

The psychology of altruism

*Where'd all the good people go?
I've been changing channels;
I don't see them on the TV shows.
Where'd all the good people go?
We got heaps and heaps of what we
sow.*
Jack Johnson lyrics from 'Good People'



TOM FARSIDES with a review of the evidence and how we might foster a more prosocial society.

CONTRARY to Margaret Thatcher's infamous dictum, there is such a thing as society. Moreover, as citizens and as psychologists we have an option and perhaps a responsibility to decide what sort of society we want. One possibility is to try to promote a truly civil society, one in which people have a tendency to be altruistic – to act on concerns for others' welfare as well as their own. In such a society, everyone would benefit from giving as well as from receiving care and consideration (Post, 2005). Were such a goal adopted, psychology would have much to contribute.

First, psychology has identified several mechanisms by which people can come to know and care about other people's situations. Reviewing these helps identify what is core and what is peripheral in altruism, helping, and – most valuably – altruistic helping. Second, psychology provides a comprehensive analysis of the situations in which altruism (and other motives) will and will not lead to helping behaviour. Third, psychology has identified a number of factors that, left unchecked, undermine effective altruism. Finally, psychology allows identification of a theoretically and empirically informed agenda for promoting a truly caring society.

Knowing and caring about other people's situations

As people mature, they can use an increasingly sophisticated set of processes to help them understand other people's subjective experiences. Although important differences between such processes exist, 'empathy' is often used as an umbrella term for them. The greater people's ability to empathise, the greater their potential to be altruistic. Social skills training that improves people's empathising abilities (Stepien & Baernstein, 2006) therefore also tends to improve their ability to be altruistic. It should be remembered, however, that manipulation of and aggression towards others is also made more effective by successfully taking their perspective (Stone, 2006).

Empathy allows individuals to appreciate the world from someone else's point of view. If empathisers identify with those they empathise with, they are likely to become sympathetic (Håkansson & Montgomery, 2003). That is, empathisers will be pleased when things seem to go well for those empathised with (Smith *et al.*, 1989) and they will be either saddened (Hoffman, 1991) or angered (Vitaglione *et al.*, 2003) when they do not. Stressing similarities with others increases people's ability to identify with them and thereby care about their fate (Levy *et al.*, 2002). Stressing differences tends to do the opposite.

By helping people appreciate perspectives other than their own, empathy can also highlight the fact that individuals have personal concerns that may be affected by others' behaviour. This can lead people to care about how they ought to behave, morally (Hoffman, 2000). Because moral concerns tend to prescribe caring about the welfare of others, this too can

lead to altruism (Carlo *et al.*, 1996). More so than with sympathetic concern, moral concern can motivate helping that is not tied to the welfare of a particular individual at a particular time. On the other hand, morality-inspired altruism is more often paternalistic than sympathy-inspired altruism. This means that moral altruists' sincere views about how to improve the welfare of others may not always be shared by those who 'benefit' from this help. Also, many putative moral beliefs permit or promote differential caring about the welfare of others, sometimes resulting in altruism towards some but indifference or

WEBLINKS

Inspiring tales of 'people who stick their neck out for the common good': www.giraffe.org

Resources on compassion, empathy and the like: <http://peacecenter.berkeley.edu>

Hints for people who want to make more of a difference: www.wearewhatwedo.org

In parenting, love routinely results in altruism

even aggression towards others. Terrorists are one product of such 'moral' thinking (Victoroff, 2005).

Although empathy can be a vital determinant of altruism, its influence is indirect. Empathy promotes altruism, when it does, mainly because empathy promotes sympathetic or other-regarding moral concerns. The influences of sympathy and morality on altruism are also indirect. Sympathetic or moral concerns promote altruism, when they do, primarily because they lead to caring about the positive welfare of others (Batson *et al.*, 1995). Crucially, it is this caring that is the most direct determinant of altruism (Nichols, 2001).

