

## MEASURING HELPING BEHAVIOR ACROSS CULTURES

(after R. Levine & A. Kope)

A series of studies done by R. Levine et al., in which helpfulness towards strangers was assessed in 36 cities across the US and 23 large cities around the world. Independent field experiments in each city was conducted to measure helping in various situations. Problems encountered during the research:

### **Problem One – Measuring Helping –**

how to identify behaviors that would be valid indicators of helpfulness (that would be sufficiently representative of such a broad concept as helpfulness). Finally, it was operationalised according to **Pearce and Amato's 3-dimensional-model of helping**: (1) type of help offered (doing vs. giving smth); (2) social setting (spontaneous vs. planned helping); (3) degree of need of the recipient (serious vs. nonserious). Accordingly, 5 field experiments were conducted, such as seeing if passerby would...

- ❖ alert a pedestrian who dropped a pen,
- ❖ offer help to a pedestrian with a hurt leg trying to reach a pile of dropped magazines,
- ❖ assist a blind person to cross the street,
- ❖ give a change for a quarter (money),
- ❖ retrieve a lost letter (a stamped envelope next to your car).

Best predictor of help turned out to be population density (overcrowding causing alienation, anonymity, deindividuation, social isolation).

### **Problem Two – How to translate behaviors across cultures – e.g.**

- ❖ a lost letter might contain bombs, mailboxes may be unattended or non-existent, post tends to be unreliable in some places, and illiteracy (e.g. 52% illiteracy rate in India) could be a hindrance, too.
- ❖ Transacting money with strangers might be dangerous in some places,
- ❖ Finally, it was decided that the most helpful cities were from Latin America – Rio de Janeiro and San Jose, Costa Rica. As a rule, cities with strong Hispanic/ Latino cultures tended to be amongst the most helpful (Madrid, San Salvador and Mexico City were also above average).

### **Problem Three – Discovering patterns in cross-cultural differences;**

Trends are that countries with lower economic productivity have higher helping rates (slower pace of life, emphasis on social harmony) – “**simpatico hypothesis**” – social responsibility over personal achievement. However, exceptions exist (e.g. Vienna, Copenhagen – high helping rate, Kiev – low).

### **Problem Four – Helping vs. Civility – all helping is not alike –**

Is it the same if somebody picks up a pen for you, or simply informs you that it's dropped? Is it the same to walk to safely across the street and tersely inform that it's safe to cross? What about the occurrences of uncivil helping, e.g. returning the letter with some swearwords on it?

### **Problem Five – Attributing meaning –**

Why in fact do some people refuse to help? New Yorkers gave many good reasons for their reluctance to help strangers (e.g. it's likely that others don't expect it, might abuse you verbally, might be dangerous, suspicious towards you – are these sheer rationalizations of uncharitable New Yorkers?).

#### **Conclusions:**

- ❖ Individualism-collectivism distinction seems insufficient here!
- ❖ **Communitarianistic** individualistic cultures (e.g. Sweden, Denmark) vs. **egoistic** individualistic cultures (e.g. USA)
- ❖ Is there a relationship between helping strangers and helping friends and family?
- ❖ Methodological complications – the **multiplicity of confounding variables** – make it a hard way to go...