Would New Yorkers help a lost child? 1976 v 2008?

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Would New Yorkers help a lost child: 1976 v 2008?

To test the notion of urban "stimulus overload" (Milgram, 1970), this study replicates a 1977 "lost child" experiment, with a child (age 9 or 10) asking 146 New Yorkers for help. As expected: (a) The rate of New Yorkers who helped a lost child rose significantly, from 46% in 1977 to 61.6% in 2008. (b) When debriefed and told that the lost child was actually part of an experiment, only 11% of New Yorkers expressed a negative reaction, compared with 55% who reacted positively. In fact, the more helpful one's behavior, the more positive their later reaction to debriefing ($r = +.67$, $p < .001$). The implications of these findings are discussed, regarding the future methods and findings of urban psychology research.

Throughout history, the city has often been associated with a negative attitude; researchers refer to this as the anti-urban bias (Steiner, 1977; Fowkes, 1988; White, 1962; Fischer, 1984). Fischer (1984) reveals that this negative image of the city is present in the Bible and in American literature. Though this anti-urban bias does indeed exist, a pro-urban bias has been identified as well; some cultures associate the city with positive images and it is thus clear that though biases do exist, there is ambivalence toward the view of cities (Takooshian, 1977; Steiner, 1976; Fowkes, 1988).

Furthermore, theorists and researchers in the field of urban psychology have focused on whether and how the size of the community affects people's lives. Essentially, the field of urban psychology focuses on the following two questions: how does the city impact the individual and why do people live in cities. The theories that focus on what the consequences of urbanism are include the following: adaptational (internal changes), situational (immediate behavior), selection or compositional (who chooses to live in cities), S-O-R (city life, and subcultural.

Milgram pioneered the use of empirical methods to study the individual in the city (Milgram, 1970). Ultimately, it was Milgram who launched the field of urban psychology, and he did so via a distinctive style of experimentation; as Blass (2005, p. 18) says, "in most of his urban research the outcome measure was discrete and dichotomous . . . [thus] the findings lent them a quality of absoluteness,
clarity, and finality that made their implications directly discernible to both lay and professional readers."

Milgram tested the adaptation theory of urban behavior—that the city produces internal, long term changes in individuals, due to urban “stimulus overload” (Milgram, 1970). When urbanites are constantly bombarded by stimuli, they adapt by filtering out “unimportant” inputs or by labeling some as “high” or “low” priority. He asserts that all of this causes a behavior change in the individual; in the city, incivility increases and we are likely to bump into others without apologizing for it, trust is diminished and we tend to think people in the city are unfriendly, bystander behavior decreases our helping behavior, and role behavior increases—we have more formal, superficial relationships. He also reveals that anonymity increases when living in the city; essentially, there is a sense of freedom in not being known, but also isolation.

Milgram’s theory was supported by much research regarding the “Lost Child” (Milgram, 1992; Takooshian, Haber, & Lucido, 1977; Cacciola, 1980). Essentially, researchers wanted to find out how and to what extent helping behavior is impacted by the city. Takooshian, Haber, & Lucido (1977) found that in the cities, 46% offered to help a lost child while in the towns, 72% did so. They also found that differences existed qualitatively; in the cities, 52 of the 69 who refused did so abruptly. They also focused on Chicago in particular to point out that Chicagoans were not only the most helpful; they also offered help in an unusual way, by calling the police. In Chicago, 35% of the helpers ignored the nearby phone and, instead, flagged down a patrol car or went looking for a patrolman.

Psychologist Stanley Milgram and other urban theorists have referred to such behavior as an “institutionalized response.” Essentially, city dwellers learn to refer responsibilities such as picking up litter, intervening in crime, or other social problems to the authorities. Cacciola’s research (1980) was also interesting in that it revealed that city-dwellers filtered out the lost child to the point where they stepped over the child or walked around a wide circle so as not to step on the sprawled child. Essentially, the Manhattanites learned to filter out the great majority of sensory inputs that are not related to their own survival needs; thus, Cacciola’s research supports the conventional image of the urbanite who “does not want to get involved.”

Solomon’s research (1980) proved that anonymity reduces help and that the findings are pertinent to urban life inasmuch as big cities encourage anonymity as a response to sensory overload. He also found that anonymous city dwellers may further attempt to adapt to overload by ignoring low priority inputs, such as low status victims, and ambiguous requests for help.

This field experiment replicates the 1977 lost child experiment. In addition to testing helpful behavior among urbanites, it goes further to debrief them, then assess their frank feelings about their experience. This research tested two hypotheses: (a) New Yorkers would be more helpful in 2008 than in the 1970s. This is based on the common but untested wisdom that since the 1970s, traumata like terrorism and the 9-11-01 tragedy have made New Yorkers more concerned about the welfare of one another. (b) When debriefed, those who helped the child would express a positive rather than negative feeling about field experiments. This too is based on the anecdotal experiences of past field researchers (like Philip Spencer and Heather Hoerner, 2005).

