

## EFFECTS OF RACE ON THE ELICITATION OF HELPING BEHAVIOR: THE WRONG NUMBER TECHNIQUE<sup>1</sup>

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A nonreactive field research technique was used to indicate the extent to which racial attitudes affect helping behavior in the general adult population. Five hundred and forty black subjects and 569 white subjects received what was ostensibly a wrong number telephone call. The caller, clearly identifiable by his voice characteristics as being black or white, explained that he was attempting to reach his mechanic from a public phone booth located on the parkway because his car had broken down. The caller further claimed that he had no more change with which to make another phone call to the garage. The subject could help the caller by contacting his garage for him. The relative frequency with which black and white men were helped was used as an indication of racial discrimination. The results showed that black subjects extended relatively equivalent levels of assistance to blacks and to whites. However, white subjects helped black callers somewhat less frequently than white callers. In addition, ignoring the race of the subject and the caller, male subjects helped more often than female ones.

Racism is a major problem in American society; however, awareness of overt discrimination appears to come only after it has taken place. We rely on the publicizing of, for example, housing and job discrimination as an indication of racism. Public opinion polls and questionnaires have also been used to indicate the extent of discrimination. However, these methods are concerned primarily with verbal attitudes, which are quite susceptible to modification and distortion, particularly in the presence of an interviewer. Nevertheless, these polls may provide some basis on which to predict behavior of white citizens toward blacks and vice versa.

The experimental study of racial conflict has almost entirely been limited to the laboratory, where few attempts have been made to expand the sampling base so as to include the general public. The present study attempts to

bridge the gap between experimental laboratory studies and public opinion polls.

Although the present research is mainly concerned with white racism, we sought also to discover whether there was any antiwhite discrimination by blacks. Marx (1969), in a study of black attitudes toward whites in 1964, found little evidence of the intolerance that whites show toward blacks. However, since 1964, many changes appear to have occurred in the black community. The riots and the voices of militant leaders lead one to assume that the attitudes of most blacks have changed. However, in reviewing the numerous surveys of black attitudes since 1964, Marx (1969) concluded that black attitudes have not changed. Marx feels that the mass media have given a distorted picture of how the majority of blacks feel toward whites. He concluded that "blacks remain perhaps the most tolerant group in American society [p. 224]."

Marx pointed out that there are alternative explanations for the data collected from public opinion polls. Blacks could have been lying to white poll takers, single males could have been undersampled, and the real militants may have refused to be interviewed. In other words, public opinion polls have many of the weaknesses of the more reactive social psychological experiments. One of the aims of the present study was to assess how blacks behave

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toward whites without the biases introduced by asking them directly.

Our approach to the study of racism was through the observation of helping behavior. Berkowitz and his colleagues (Berkowitz, 1966; Berkowitz & Daniels, 1964; Berkowitz, Klander-man, & Harris, 1964) have conducted a number of experiments in the general area of helping behavior. They have assumed the existence of a "social responsibility norm" in our society that accounts for one person's helping another when no tangible rewards can be gained. If anti-black sentiment is present, then we would expect that the social responsibility norm would be violated more frequently for a black man in need of help than for a white man in the same situation. Therefore, we have used the relative frequencies with which a black and a white man are helped as an indicator of discrimination.

To date, there have been three studies on helping behavior that have studied race. Piliavin, Rodin, and Piliavin (1969) found some tendency for more same-race helping in a face-to-face emergency situation. Bryan and Test (1967) found significant differences between the number of persons who contributed to a Salvation Army kettle, depending upon the race of the person who was soliciting. White persons in a shopping center tended not to contribute as often when the kettle was manned by a black woman. Wispé and Freshley (1970), however, failed to observe a race effect in the willingness of passersby to assist a black or white female whose bag of groceries had just broken in front of a supermarket. Wispé and Freshley suggested that the immediacy of the onset of the incident may have attenuated a race effect.

In summary, we predicted that whites would discriminate against blacks by not helping them as frequently as they help their fellow whites. In addition, based on the results of polls of blacks, we expected that blacks would not show any discrimination against whites, that is, that blacks would extend equivalent levels of assistance to black and white victims.

#### METHOD

##### *Subjects*

The subjects were 1,109 residents of Brooklyn, New York. Subjects were sampled from the 1968-1969

*Brooklyn Telephone Directory*. The 540 black subjects were selected from the directory on the basis of last name (e.g., Jones, Brown, and others common among blacks in New York City), and then on the basis of place of residence. In order to be classified as black, the subject had to live in an area that was almost totally inhabited by blacks, as indicated by the 1960 Census tracts. The 569 white subjects were drawn from the telephone directory without regard to last name but using a similar geographic criterion.

A further check on the racial identification of the subject was made when the actual study was conducted. Based on the voice characteristics of the subject, the caller and his assistant, both of whom were unaware, prior to the call, of the subjects' racial classification, name, and area of residence, had to agree in their identification of the subject's racial classification in order for the subject to be included in the data analysis. Fewer than 1% of the subjects were rejected for failure to meet this criterion. No doubt, selecting subjects on the basis of the residential criterion results in a black sample that is lower socioeconomically than the white sample. Without the benefit of a follow-up interview, or the sampling of identifiably middle-class black subjects, it is impossible to disentangle the effects of race and social class when discussing differences in the helping behavior of the black and white subjects.