Love probably provides the paradigm example of caring about the positive welfare of others. Although a many-splendoured thing, love is most apparent when people demonstrate that they genuinely care about the positive welfare of others (Fehr & Russell, 1991). A mother does not typically nurture her baby because she empathises with it, sympathises with it, or feels morally bound to do so. She nurtures it because she loves it. In this context, loving and caring are almost synonymous and they routinely result in altruistic behaviour.

In intimate relationships, people tend to rely on sympathy or morality (empathy-derived or otherwise) to generate caring only when love is absent. When love is present, such alternatives are simply not required (Comte-Sponville, 2003). Sometimes coy of the term, psychologists have nevertheless repeatedly demonstrated clear and positive links between (proxies of) love and altruism (e.g. Clark & Grote, 1998; Mikulincer *et al.*, 2005).

Calculated caring

At a minimum, caring about others means hoping things go well for them. But, to quote another Conservative ex-Prime Minister, 'Fine words butter no parsnips'. More than simply caring about others is needed to motivate actual helping. Beyond altruistic concern, a decision to act in the interest of another requires an altruist to believe that helping is in their own best interest. This does not mean that altruists do not 'really' care about the welfare of others. It just means that this is not all they care about.

Simplifying rather crudely, if an altruist can obtain benefits from improving another's welfare that are not outweighed by personal costs, it is in the altruist's interest to help and they will tend to do so (Dovidio *et al.*, 1991). The most important components of this calculation are the costs and benefits to the altruist because of changes in the welfare of the person cared about, and the costs and benefits to the altruist of personally providing help to bring such changes about (for a review, see Piliavin *et al.*, 1981). The more people care for others, the less 'extra' rewards they will need to entice them to help and the more costs they will put up with – when necessary – in order to pursue their goal of promoting other welfare.

Having a desire to improve the welfare of others means the altruist will derive pleasure from improvements in the other's welfare and will be displeased by the absence of such improvements (Batson & Weeks, 1996). But altruism alone will not motivate helping if, for example, such help seems unnecessary, insufficient, or counter-productive for satisfying the goal of improving other-welfare (e.g. Sibicky *et al.*, 1995). Similarly, satisfying one altruistic motive sometimes requires non-fulfilment of another – so, for example, a person might seek to avoid loved ones' distress by deciding not to become an organ donor.

Challenges to altruism

Altruism will not occur in the absence of sufficient motive, means and opportunity.

As discussed, motives are best considered relative entities. An inclination to be altruistic is unlikely to flower if accompanied by stronger and potentially competing motives; for example, those associated with in-group loyalty (Lowery, 2006). Similarly, virulent individualism and materialism often leave little room for altruistic concerns. When societies promote individual expression and development as a right bordering on an obligation, it should surprise no one if the young in such societies think altruism threatens their autonomy and well-being (Sheldon *et al.*, 2005). If those societies also idolise wealth and status, any hint of altruism is likely to be treated with suspicion, if not derision (Ratner & Miller, 2001), which in turn will tend to undermine even genuine altruism (Batson *et al.*, 1987). Batson and Moran (1999), for example, introduced a prisoner's dilemma game as either a social exchange or as a business transaction. Unless empathy for the recipient was evoked, the business frame reduced cooperation.

No matter what the cultural milieu, altruists will be helpful only to the extent they feel able to be so (e.g. Lindsey, 2005). Resources required by altruists vary according to context. Where heroism is required, altruism must be accompanied by bravery (Becker & Eagly, 2004). Where others' suffering is great, altruists have to be able to cope with the personal distress that may accompany their sympathetic, moral or loving inclinations (Eisenberg, 2000). Where society is unsupportive of or antithetical to other-concern, altruism must be accompanied by conviction and resilience (Greitemeyer *et al.*, 2006). And where altruism has come to seem all but impossible, it requires faith or determination (Marsh, 2004).

Altruism always requires the ability to assess and influence others' welfare. Excessive personal or situational demands making these things difficult will limit opportunities for altruism (e.g. Evans, 2005). Less obviously, so will an excessive focus on means rather than ends; for example, giving to charity rather than pursuing the charity's goals (Fishbach *et al.*, 2006).

