who is unaware of and thus ignores someone's urgent need has abandoned that person and the effects may be as harmful as actions taken from Position Two. Position Four may be the most common of all. In this position a person is aware of what is going on but is either uncertain what to do or lacks the internal or external resources to act exactly as he or she knows to do. This position saps energy, enthusiasm, and resolve. There are long-term consequences for the self and others, for the communities of which one is a member of each of these positions.

Sadly, events in 2020 have made the four positions totally understandable. If we consider the murder of George Floyd through the lens of the witnessing model, our understanding of one facet of the event may be enhanced. Darnella Fraser, the young woman who videotaped the murder with her phone and subsequently was a witness at Derek Chauvin's murder trial, did what she could at the time under the life-threatening circumstances she felt she was in. She was in Position Four: aware but disempowered to stop the murder. She stood outside and filmed the encounter for a full 10 minutes, recording what has been called "one of the most important civil rights documents in a generation." Yet, her experience at the time was of helplessness. She was aware she was seeing police brutality, and as it unfolded, murder, but she was powerless to stop it. She has spoken eloquently of how terrified she was at the time by the police who were menacing witnesses and how "traumatized" she remains. Others who were there have told of walking away, attempting to move into unawareness, Position Three. They abandoned the moment but have been haunted since. Three officers were at the scene the entire time and were in Witness Position Two, the most dangerous witness position. They were empowered to stop their fellow officer but misperceived what was happening or supported his actions and chose not to restrain Chauvin from keeping his knee on George Floyd's neck. Their inaction is also a form of perpetration, and they will be tried for this as

well.

The press has used the term “bystander” for the accounts of people who were present on May 26, 2020 and “witness” when these same people offered testimony at the trial. Calling any of them a bystander negates the trauma they experienced at the time and subsequently. The witnessing model does not do that.

Darnella Fraser’s video was viewed by millions of people globally. Although she felt helpless and disempowered at the moment, doing what she could do at the time had stunning reverberating consequences. An axiom of the witnessing model is that small actions need not be trivial; we can never know the ripples outward of actions we take. The axiom is meant to encourage people to act and in this instance, it has.

Figure 1: Witness Positions