Before collecting field data, 34 students at the start of a course in urban psychology were asked to pen two predictions: (a) First, what percent of New Yorkers would aid an upset nine-year-old who asked them “I’m lost. Can you help me phone my house?” Their predictions ranged widely, from 20% up to 90%, with a mean of 62%. (b) Then after viewing a six-minute videotape of the lost child experiment, these 34 students were asked what words they would use to predict pedestrians’ likely feelings when debriefed that the child was not really lost. Aside from a few positive words, such as curious, interested, and amused, the clear majority of predictions were negative words, such as annoyed, embarrassed, angry, deceived, indifferent, regretful, and “those damn psychologists!” Of course such predictions are no substitute for experimental findings.
Method

Procedure

A team of 7 female researchers from Fordham University at Lincoln Center participated in collecting experimental data for a 2008 replication of this study in New York City; they worked under the supervision of Dr. Harold Takooshian. The participants included 4 children who were relatives of students in an Urban Psychology course at Fordham University. The 4 children would run up to subjects and exclaim the following: “excuse me, I am lost; can you please help me phone my mom.” Some variations of this did exist, where some of the children would say, “excuse me, I am lost... I was separated from my class during a field trip; can you please help me phone my teacher.” It is important to indicate that the children were not asking for money; in fact, they had $12 in a pouch that had their name and emergency information on it. The children included Andrew, age 9; Ryan, age 10; Joshua, age 10; and Olivia, age 9.

The researchers went to various locations in Manhattan, New York where there would be a large amount of pedestrian traffic. Areas included a street near Fordham University as well as near City Hall, where Andrew, age 9, conducted the trial, the sidewalk in front of Fordham University, in which Ryan, age 10, and Olivia, age 9, conducted the trials, and the sidewalk within the area of Columbus Circle, New York City, in which Joshua, age 10, conducted the trial.

Once at the location, the child would act as the experimenter, actively testing subjects while the recorders would stand within sight and earshot of the experimenter; the researcher who planned on debriefing would be there as well. When an approaching pedestrian was within a distance whereby they could hear the experimenter, the experimenter would run up to them and say he/she was lost then ask for help with making a phone call. If the pedestrian proceeded to take out their cell phone or engage in some time of helpful or non-helpful behavior, the researcher would hand the participant a debrief card, explain the study, and ask if they had any questions. At this point the recorder would come close by to write down the exchange and to indicate if the reaction to being debriefed was a positive, negative, or a neutral/mixed one, as well as indicate comments given as approached by the child or as debriefed. The researchers also recorded if the reaction to being debriefed was a positive, negative, or a mixed/neutral one. If the participants simply kept walking, the recorder would label the act as “ignored or neutral” and another recorder, standing somewhat nearby, would catch the participant and offer them a debrief card. If the participant was willing to answer a few questions the same questions would be asked of them as was of the helpful participants.

The researchers analyzed the data using SPSS. They labeled the helping behavior as 0=not helpful; 1=mixed/ignore; 2=helpful. They labeled reactions to the debriefing as 0=negative; 1=mixed/ignore; 2=positive. They obtained a crosstabulation of the four children by rate helping as well as of helpful behavior by positive reaction to debriefing. The researchers also obtained the Pearson Correlation Coefficient in order to determine what type of association existed between positive helping behavior and a positive reaction to being debriefed. Additionally, the researchers obtained crosstabulations of ethnicity by helping behavior and sex by helping behavior. They also obtained the average age of participants and obtained correlations between age, a positive reaction to being debriefed, helping behavior, sex, and group.

Participants

Thirty-four undergraduate students enrolled in an urban psychology course provided the predictions as to the reactions of participants in field experimentation.

The 146 participants in the field experiment were chosen on the basis of availability. They were pedestrians walking by the child. There was an unsystematic attempt by the researchers to have an even cross-section of men and women, age, and ethnicity. 58% of the participants were female and 42% were male. The recording researcher would make a subjective estimate of the age of each participant and the mean of this was 32 years. 15.8% of participants were Asian, 6.2% were Black, 1.4% were Hispanic, 74.7% were White, and 2.1% were other.

Materials
When conducting the experiment, the researchers had recording sheets in which they collected data on. The recording sheets included areas to mark the estimated age of the participants, race, gender, response (negative/positive/neutral), and reaction to being debriefed (negative/positive/neutral). There was also an area for additional or unusual comments made by participants.

All participants received a debrief card that explained more about the study and why they decided to conduct it. It also invited participants to phone Fordham University for a copy of the findings.

