

## Racial Factors in Helping Behavior: An Unobtrusive Field Experiment

Daniel M. Wegner  
*Trinity University*

William D. Crano  
*Michigan State University*

This naturalistic study focused on race and sex differences in aiding behavior. The complete crossing of sex and race of subjects and of confederates in a nonthreat situation on a university campus revealed that black bystanders helped more black than white victims, whereas white bystanders helped both races equally. Two possible integrations of these results with previous, contradictory results were offered: (a) Black college students may be more cohesive than black city residents, or (b) black individuals may be more likely to aim their altruistic activities at other blacks when the immediate population is predominantly white than when it is predominantly black. Some significant interactions involving sex and race were also observed and discussed.

A recent line of helping behavior research has focused on aiding as a function of race of victim and bystander. In early investigations of this type (e.g., Bryan & Test, 1967; Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969), the study of race differences was apparently included as a provocative, hypothesis-generating afterthought, since the experimental arrangements of these studies were clearly not developed in such a way as to provide an unambiguous assessment of such effects. The hypothesis suggested by both studies, that bystanders are more likely to aid victims of their own race than those of a different race, has since been submitted to more systematic examination.

In an inventive study by Gaertner and Bickman (1971), for example, a hapless victim of car trouble had spent his last dime in an attempt to reach a service station but had mistakenly dialed the home of the naive subject, whose subsequent call to the station was the primary dependent measure of the experiment. The victim's voice was clearly identifiable as that of a black or a white man; the subject's race was determined according to the location of his home in New York City. Under these conditions, a significant level of same-race helping was found for whites but not for blacks.

Wispé and Freshley's (1971) "broken bag caper" focused on the tendency of naive subjects to help others (black and white female experimenters) whose full grocery bag broke outside a supermarket. Black and white subjects were selected, respectively, in predominantly black and predominantly white sections of a "medium-sized southwestern city." While the previous research suggests that some tendency for same-race helping would be observed under these circumstances, Wispé and Freshley found no race differences in terms of either help given or help received.

Other studies have also reported an absence of differentially high levels of same-race helping. Graf and Riddell (1972) for instance, found no significant differences in the frequency with which a black or a white male was able to hitch a ride in black and white sections of San Diego. Also convincing are the results of the systematic research conducted by Thayer (1973), in which the experimental design featured the complete factorial combination of race and sex of both victim and bystander. Each subject was approached in New York City's Grand Central Station by a confederate who wore a conspicuous hearing aid and presented a hand-lettered sign requesting aid in placing a phone call. Black subjects did not make the phone call more often for blacks than whites, and a weak tendency for whites to aid blacks more often than whites was observed. Thus Thayer's findings appear to dim further any

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Daniel M. Wegner, Department of Psychology, Trinity University, 715 Stadium Drive, San Antonio, Texas 78284.

prospects for the emergence of empirical generalizations from past research.

The divergence of the cited findings may be attributed to a number of possible sources. For one, it is conceivable that the salience of race as a variable in altruism varies drastically with the characteristics of the subject sample under study (e.g., socioeconomic level, geographic location, etc.). But another reasonable supposition is that previous investigations, while intriguing and quite imaginative, have failed to employ appropriate experimental design tactics and, in so doing, have generated a series of misleading observations. With the exception of Thayer's (1973) research, for example, none of the studies have examined helping as a function of the complete factorial combination of race and sex of both victim and bystander. Given the multiple interactions of these variables reported by Thayer, this criterion seems rudimentary. A more serious difficulty in past research, however, was also evident in Thayer's study. Confederate victims were typically nested within the sex and race conditions of the study; that is, one black and one white confederate of each sex constituted the total victim population; this confounding renders the interpretation of results completely problematic (Crano & Brewer, 1973).

One further comment on previous studies deserves elaboration. In the research reported by Gaertner and Bickman (1971), Wispé and Freshley (1971), and Graf and Riddell (1972), black subjects were selected in black sections of a city, and whites were selected in white sections, the result being the complete confounding of race of subject with the physical location in which the subject's actions were observed. Thus while these studies appear superficially equivalent to other investigations that have selected subjects from a single population, it must be emphasized that the subtle shift in paradigm could be responsible for some variation in findings.

In an effort to overcome some of the problems encountered in previous research settings, the present study was designed such that a single subject population was observed,

the usual nesting of confederates within race and sex conditions was avoided, and a complete factorial design examining the effects of race and sex of both victim and bystander upon the frequency of helping was employed.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

A group of 144 students from a large midwestern university, equally divided with respect to race and sex, constituted the subject sample. None were aware that they were a part of an experimental investigation. At the time of this experiment, the university enrolled approximately 43,000 students, only a small fraction of whom were black.

### *Experimenters*

A group of 12 college students, divided equally with respect to race and sex and unaware of the design of this investigation, served as experimenters. Each experimenter tested 12 subjects, 3 of each race-sex combination. This distribution rule allowed for an examination of the degree to which subjects' responses were influenced by idiosyncracies of the individual experimenters rather than the major classificatory variables of race and sex.