##### *Procedure*

The apparent race of the caller was manipulated by varying his speech characteristics. When the caller (victim) was to seem black, a black confederate employing a modified "southern Negro" dialect placed the call and identified himself as George Williams. Similarly, when the caller was to seem white, a white confederate using a recognizably white speech pattern (i.e., typical of whites in New York) called and similarly identified himself as George Williams. Grammatically, the messages of the black and white victims were identical; only the pronunciation of the words was varied. Seven black males and seven white males were used as callers.

To insure that both male and female subjects would be home to receive the calls, the study was conducted between the hours of 6:30 and 9:30 p.m. If anyone identified by voice characteristics as being under 18 years of age answered, the caller apologized for reaching the wrong number and hung up. When an adult (someone over 18) answered, the caller repeated the following:

*Caller:* Hello . . . Ralph's Garage? This is George Williams . . . listen, I'm stuck out here on the parkway . . . and I'm wondering if you'd be able to come out here and take a look at my car?

*Subject's expected response:* This isn't Ralph's Garage . . . you have the wrong number.

*Caller:* This isn't Ralph's Garage! Listen, I'm terribly sorry to have disturbed you, but listen . . . I'm stuck out here on the highway . . . and that was the last dime I had! I have bills in my pocket, but no more change

to make another phone call . . . Now I'm really stuck out here. What am I going to do now?

*Subject:* . . . [Subject might volunteer to call the garage.]

*Caller:* Listen . . . do you think you could do me the favor of calling the garage and letting them know where I am . . . ? I'll give you the number. . . . They know me over there.

*Prod A:* Oh brother . . . listen, I'm stuck out here . . . Couldn't you PLEASE help me out by simply calling the garage for me [pleadingly]?

*Prod B:* Listen . . . If YOU were in my situation . . . wouldn't you want someone to help you?

If after Prod B the subject refused to place the call but did not hang up, he was relieved of any concern he may have had for the stranded motorist when the caller reported: "Oh, one second . . . here comes a police car . . . I think he will be able to give me a hand."

If the subject agreed to help, the victim gave him a telephone number to call. In fact, the subject's call was received by an assistant acting as the garage attendant. The assistant assured the subject that the victim would be helped immediately, and graciously thanked him for his helpfulness.

To identify which subjects actually helped, the following procedures were employed. First, black and white callers gave the subjects different telephone numbers to call. Second, each time a subject agreed to call, the caller changed his location on the parkway, rotating eight different locations. At the "garage," the subject was asked for the location of the stranded motorist. Finally, the time at which the call to the subject was completed, along with the time at which subject's call was received at the garage, was recorded.

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGES OF BLACK AND WHITE SUBJECTS  
HELPING BLACK AND WHITE VICTIMS

Item	White subjects		Black subjects	
	White victim	Black victim	White victim	Black victim
% overall	65	53	67	60
<i>n</i>	251	236	247	239
	$\chi^2 = 7.40^{****}$		$\chi^2 = 2.34^*$	
% males	73	59	69	68
<i>n</i>	97	97	84	87
	$\chi^2 = 4.50^{***}$		$\chi^2 = .05$	
% females	60	49	66	57
<i>n</i>	154	163	163	152
	$\chi^2 = 3.89^{***}$		$\chi^2 = 3.12^{**}$	

\*  $p < .20$ .

\*\*  $p < .10$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

Only if the subject actually called the garage was he credited with a helping response. If the subject refused to help after Prod B, or hung up after the caller stated "and that was the last dime . . ." a no-help response was scored. However, if the subject hung up prior to the word "dime," a *premature hang-up* response was recorded and was considered separately from the help, no-help response categories. In the case of a premature hang-up, the subject could not reasonably be expected to realize that the caller needed his assistance.

## RESULTS

### *Perceived Characteristics of the Black and White Callers*

College students listening to tape recordings of the callers' practice performances of the experimental dialogue judged the white callers as "white" 92% of the time ( $n = 89$ ) and judged the black callers as "black" 97% of the time ( $n = 97$ ).

In addition, the students perceived social and personality differences between the black and white callers. Although blacks were perceived to be of lower social class ( $t = 2.57$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and less education ( $t = 1.97$ ,  $p < .05$ ), both groups were judged as being lower-middle class and as having completed a high school education. Furthermore, blacks were perceived to be more good-natured ( $t = 2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while, in general, both groups of callers were judged favorably on characteristics such as good-naturedness, friendliness, courteousness, reliability, truthfulness, and sincerity.

### *Effects of the Race of the Victim on Helping Behavior*

The results (see Table 1) of this experiment show that white subjects helped the white victims 12% more frequently than they helped the black victims ( $\chi^2 = 7.40$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, the results support the hypothesis. However, although this 12% difference is statistically significant, the magnitude of the effect is rather small.