Results

As hypothesized, the researchers found that helping behavior increased compared to the study done in the 1970s—46% helped in 1976 while 61.6% helped in 2008 (see table 1). It was surprising that the findings were in line with the predictions made by the urban psychology students; they predicted that 62% of pedestrians would exhibit helpful behavior, and they were actually quite correct.

The researchers found that not only did the quantity of help differ from the 1970s, but the quality of help also differed; the two trends that researchers observed were that if participants helped in 2008, they did so by either taking out their cell phones or referring the child to the security desk at Fordham University or to the security in the Mall. This was also observed at City Hall. Thus, an institutionalized response was observed. Essentially, pedestrians referred the children to institutions and placed the responsibility of helping the child on the institution. More importantly, the trend of using cell phones to assist the child was the main difference observed between helping behavior in 2008 vs. 1976. The most common reaction to the child asking for help was, “sure I will help you,” as the participant took out his/her cell phone. Of the 90 who helped, about 48 used their cell phones. Thus, this was clearly another main trend.

Equally important, one main finding was that there was a great variety or diversity of responses. For example, if pedestrians were helpful, some of them would go out of their way to help the child—they tried to soothe the child, some asked him questions to get to know him better as they made the call, and some ended personal conversations they were having in order to assist the child. On the other hand, there were some who were unhelpful and completely ignored the child or blatantly said “No!” and walked away. And then there were some who just walked by and said nothing. Thus, there was a clear variety in the responses.

Additionally, the study supported the researchers’ hypothesis that those who helped the child would respond positively when debriefed; of the 123 participants who were debriefed, 9 refused then reacted negatively when debriefed and 68 helped then had a positive reaction when debriefed. Those who were more helpful toward the child tended to have a positive reaction when debriefed, with significance (p<.001). Thus, having a positive reaction to debriefing was significantly correlated to helping behavior (r= +.67, p<.05). Overall, when debriefed, 11% expressed a negative feeling (such as being deceived or inconvenienced) compared with 55% who expressed a positive reaction (such as curiosity or amusement), and 34% who had a mixed/neutral response.

Discussion

Additional Findings

The researchers found that the child involved in the experiment made a difference in helping behavior (Chi-Square=13.252, p<.05); Ryan was helped the most (67.4%) while Joshua was helped the least (51.9%) and the other two children fell between those figures. Thus, overall, the helping behavior was positive, and in 2008, 61.6% of participants exhibited helping behavior in the city while 22.6% showed a mixed response or ignored the child and 15.8% refused to help.

Equally important, another variable that was found to be significantly correlated to helping behavior was age. Essentially, those who were older tended to demonstrate low positive helping behavior (r= -.208, p < .05).

The researchers found that there was no consistent trend in the helping behavior of couples.
The only trend was that ignoring the child was the reaction that occurred the least. Among men and women, females helped more (about 10% more) but this was not significant. Equally important, there were no significant correlations between any specific ethnicity and helping behavior.

Upon debriefing participants, the researchers found that those who ignored or had mixed helping behavior (17 people) tended to not care when debriefed; they acted like “bullets,” wanting to get to where they were going. In terms of the responses to the debriefing, most were found to be either neutral or positive. While many were interested in the study, there were also some unusual responses. For example, a helpful man who was debriefed reacted extremely negatively, calling the researchers “sick” and saying they should be ashamed. Surprisingly, foreigners seemed to react in the most positive manner when debriefed. Equally important, when debriefed, some felt as if they had just been “scammed” and one woman waited in the corner and when she saw us approaching others, she went up to them exclaiming, “don’t listen to them; it is a trick.” Some, when debriefed, expressed the fact that they thought the child was going to steal their phone.

During the completion of this study the experimenters found that they not only gained knowledge about peoples likeliness of helping and opinions on participation in field research, but also of the individual differences in the manner in which people react to stimuli in their natural, uncontrolled environment. One example is that despite those who showed positive reactions after helping, there were some who viewed the experiment as a bad experience. These participants were initially helpful but then, upon being debriefed, felt that they had been tricked or deceived. However, overall participants seemed to have a positive reaction to being debriefed. One participant followed up and sent an email to inquire about the research as well as to thank us; she said, “I hope your research continues to go well and that your results indicate some improvement in our behavior towards small children, strangers, and old folks. I’m all the more committed to kindness after having read those articles!” The researchers were surprised to actually receive an email; they were glad that people seemed to be interested in their study.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that helping behavior in New York City has improved since the 1970s, but we must ask ourselves, is this simply because we now have cell phones and easier means of helping “lost” children? During the 1970s, those who helped the child had to walk with the child to a pay phone; in 2008, those who helped simply had to take out their cell phones and dial a number. Thus, we must ask ourselves: did they just help the child simply because it was an easy task?

