

Does your empathy predict if you would stop and help an injured person?

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Credit: Craig Brierley

If you see an injured person by the side of the road, would you stop and help them, or are you more likely to walk on by? What motivates people to do good in such a situation?

A team of psychologists at the University of Cambridge has conducted a social psychology experiment to test the theory that an individual's level of empathy influences their behaviour. The results of their preliminary

study, dubbed "The Trumpington Road Study" and published in the journal *Social Neuroscience*, suggest that this theory is correct.

In the experiment, one of the team posed as an injured person, sitting on the grass on Trumpington Road, one the main roads running through Cambridge, next to the Cambridge University Botanic Garden. Next to the 'injured' person was his upturned bicycle. Another member of the team was standing innocently across the road, watching to see if anyone was approaching from the side road of Brooklands Avenue.

As soon as a member of the public approached the street corner, alone, and was about to turn into Trumpington Road, he gave a quiet signal to the 'injured' person to start rubbing his ankle. The experiment had begun. The researcher across the street then noted if the passer-by stopped to ask the 'injured' man if he was OK.

Irrespective of whether passers-by stopped or not, once they had walked further up Trumpington Road, they were intercepted by a third researcher who told them she was conducting a 'memory' experiment, inviting them to describe what they had seen along the road in the last few minutes. Various items had been left on the sidewalk (such as a scarf) to make this a plausible cover story. Those who agreed to take part were also asked to visit a website in their own time, and complete the Empathy Quotient (EQ) and Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ) questionnaires, and were told they would receive a token payment of £6 for taking part.

As the team predicted, EQ scores were higher in those who had stopped to help the injured cyclist, than in those who walked past him, presumably focused on their own agenda.

The study was led by Richard Bethlehem, a Cambridge PhD student, and Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, Director of the Autism Research Centre

at the University of Cambridge. 37 (19 males, 18 females) completed both the EQ and also the AQ. They ranged in age from 18 to 77 years old.

Interestingly, how many [autistic traits](#) a person recorded was not related to whether they stopped to help or not, suggesting that empathy is the key factor, not autistic traits. Nor did age predict who stopped or not. Of those who stopped to help, 80% were female.

Richard Bethlehem said: "Experimental studies are often confined to the lab, which means they lack 'ecological validity'. In this novel study we tested if empathy scores predict if people will act altruistically in a real-world setting. Our results support the theory that people who do good are, at least partially, driven by empathy."

Dr Carrie Allison, a member of the team, commented: "How much empathy one has is itself a complex outcome of both biological factors and early upbringing and is a skill that can improve with development, learning, and practice."

Professor Baron-Cohen, author of *Zero Degrees of Empathy* and the Chair of Trustees of the Canadian-based charity "Empathy for Peace", said: "This research is a first step towards understanding why some people may or may not stop to help a person in distress. Studies conducted 'in the wild' are notoriously difficult to undertake, and even this small sample was derived from over 1,000 passers by. We will need to await a larger-scale replication. These results suggest that one factor that predicts which individuals will not stand idly by, is how many degrees of empathy they have."

More information: Richard A. I. Bethlehem et al. Does empathy predict altruism in the wild?, *Social Neuroscience* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/17470919.2016.1249944](https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2016.1249944)

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