

6.4. Who Can You Count On? Looks, Race, Even Weather May Play Role in Whether You'll Get a Helping Hand

The following story appeared on 20/20, the ABC News program, on August 29, 2003.
 Copyright ABC News. Used with permission.

Often, we rely on the kindness of strangers to help us out in an emergency. But in what circumstances would you help someone, and in what circumstances would you be helped if you were the victim?

It seems race, crowds, even whether or not people have exchanged pleasantries can play into how and why people help each other. Ultimately, experts say whether or not someone helps does not depend so much on their personality as it depends on the situation.

Bystander Apathy

20/20 correspondent Jami Floyd asked people how they'd respond to a particular situation, and then conducted a series of hidden-camera experiments to see just what it took for people to come to the aid of others.

Floyd asked people how they would respond if they found themselves in this scenario: It's a beautiful summer day and you're relaxing on the beach. You notice the woman next to you gets up and walks away. That's when the crime occurs: A stranger appears and steals your neighbor's beach bag right in front of your eyes. Would you do anything?

One woman said, "Yes, I'd scream bloody murder!" A man said, "I would probably catch the person and probably beat the crap out of him."

Most people think they would help, but 20/20's hidden cameras at the beach suggest that the larger the crowd, the less chance there was of anyone helping.

This squares with a phenomenon called bystander apathy. The most infamous case happened in New York City nearly 40 years ago. It was late at night, and a young woman named Kitty Genovese was walking home from work when a man attacked her with a knife. Her screams brought dozens of her neighbors to their windows. But not one of them did anything to help. No one even called the police, and Genovese was stabbed to death.

"When you asked them why they didn't help, what they said is they thought somebody else had already called the police. And so ... they decided if someone else has already called the police, then I don't have to do it," said Jack Dovidio of Colgate University.

Genovese's murder inspired a whole new school of psychology, prompting scientists like Dovidio to investigate why people don't respond to cries for help. In experiment after experiment, they came up with the same curious result: The greater the number of people around, the less likely anyone is to act.

Help Out and Get a Date?

Back at the beach, Dovidio wore a hidden camera for 20/20, and challenged bystanders about why they didn't help the woman—actually a hired actress—when the thief (another actor) stole her bag.

"I'm not usually the type of person to stop and say something," one man said. Another said he wasn't sure what was happening.

Most people had some reason for not helping.

"I thought it was his bag. He said nothing to anybody. Came over like it was his," one man told Dovidio.

"I thought maybe he was her boyfriend," one woman said.

But a crowd is just one important factor in determining whether someone will help.

Evidence also suggests people help only when the rewards for helping outweigh the costs. In other words, we are more likely to help if we think we'll get something out of it.

Looks are another important factor. Like it or not, attractive people have a better chance of getting help — especially from someone of the opposite sex.

In one experiment, 20/20 hired an attractive model to stand next to a broken-down car. Almost immediately, a dozen cars screeched to a halt—some even backed up to help her.

But with a less-attractive actress—who wore the exact same outfit as the beautiful model—most cars just went whizzing by.

Randy Cohen, who writes an ethics column for the *New York Times*, says despite our best intentions, when the moment to help actually arises, we aren't always the do-gooders we think we are.

"We don't want to only help the cute, we want to help those who really need our help. But we're human—we're imperfect," Cohen said.

A Race Factor?

Can something as explosive as race make a difference? Experts like Dovidio say yes. He helped 20/20 design an informal study with two 20/20 employees—Gina, who is white, and Susan, who is black—at a New York train station. Gina and Susan each stood on a train platform and had their briefcases burst open with papers scattering around them.

While people told 20/20 that a person's race would make no difference in whether they helped them, the hidden-camera experiment with Gina and Susan found something different. Many people went out of their way not to stop, for all sorts of reasons. One woman leapt over the pile of papers rather than miss her train.

While many passers-by crossed racial lines to help, Dovidio concluded that overall race played a statistically significant role when people did stop. Only whites stopped for Gina. No blacks

helped her. But blacks did stop for Susan, a fellow African-American. Dovidio says our results support his own findings that race can play a role in who we choose to help.

"Race becomes one of those fundamental categories of 'wes and theys' in in-groups and out-groups in our society. So it becomes a very powerful factor, in terms of affecting people's decisions about whether or not they help," Dovidio said.

Cohen said, "If I see someone's briefcase open up in Grand Central Station and my tendency is to turn away. . . maybe. . . I ought to think for half a second that I did the wrong thing and that race affected my thinking."

Make a Connection

But psychologists say we're not racists. Race is one of many unconscious factors that affect how people make split-second decisions when asked for help.

Here are just a few of the factors. A small-town environment, rather than an urban one, can encourage some people to respond to a person in need of help. If the victim appears patriotic, she might be more likely to get a helping hand. Even the weather can affect our decision to help someone.

Although it seems we're all programmed to help out only in certain circumstances, it doesn't necessarily mean that if we found ourselves in need of help our fate would be sealed by the clothes we were wearing that day or the color of our skin.

What it really comes down to, researchers say, is making a human connection with the people around you.

"Sometimes just saying hello to somebody, . . . asking somebody their name, simply personalizing it, is sufficient to make some sort of special connection," Dovidio said.

Our hidden camera found that to be the case, too. In the beach bag experiment, the woman 20/20 hired made no point of meeting her neighbors. In that instance no one helped her when her bag was stolen. But in another test, she introduced herself to her neighbor. It was that little bit of contact that made all the difference. In that instance, her neighbor got up and literally ran after the thief.

And a single person's action can stir other people to act as well, according to Dovidio. "The irony is, once one person helps, you have all the other people helping, because what that one person is doing is saying, 'This is serious, and any good, caring person, therefore will do the right thing.' They will join in and help."