**Limitations**

Some limitations to the study were that not all of the experiments were present during all of the trials. Thus, when coding the data and putting all of the material together, there may have been some errors that were uncontrollable because of the fact that not all of the experiments were present each time and thus could not verify the data 100%. However, the researchers did communicate with each other in order to ensure that the coded data was as accurate as possible. Another limitation to the study was that the researchers did not have enough of a sample to determine if a specific ethnicity was more helpful toward the child; however, this was ultimately not something they were focusing on as a part of their study and their hypothesis.

**Future Suggestions**

In terms of future suggestions, the researchers believe it would be helpful to create a situation, perhaps in the laboratory, in which New Yorker participants would not be allowed to bring their cell phones into a certain area. Then, the researchers would conduct a similar experiment that would require the help of participants; the researchers would be sure to create at least one scenario where helping the child would be easy and one where helping the child would require effort and time. Such an experiment would allow researchers to find out if New Yorkers really are more helpful today or if it simply because it is easier to help a child now than it was to help a lost child in 1970s. However, in order to be more generalizable, it would be great to conduct such a study in the field, but it is hard considering cell phones are common.
Perhaps then it would be best to conduct this study in the field, in an area in New York City where there is limited or no cell phone service; this would require participants to go out of their way in order to help the child. For example, conducting the research on a subway or in a mall—two settings in which there is limited or no cell phone service—may be useful. Essentially, researchers need to figure out if there is a way of modifying the lost child study so that it does not involve a cell phone.

Since today's cell phones now render this lost child method inadequate to chart helpfulness across the years, perhaps researchers can make use of alternate sources of some "needy situations" that can better create a behavioral census to chart helping over time. Specifically, perhaps researchers can replicate Levine's studies that focus on simple acts of assistance such as: Is an inadvertently dropped pen retrieved by a passing pedestrian? Does a man with an injured leg receive assistance picking up a fallen magazine or book? Will a blind person be helped across a busy intersection? Will someone try to make change for a dollar when asked? Do people take the time to mail a stamped and addressed letter that has apparently been lost? According to Levine, "one's prospects for being helped by a stranger are bleaker in New York than they are in Rio, Mexico City, or Shanghai. Indeed, you're more likely to receive assistance from someone you don't know just about anywhere else in the world" (Levine, 2003). Thus, it would be interesting to conduct such a study in order to observe how New York measures up to other large cities worldwide today, and if helpfulness has improved since Levine's study.

Equally important, it would also be useful to replicate the study in the suburbs/rural areas in order to determine whether changes have occurred in helping behavior there compared to 1970s. Additionally, perhaps this study can be replicated in other cities, such as Chicago, in order to find out if trends that were observed in the 1970s are still present and also to find out if NYC helping behavior is typical or atypical. Replicating the study in cities abroad can also give us a better look at large scale trends of helping behavior in cities. Equally important, it would be useful to replicate the study using children of a diverse background and replicate the study in more diverse neighborhoods to examine whether the environment—of higher socioeconomic status vs. lower socioeconomic status—will have an influence on helping behavior and whether the child involved in the study will influence helping behavior.

References


Footnote

1 A special thanks to Dr. Harold Takooshian and the six Fordham University students who helped conduct the study: Elaime D. Hernandez, Rafaela Pogrebinschi, Nataliya Lavryshyn, Leidy Reyes, Laurence Agenor, Lemonia Mavrogeorgis

2 A special thanks to the four children—Ryan, Joshua, Olivia, and Andrew—for participating in this study.
Table 1.

**Relation of helping behavior with reaction to debriefing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction to debriefing</th>
<th>help</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                       | refuse | ignore | help |%
| **negative**         |        |        |      |
| Count                 | 9      | 0      | 5    | 14 |
| % within pos          | 64.3%  | 0%     | 35.7%| 100.0%|
| % within help         | 42.9%  | 0%     | 5.9% | 11.4%|
| **Mixed/neutral**     |        |        |      |
| Count                 | 12     | 17     | 12   | 41 |
| % within pos          | 29.3%  | 41.5%  | 29.3%| 100.0%|
| % within help         | 57.1%  | 100.0% | 14.1%| 33.3%|
| **positive**          |        |        |      |
| Count                 | 0      | 0      | 68   | 68 |
| % within pos          | 0%     | 0%     | 100.0%| 100.0%|
| % within help         | 0%     | 0%     | 80.0% | 55.3%|
| **Total**             |        |        |      |
| Count                 | 21     | 17     | 85   | 123 |
| % within pos          | 17.1%  | 13.8%  | 69.1%| 100.0%|
| % within help         | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0%| 100.0%|

Notes: (1) $X^2 = 88.5$ (df= 4), $p < .001$. (2) 23 of the 146 cases are excluded here, where it was not possible to debrief all fast-moving participants.