3. The Power of the Situation

When studying social behavior, it is easy to overlook the power of the situation and to assume instead that enduring personality forces are more important. Sometimes this is true, but often it is not. In many instances, subtle variations in a situation can profoundly affect how people behave. Consider, for example, a study by Darley and Batson (1973). The participants were seminary students at Princeton University. As they were walking to a classroom to deliver a lecture, they encountered a man slumped in a doorway, head down, eyes closed, not moving. Would these seminary students offer help? One would certainly think so. After all, they were training for the ministry, a profession that emphasizes the importance of good deeds and caring for others. But the experimenters had manipulated a variable in this study. Some students were told they were very late and needed to hurry, others were told they were right on schedule, and a third group was told they were ahead of schedule and had plenty of time.

This situational manipulation proved to have a very powerful effect on whether the students helped the victim or not. As shown in Figure 1.2, a high percentage of students helped when they were not in a hurry, but very few helped when they were in a hurry. In this study, then, a small situational variable had a large effect.

B. Social Psychology versus Other Academic Disciplines

Social psychologists are not the only people who study social behavior. Social behavior is a concern of clinical, personality, and developmental psychologists, and sociologists,