Blacks, on the other hand, were not at all antiwhite. In fact, among black subjects, white victims were accorded help 6.6% more frequently than black victims. This 6.6% difference, however, is not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 2.34$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .20$ ).

The relative extent to which the subjects' helping behavior appeared prowhite was not significantly greater for the white than the black subjects ( $\chi^2 = .83$ ). Thus, although whites extended help less frequently to the black than to the white victims, whites did not favor whites to a greater extent than blacks favored whites.

The complexion of the findings changes somewhat when the subject's sex is considered. Table 1 reveals that among whites, both males and females helped the black victims less frequently than white victims. Black females similarly helped white victims somewhat more frequently than black victims ( $\chi^2 = 3.12$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Black males, however, extended equivalent levels of assistance to the black and white victims.

Ignoring the subject's and the victim's race, the stranded motorists were assisted by 67% of the male subjects and by only 58% of the female subjects. The difference of 9% in the frequency with which males and females helped was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 7.35$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

#### *Premature Hang-Ups*

A subject's response was categorized as a premature hang-up rather than help or no help if he hung up before the stranded motorist had the opportunity to state "and that was my last dime." The results show that neither the white nor the black subjects discriminated in terms of the premature hang-up. The white male and black female subjects, however, seemed to hang up prematurely somewhat more frequently on the black than on the white victims ( $p < .10$ ). Overall, white subjects hung up prematurely more frequently than black subjects. That is, 14.2% of the white subjects, but only 9.4% of the black subjects, hung up prematurely ( $\chi^2 = 6.07$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .02$ ). A sex difference also emerged in the rate of premature hang-ups. Fourteen percent of the females, compared to 5% of the males, hung up prematurely ( $\chi^2 = 18.41$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### DISCUSSION

In this nonreactive study, it appears that among whites, the social responsibility norm

was violated somewhat more frequently for black than for white victims. It should be stressed, however, that for 88% of the white subjects, the race of the victim did not seem to affect whether or not they helped. Therefore, the race of the victim (inferred from his dialect) has a small but detectable influence upon the helping behavior of white residents of New York City.

Black subjects, confirming the findings of public opinion polls, did not discriminate against whites. Somewhat surprising, but approached cautiously because of the low level of statistical significance, was the unpredicted finding that black females also tended to help white victims somewhat more frequently (9%,  $p < .10$ ) than the black victims.

Comparing the wrong number technique with more traditional measures, some advantages of the technique can be noted: (a) The method is nonreactive; (b) it measures *overt* behavior, rather than belief or intention to behave; (c) it permits the investigator to expand the sampling base beyond the college student population; (d) large numbers of subjects may be tested in a relatively short period of time (i.e., each caller averaged 12 subjects per hour). Speed is especially important if we wish to gauge the immediate effects of current events or programs to reduce intergroup tension.

However, there are some disadvantages and limitations associated with the wrong number technique: (a) Although the sampling base is greatly expanded, the sample must be limited to those people with telephones whose phone numbers are listed in the public directory. However, the widespread use of telephone service tends to minimize this problem. Nevertheless, investigators interested in sampling black and white households must recognize that their sample of the black population will probably be less representative than their sample of whites, based solely upon economic factors. An examination of elementary school records in areas populated largely by blacks revealed that approximately 70% of the children's homes maintained private telephone service. Thus, nearly 30% of the black population may be inaccessible via telephone. (b) The investigator has no control over the subjects' behavior prior to the telephone call for

help. The subject may have been doing something at home which might have interfered with or increased his willingness to help, and thus the relationship between race and helping may have been attenuated. However, this may be only an apparent disadvantage since the complexity of the situation was real, and thus the result might be more representative of how people actually behave in real-life situations. (c) A more serious disadvantage of the wrong number technique is its possible insensitivity to varying degrees of prejudice necessitated by the restrictive response categories (i.e., help-no help). Are all white subjects who help the black victim nonprejudiced? Most probably not. They are, however, nondiscriminators in this situation. This method may be relatively insensitive, but it need not be the sole instrument in a researcher's battery of measures. Also, it would be a mistake to view the wrong number situation solely as a one-item test with a yes-no response. Actually, the subject makes a number of responses in this situation which may be systematically recorded; for example, does he hang up immediately, does he volunteer to help without being asked, does he agree to help only after the victim pleads for help, does he help grudgingly or in friendly spirits, does he actually call the garage? A cursory view of this complex set of responses indicated, however, that only the help-no-help response yielded any meaningful differences.

Other studies using this technique are in progress. An investigation of whether the sex of the victim is important in determining the subject's response is being conducted. Will a black female get more help than a black male? In addition, the political affiliations of the sub-

jects are being considered. Will members of different political parties with their different ideologies (conservative versus liberal party) behave in different ways?

The usefulness of this method is not limited to the study of intergroup attitudes. For example, the manner in which the victim asks for help is under investigation. Determination of whether help is more likely when the victim requests or demands help is being made. In addition, the relationship between the sex of the victim and the sex of the subject is being studied.

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