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## Lack of empathy results in rude public behavior

By Philip Lai | September 5, 2013, Thursday |  PRINT EDITION

SEVERAL weeks ago, at around lunch time, I was at the end of a relatively short queue waiting to pay for my lunch at a neighborhood bakery. There were five or six people in front of me, and we were all carrying our trays, waiting.

My stomach was roaring, and how I wished I could just pay for the bread and start my lunch right away!

Unfortunately, there was a line, and all I could do was to wait and accept a slight delay in satisfying my hunger because those in front of me had needs no different from my own.

After a few moments waiting in line, I saw a man walk directly up to the cashier. Without missing a beat, I waved to him and said, "Excuse me," pointing at the same time to where our queue ended, "Please line up there, thank you!"

Being a student of social psychology, I observed this person's response closely, and I was quite surprised by his reaction. Not that he was rude or anything, but he was taken aback by me talking to him as if he hadn't noticed anyone else in the shop other than himself and the cashier he was approaching. While a little embarrassed, he gave the impression that he was indeed in a totally different time and space earlier. By the way, the bakery is fairly small, and the queue was right in the middle of the place which means, it's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to have missed it.

Interestingly enough, soon after this man had joined our line, another man did exactly the same thing. I couldn't believe it. I went through the same routine with him, and his reaction was similar to that of the earlier queue jumper; he even appeared apologetic. He too gave the impression that he had no idea there was a queue. Fascinating!

While I knew for sure I would not get a response, I still asked the man as he moved to the line, "Sorry, I'm just curious. I assume you saw some people here just now, and I wonder what you thought we were doing here in a bakery standing in line?"

I honestly believe that, while he might have vaguely noticed us, his mind was blinded by his own needs, and there wasn't any capacity left to see the needs of others at all. Psychology has a special term for our capacity and capability to acknowledge and feel for the needs of others, and it's called "empathy."

My bakery encounter is but a very small example of the challenges that we all face living in a big city like Shanghai where people of varying levels of empathy rub shoulders with each other every day.

If civilization is mostly about being mutually respectful of each other's needs and wants, it seems that the overall empathy level of its members plays a very critical role in fostering a civilized society.

Civilized behaviors, such as lining up at subway or bus stations,

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pushing the “open” button while others are entering or leaving the elevator, giving up seats on subway or buses for others who are in need, and so on, are much more common today than several years ago.

I really believe the trend will continue, and that, at the same time, empathy is being treated seriously as an essential life skill to be systematically promoted.

The author is a learning and development consultant and executive coach in Shanghai.

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