An altruistic agenda

It is important to recognise that altruism

can be fostered, especially among the young (Scourfield *et al.*, 2004; cf. Sutton *et al.*, 2006). Essentially, nurturing people is the best way of nurturing their altruism (Knafo & Plomin, 2006). Conversely, people who are not nurtured tend to become both physically and emotionally insensitive, including to the needs of others (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006).

Altruism can also be wilfully

undermined. This happens particularly starkly when training people to intentionally harm others. Of the many examples chillingly chronicled in Jonathan Glover's *Humanity*, one account from Svetlana Alexievich illustrates the essence of such a process: 'Before I went into the army it was Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy who taught me how I ought to live my life. In the army, it was the sergeants... "Now hear this! Repeat after me! What is a para? Answer: a bloody-minded brute with an iron fist and no conscience! Repeat after me: conscience is a luxury we can't afford"' (p.51).

More subtly, altruism can be undermined by fostering any seemingly incompatible beliefs. In particular, we should be wary of telling people there is no such thing as altruism. Instead, altruism should be promoted as common, attractive and expected. People feel elevated when they witness altruism (Haidt & Algoe, 2004) and they tend to become more altruistic themselves as a result (Yates, 1999). If our goal is to promote altruism,

we should provide as many attractive altruistic role models as we can, in public life, in the media and in our own lives. We should also reward attempted altruism, at least more than we reward anything antithetical to it. We should celebrate celebrities who try to be altruistic.

This point deserves emphasis. Altruism tends to thrive when people are not prevented from developing and expressing the nobler of their natural inclinations. O'Donahue and Turley (2006) interviewed women who dealt with people placing notices in newspapers on the anniversary of their loved ones' deaths. Only one woman had received specific training for the role – and this was to make sure that sympathy did not get in the way of commercial interests. Indeed, all workplace structures and systems seemed to be 'underpinned primarily by management goals such as efficiency and profit generation' (p.1442). Moreover, empathy and altruism in this context were sometimes especially emotionally taxing. Nevertheless, given sufficient autonomy and mutual support,

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

How altruistic do we want people to be, to whom, in what circumstances?

What are the pros and cons of fostering a particular behaviour (e.g. giving money to charity) relative to fostering a particular motive (e.g. to promote other-welfare)?

In what ways do your own principles and duties (moral, political, religious, professional, etc.) promote and undermine your altruistic tendencies?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' to psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute (members only) via www.psychforum.org.uk.

each of the women was inspired by humanity and by their colleagues to increasingly develop a compassionate 'ethic of care'.

Although there are specific situations in which altruism is actively discouraged, most people approve of altruism 'in general'. It needs to be noted, however, that such altruistic sentiments mask two potential barriers to altruistic action. First, it is easy to agree with altruism in principle and avoid acting altruistically on any number of specific occasions. Secondly, altruistic acts sometimes involve some level of personal sacrifice, even among those for whom such actions are intrinsically satisfying. Promotion of an altruistic society would therefore be furthered by strengthening people's active commitment to altruism (Maio *et al.*, 2001) and by simultaneously strengthening character traits complementary to altruism' (e.g. resilience: Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Universal and unconditional altruism is an inappropriate goal. People should be guided in how to distribute their altruism in acceptable ways, e.g. according to opportunity and effectiveness rather than parochialism (Reed & Aquino, 2003). People should also be taught that altruism does not necessitate being blind to others' faults (Neff & Katney, 2005).

Finally, whilst promoting altruism ought to include making non-altruism relatively costly (Henrich *et al.*, 2006), we must guard against believing that being aggressive towards non-altruists is the same thing as actually being altruistic – however righteous and similar they may sometimes appear (King *et al.*, 2006). Just as robbing the rich does not encourage charity and beating bullies does not teach kindness, it is not possible to force people to be altruistic. As with so much else, when it comes to altruism, one tends to get what one gives.

I am optimistic about our ability to better ourselves. We can learn to be decent and caring; we can learn to give of ourselves; we can learn to love. How do we do that? The same way we learn how to speak, read, swim, or ride a bicycle: we need somebody to teach us, and we need practice.

Forni (2002, p.19)

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