

A Social-Cognitive Exploration of Reactions to Leiby Kletzky's Abduction and Homicide

by

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Boro Park, a neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, boasts one of the largest orthodox Hasidic populations in the nation (Mintz, 1992) and many of its residents are of Jewish descent. Hasidic Jews trace their ancestry to Eastern Europe. They strictly observe a traditional interpretation of Jewish religious law. For example, men and women worship and are educated separately (Mintz, 1992), they dress modestly by America's fashion standards, and they carefully follow kosher laws (see Harris, 1995, for a description of life in a typical Hasidic household). The Hasidic Jewish community of Boro Park is very tightly-knit—residents watch out for each other and generally avoid contact with strangers—and in many ways is insulated from the large-city culture surrounding it (Joselit, 1990). It is in this neighborhood that Nachman and Esther Kletzky raised six children, including their only son, Leiby.

During the summer of 2011, eight-year-old Leiby attended day camp, like so many other children do. Feeling a sense of independence, Leiby asked his parents if he could walk part of the way home from camp. Concerned for their son, who never before had been allowed to walk in the city alone, the Kletzky's reluctantly agreed. Esther and Leiby walked the seven-block route together so that he would be familiar with the path (Barron, 2011). Then, on July 11, Leiby was allowed to walk from his camp to an agreed upon meeting point where his mother would be waiting.

Leiby never made it to the meeting point.

Frantic when her son did not appear, Esther alerted the Shomrim, a volunteer neighborhood watch group that cooperates with the New York Police Department. Volunteers quickly mobilized throughout Boro Park to look for the boy. They knocked on doors, spoke with passersby, and posted fliers with Leiby's picture. News of Leiby's disappearance spread through the community, and thousands of volunteers joined the search. Two days later, Boro Park residents were devastated by the news that police investigators discovered parts of Kletzky's dismembered body in an apartment and also in a suitcase left in a dumpster. Levi Aron, a Boro Park resident who worked at a local hardware store, was arrested. The insulated community's shock was amplified when it became known that Leiby's abductor—though not Hasidic—was himself a member of the Jewish community (Barron, 2011; Berger, 2011).

Police reports and footage from local security cameras suggest that Leiby lost his way as he was walking to meet his mother, making a wrong turn only blocks from where she was waiting for him. When he could not find a familiar landmark, Leiby encountered Levi Aron and asked him for help. Reports confirm that Aron agreed to help, but first took Kletzky with him to pay a bill and to wait in the car as he attended a wedding (Berger & Baker, 2011). Aron told Kletzky that he could stay at his apartment and then go home the following day. According to police, Aron stated that he panicked when he realized that volunteers were searching for the boy who was sleeping in his apartment (Barron, 2011). Fearing discovery and its consequences, Aron allegedly drugged and suffocated Leiby; he then dismembered the boy's body (Berger & Baker, 2011). Aron later told his lawyer that he heard voices saying he should kill himself for his actions (Mann, 2011).

Leiby's family described the eight-year-old as a "gentle, sweet, sensitive, a little shy, but incredibly compassionate boy" (Ritter, 2011). His father described Leiby as showing concern and compassion for others (Leiby Kletzky Memorial, 2011). Strong reactions to Leiby's murder came from across the globe as people tried to explain why Levi Aron committed such a gruesome crime against a child.

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Worksheet 1

Instructions: Using your textbook and/or other resources, define each of the following concepts. Then develop an example from your own experience that illustrates each concept. When everyone in your group has finished, share the examples with each other.

1. Availability heuristic

Definition: _____

Example: _____

2. Internal and external attributions

Definition: _____

Example: _____

3. Hindsight bias

Definition: _____

Example: _____

4. Representativeness heuristic

Definition: _____

Example: _____

5. Blaming the victim

Definition: _____

Example: _____

6. Overgeneralization

Definition: _____

Example: _____

7. Illusion of invulnerability

Definition: _____

Example: _____

8. Just world hypothesis

Definition: _____

Example: _____

Worksheet 2

Instructions: Now that you have defined and provided an example of several social cognitive concepts, you will work in your group to apply those concepts to people's responses to Leiby Kletzky's homicide. Comments have been selected from several online newspapers and forums; these appear below in their original form, including spelling and grammatical errors. For each comment, identify the relevant concept(s) and any flaws you may see in the author's reasoning. Prepare to support your answer as you discuss each comment with your group.

1. "People, TEACH your children to ONLY ask for help from a woman, if possible. This poor little child got lost. He was making the 7 block trip from day camp to home for the first time alone. He asked his killer directions. The local police did a safety class for kids in my town some years ago and this was their number 1 priority for children who get lost or are in crisis for any reason. DO NOT ask for help from a male, if a female is available. This story, and every one like it, saddens me deeply and is an excellent case in point."

Comment from FeralForever on the *Huffington Post* online <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/social/FeralForever/levi-aron-arrested-lieby-kletzkyn89718497284630.html>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

2. "Yeah, I did want to add something because when we start focusing, as we're doing now, with all the dangers of a kid going outside and getting lost and walking to school, God forbid, let's remember that 90 to 95 percent of all the crimes against children are not committed by strangers that they meet on the street. They're committed by people they know, often family members or close family friends."