### *Procedure*

Under instructions to avoid encounters with acquaintances or familiar persons, experimenters approached individual naive subjects in hallways of buildings scattered throughout the campus. When a subject who fulfilled the prearranged requirements of race and sex was isolated, the experimenter, apparently engrossed in the examination of a deck of 500 computer cards, walked in the direction of the subject. When the experimenter was approximately one step away from meeting the subject face to face, he (or she), seemingly by accident, dropped the entire deck of 500 cards. If the subject immediately assisted the experimenter in picking up the cards, his (her) actions were scored as an instance of helping.

## RESULTS

It was observed earlier in this report that some previous experiments in this area confounded the personal characteristics of the experimenters (or victims) with major classificatory dimensions (e.g., race, sex) under investigation. An attempt was made to avoid this problem by employing *groups* of male and female, black and white experimenters, each of whom investigated equal numbers of subjects of all race-sex combinations. The nested features of this experimental arrange-

ment were somewhat complex, with experimenters nested in both race and sex conditions and subjects nested in experimenters. An analysis of variance on the dichotomized helping responses of subjects was performed and revealed no significant effects attributable to any of the nested factors. (It should be emphasized here that the absence of such effects in the present instance has no necessary implication for the evaluation of previous studies that did not control for this possibility.)

In light of the nonsignificant differences attributable to variations within victim conditions, the nested error terms computed in this analysis were pooled, and the resulting design thereby reduced to a simple  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial analysis of variance on the dichotomized helping measure.<sup>1</sup> Inspection of this analysis revealed three significant effects: a main effect of race of victim, which is best considered in light of the significant Race of Victim  $\times$  Race of Subject interaction,  $F(1, 129) = 14.78, p < .001$ , and a final significant Race of Subject  $\times$  Sex of Subject interaction,  $F(1, 129) = 7.54, p < .05$ .

Decomposition of the Race of Victim  $\times$  Race of Subject interaction (see Table 1) by an analysis of simple effects (Winer, 1971) revealed that black subjects helped black victims to an extent significantly exceeding that afforded white victims ( $M = 75\%$  vs.  $17\%$ ),  $F(1, 129) = 25.29, p < .001$ . White subjects did not appear to differentiate on the basis of race of victim, as both blacks and whites were helped equally ( $44\%$  of the time). Viewing the interaction from the perspective of the victim revealed that black

TABLE 1  
RELATIVE PROPORTION OF HELPING RESPONSES

Race of victim	Race of subject	
	Black	White
Black	.75	.44
White	.17	.44

victims were helped to a significantly greater extent by black subjects than by white subjects ( $M = 75\%$  vs.  $44\%$ ),  $F(1, 129) = 8.12, p < .01$ . White victims, in turn, were helped more frequently by white subjects than by black subjects ( $M = 44\%$  vs.  $17\%$ ),  $F(1, 29) = 6.71, p < .05$ .

Analysis of the significant Race of Subject  $\times$  Sex of Subject interaction revealed that white males helped significantly less frequently than either black males ( $M = 33\%$  vs.  $56\%$ ) or white females ( $M = 33\%$  vs.  $56\%$ ),  $F(1, 129) = 4.30, p < .05$  for both comparisons. No other comparisons reached significance; that is, black female subjects were intermediate to white males and black males in providing assistance and were not significantly different from either group in amount of help offered.

#### DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of this investigation indicate that black victims of a minor emergency situation typically obtained significantly more assistance than whites. Blacks were helped on nearly  $60\%$  of the experimental interactions, whites only about  $30\%$  of the time. This difference in overall assistance, however, was solely attributable to the actions of black bystanders, who were nearly five times more likely to provide assistance to a black than to a white victim. Over all interactions, whites helped as frequently as black subjects did but divided their assistance equally between both groups of victims. These results conflict with past research, which only infrequently found differences in helping responses between black and white subjects as a function of victim's race. As was noted earlier, however, much of the previous research in this area was fraught with design problems of sufficient magnitude to arouse

<sup>1</sup> An alternative mode of analysis of these data by means of partitioned chi-square (cf. Winer, 1971, p. 855) was also undertaken and yielded a series of significant effects parallel to those revealed by the analysis of variance. Although a chi-square analysis might be considered more appropriate given the dichotomous nature of the data, an analysis of variance was employed to facilitate the investigation of the multiple nesting effects, which were of prime methodological interest. Since the results of the two analyses did not differ, the more clearly interpretable analysis of variance was retained in reporting the results.

doubt regarding the interpretation and generalization of results. Aside from the correction of these obvious faults, the present study included two other departures from tradition that might account for the deviation in findings.

Unlike those in past studies, the present subjects were drawn from a college student population. It might easily be concluded that black college students are more cohesive than are black city residents and that white college students are similar to some white city residents (e.g., those observed by Thayer, 1973) and less discriminatory than others (e.g., those observed by Gaertner & Bickman, 1971). Given the liberalism popularly attributed to white college students and the black consciousness movement evident among blacks in university settings, an interpretation of the present findings that appeals to such sample characteristics must be given due consideration. A decision concerning the validity of this explanation must be withheld, however, awaiting replication of the present design within a sample of city residents.

An alternate interpretation of the present results can be derived from consideration of the characteristics of the population within which subjects' actions were observed. Since Gerard and Hoyt (1974) have found that increasing minority group cohesiveness is a function of the distinctiveness of social categorization (i.e., the decreasing size of the minority relative to the majority), it might be proposed that the altruistic activities of minority group members would more often be aimed at fellow members when the group comprised only a small fraction of the immediate population. Same-race helping within the minority would be attenuated, in turn, when the immediate population contained a large segment of minority group members.

From this perspective, the common absence of differentially high levels of same-race helping among blacks or among whites observed in previous studies was engendered by research conditions that suppressed subjects' perceptions of their own racial group membership. These studies either reported the behavior of subjects observed in locations in which neither blacks nor whites constituted a large majority (e.g., Thayer, 1973) or, due

to the aforementioned confounding of race of subject with location of observation, reported the behavior of blacks observed in predominantly black populations and whites observed in predominantly white populations (e.g., Gaertner & Bickman, 1971; Wispé & Freshley, 1971; Graf & Riddell, 1972). The present study, in contrast, employed both black and white subjects drawn from a location in which whites constituted a large majority, a setting where black subjects' minority group membership was continually reinforced. Under such circumstances, an impressive level of same-race helping among blacks was obtained. But while this proposed interpretation renders the apparently contradictory series of past and present findings more tractable, it remains to be determined whether the associated prediction of greater white same-race helping within predominantly black populations will receive support in future research.

In looking beyond the methodological polemics that have characterized this report, it can be proposed that the results signal an important development in the intragroup sentiments of the black minority. Until only recently, studies of racial preference and identification among blacks have typically indicated that many black individuals harbor negative feelings toward other blacks and toward blackness in general (cf. Hraba & Grant, 1970). Thus while the advocated interpretations of the present finding might suggest its limited generalizability, the simple fact of black altruism toward blacks also suggests that times may be changing.

#### REFERENCES

- Bryan, J. A., & Test, M. A. Models and helping: Naturalistic studies in aiding behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, 6, 400-407.
- Crano, W. D., & Brewer, M. B. *Principles of research in social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.
- Gaertner, S. L., & Bickman, L. Effects of race on the elicitation of helping behavior: The wrong number technique. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1971, 20, 218-222.
- Gerard, H. B., & Hoyt, M. F. Distinctiveness of social categorization and attitude toward ingroup members. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1974, 29, 836-842.

- Graf, R. C., & Riddell, J. C. Helping behavior as a function of interpersonal perception. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 1972, 86, 222-231.
- Hraba, J., & Grant, G. Black is beautiful: A re-examination of racial preference and identification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1970, 16, 398-402.
- Piliavin, I. M., Rodin, J., & Piliavin, J. A. Good Samaritanism: An underground phenomenon? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1969, 13, 289-299.
- Thayer, J. Lend me your ears: Racial and sexual factors in helping the deaf. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1973, 28, 8-11.
- Winer, B. J. *Statistical principles in experimental design*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.
- Wispé, L. G., & Freshley, H. B. Race, sex, and sympathetic helping behavior: The broken bag caper. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1971, 17, 59-65.

(Received September 9, 1974)

---

Manuscripts Accepted for Publication in the  
*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*

- Performance Enhancement by Relevant Success and Irrelevant Failure. Philip Brickman (Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60201), Joan A. W. Linsenmeier, and Alicia McCareins.
- Effects of Deindividuation Variables on Stealing Among Halloween Trick-or-Treaters. Edward Diener (Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois 61820), Scott C. Fraser, Arthur L. Beaman, and Roger T. Kelem.
- Learned Industriousness and Social Reinforcement. Robert Eisenberger (Department of Psychology, State University of New York at Albany, Albany, New York 12222), Denise Cortis Park, and Michael Frank.
- Equity Judgments as Information Integration. Norman H. Anderson (Department of Psychology, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California 92037).
- Achievements of Male and Female Storybook Characters as Determinants of Achievement Behavior by Boys and Girls. Leslie Zebrowitz McArthur (Department of Psychology, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts 02154) and Susan V. Eisen.
- Effects of Nonverbal Dissimulation on Emotional Experience and Autonomic Arousal. John T. Lanzetta (Department of Psychology, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire 03755), Jeffrey Cartwright-Smith, and Robert E. Kleck.
- Effects of a Stimulus Associated with a Victim's Pain on Later Aggression. Christopher Swart (Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin 53706) and Leonard Berkowitz.