Comment from Lenore Skenazy on NPR's "Tell Me More" www.npr.org/2011/07/19/138510244/independence-for-kids-when-to-give-it-and-how-much?r=1

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

3. "As psycho as this killer is and he must be put away, I have not heard or seen any media question what an eight boy was doing walking home from camp by himself. What on earth were his parents thinking? Obviously, the weren't, but there seems to be a real case of neglect on the parents' part here as well. What a tragic loss!"

Comment from MissDarla on *Huffington Post* online <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/social/MissDarla/levi-aron-arrested-lieby-kletzkyn89718497248993.html>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

4. "This just proves no neighborhood is safe. I still have friends that leave their doors unlocked and I just don't get it. People think things like this don't happen in their neighborhood, well neighborhoods don't discriminate against sickos. This is sad and unfortunate, especially due to the fact that it only took a split second for it to happen. With mom waiting for him on the other side of the block. How devastating! Sending prayers to the poor family that now has a lifetime of pain thanks to a sick twisted pervert that still gets to breathe fresh air. Makes me ill."

Comment from Bellarain on *Huffington Post* online <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/social/Bellarain/levi-aron-arrested-lieby-kletzkyn89718497196795.html>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

5. “As for Levi, what a monster. If his story is true, you certainly don’t kill a child just because there is a major search for him. He could’ve dropped him off back at his day camp and left. I think there is much more to this story than we have heard. Sick, sick, sick!”

Comment from tenaclark on *Huffington Post* online <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/social/tenaclark/levi-aron-arrested-lieby-kletzky89718497194231.html>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

6. “A neighbor said that Aron’s family is “dysfunctional” and Aron himself is “disturbed.” He also made it clear that he kept his kids away from the Aron home. Not denying the fact that Aron has been facing emotional issues prior to the murder, his lawyers have suggested pursuing an insanity defense...”

Comment from Jordana Kozupsky on *IrishCentral* online <http://www.irishcentral.com/news/Irish-American-Brooklyn-DA-makes-murder-of-Leiby-Kletzky-a-priority-126136448.html>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

7. “It is quite interesting the belief that keeping with “your own kind” provides safety. It is provides nothing. It is erroneous and not logical. Why? Because evil is every where. I also find it interesting everyone is attributing this crime to a mental illness. Why? Because he is Jewish. The man is evil and probably has killed before. He knew exactly what he was doing and did not seem to be the least bit remorseful. That isnt a mental illness that is evil. He isn’t the first Jew to kill and he won’t be the last. This is the danger in thinking of evil in superficial terms like nationality, skin color or religion. Some people are evil, have evil thoughts and act on them. Thinking you live in a “safe neighborhood” is seriously set oneself up for a huge disappointing wake up call.”

Comment from Anonymous on *The Wall Street Journal* online <http://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2011/07/13/leiby-kletzky-murder-in-borough-park-whispers-about-a-loner/tab/comments/>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

8. “It’s not more dangerous today... it’s just in the news more. Kids & adults alike were murdered back when we were kids, we just weren’t told about it and it wasn’t all over the TV. There would be an article in the paper our parents would hide from us.”

Comment from tuffgirl-1811463 on *MSNBC* online <http://world-news.newsvine.com/news/2011/07/13/7073399-boys-dismembered-body-found-man-charged>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

9. “My heartfelt sympathy to all of his family. Rest in peace little one. What a sick world we live in!!”

Comment from marianne-2739286 on *MSNBC* online <http://world-news.newsvine.com/news/2011/07/13/7073399-boys-dismembered-body-found-man-charged?pc=25&sp=50-discussionnav>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

10. “Take this murdering bastard to his neighborhood, stand him in the middle of the street in just his skivvies with his hands tied behind his back. Then let the chips fall where they may for him. His community will make sure he pays for such a brutal and disgusting murder of an innocent.”

Comment from PocketClam-20 on MSNBC online <http://world-news.newsvine.com/news/2011/07/13/7073399-boys-dismembered-body-found-man-charged?pc=25&sp=50> - discussionnav

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

11. “His uncle and father had to be aware that this guy was disturbed. They may not have known how disturbed he was, but I’m sure they knew he wasn’t a well-balanced, normal sane person. I hope the police look very hard into what, if any, culpability they may have in this case.”

Comment from Catwhisperer56 on ABCNews online <http://abcnews.go.com/US/dismembered-brooklyn-boys-alleged-killer-hearing-voices-lawyer/comments?type=story&id=14067849>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____

12. “When I was growing up there were all kinds of characters in our neighborhood; but not one that I believe would have hurt me, let alone kill and dismember me. What has the world come to? You read about Caylee Anthony, now this. I am convinced that the more we become accepting of eveyhting, the more it is that people really do not have a sense of what is right, let alone, normal.”

Comment from lwba on ABCNews online <http://abcnews.go.com/US/dismembered-brooklyn-boys-alleged-killer-hearing-voices-lawyer/comments?type=story&id=14067849>

Relevant Concept(s): _____

Flaw in Reasoning: _____



Now that your group has discussed the cognitive flaws inherent in how people have processed the events of Leiby’s abduction and homicide, how can people improve their judgments of social situations? In the space below, generate several strategies based on your social psychological research.
