TABLE :: 12.1 Comparing Theories of Altruism

How Is Altruism Explained?

Theory	Level of Explanation	Externally Rewarded Helping	Intrinsic Helping
Social-exchange	Psychological	External rewards for helping	Distress → inner rewards for helping
Social norms	Sociological	Reciprocity norm	Social-responsibility norm
Evolutionary	Biological	Reciprocity	Kin selection

is therefore "multilevel," say some researchers (Mirsky, 2009). It operates at *both* individual and group levels.

Donald Campbell (1975a, 1975b) offered another basis for unreciprocated altruism: Human societies evolved ethical and religious rules that serve as brakes on the biological bias toward self-interest. Commandments such as "love your neighbor as yourself" admonish us to balance self-concern with concern for the group, and so contribute to the survival of the group. Richard Dawkins (1976) offered a similar conclusion: "Let us try to *teach* generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something no other species has ever aspired to" (p. 3).

Comparing and Evaluating Theories of Helping

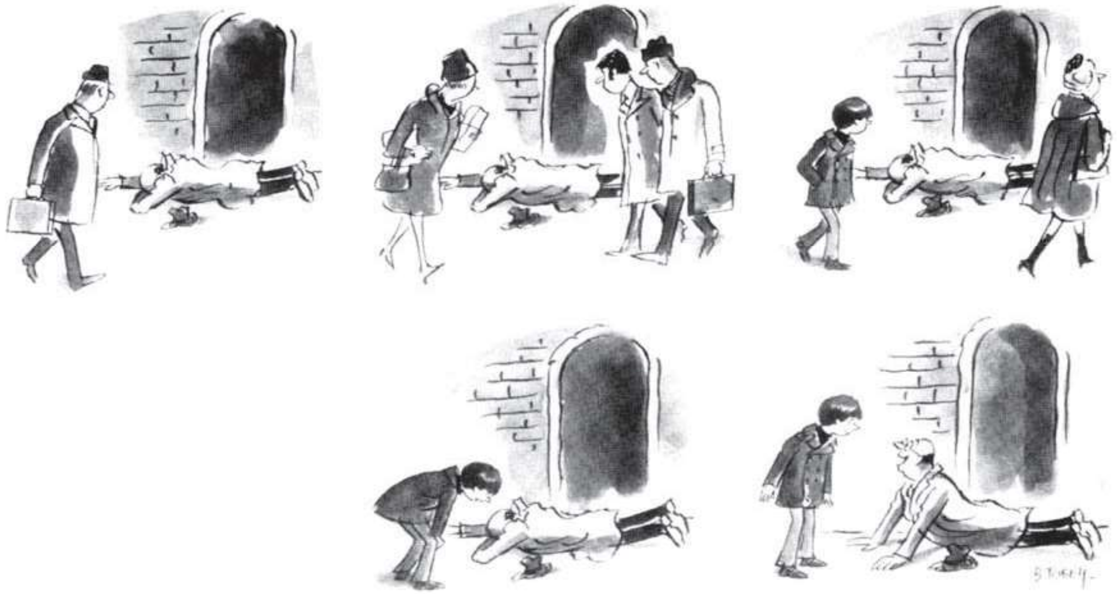
By now you perhaps have noticed similarities among the social-exchange, social norm, and evolutionary views of altruism. As Table 12.1 shows, each proposes two types of prosocial behavior: a tit-for-tat reciprocal exchange and a more unconditional helpfulness. They do so at three complementary levels of explanation. If the evolutionary view is correct, then our genetic predispositions *should* manifest themselves in psychological and sociological phenomena.

Each theory appeals to logic. Yet each is vulnerable to charges of being speculative and after the fact. When we start with a known effect (the give-and-take of everyday life) and explain it by conjecturing a social-exchange process, a "reciprocity norm," or an evolutionary origin, we might merely be explaining-by-naming. The argument that a behavior occurs because of its survival function is hard to disprove. With hindsight it's easy to think it had to be that way. If we can explain *any* conceivable behavior after the fact as the result of a social exchange, a norm, or natural selection, then we cannot disprove the theories. Each theory's task is therefore to generate predictions that enable us to test it.

An effective theory also provides a coherent scheme for summarizing a variety of observations. With this criterion, our three altruism theories get higher marks. Each offers us a broad perspective that illuminates both enduring commitments and spontaneous help.

Genuine Altruism

My town, Holland, Michigan, has a corporation with several thousand employees that, for most of the last half-century, annually gave away 10 percent of its pretax profits with one stipulation: The gift was always anonymous. In a nearby city, anonymous donors in 2005 pledged to provide Michigan public university or community college costs—ranging from 65 to 100 percent depending on length of residence—for *all* Kalamazoo public schools graduates. Are such anonymous benefactors—along with lifesaving heroes, everyday blood donors, and Peace Corps volunteers—ever motivated by an ultimate goal of selfless concern for others? Or is their ultimate goal some form of self-benefit, such as gaining a reward, avoiding punishment and guilt, or relieving distress?



"Are you all right, Mister? Is there anything I can do?"

"Young man, you're the only one who bothered to stop! I'm a millionaire and I'm going to give you five thousand dollars!"

We never know what benefits may come from helping someone in distress.

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Abraham Lincoln illustrated the philosophical issue in a conversation with another passenger in a horse-drawn coach. After Lincoln argued that selfishness prompts all good deeds, he noticed a sow making a terrible noise. Her piglets had gotten into a marshy pond and were in danger of drowning. Lincoln called the coach to a halt, jumped out, ran back, and lifted the little pigs to safety. Upon his return, his companion remarked, "Now, Abe, where does selfishness come in on this little episode?" "Why, bless your soul, Ed, that was the very essence of selfishness. I should have had no peace of mind all day had I gone and left that suffering old sow worrying over those pigs. I did it to get peace of mind, don't you see?" (Sharp, cited by Batson & others, 1986). Until recently, psychologists would have sided with Lincoln.

Helpfulness so reliably makes helpers feel better that Daniel Batson (2006; Batson & others, 2008) has devoted much of his career to discerning whether helpfulness also contains a streak of genuine altruism. Batson theorizes that our willingness to help is influenced by both self-serving and selfless considerations (Figure 12.4). Distress over someone's suffering motivates us to relieve our upset, either by escaping the distressing situation (like the priest and the Levite) or by helping (like the Samaritan). But especially when we feel securely attached to someone, report both Batson and a team of attachment researchers led by Mario Mikulincer (2005), we also feel **empathy.** Loving parents suffer when their children suffer and rejoice over their children's joys—an empathy lacking in child abusers and other perpetrators of cruelty (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). We also feel empathy for those with whom we identify. In September 1997 millions of people who never came within miles of England's Princess Diana (but who felt as if they knew her after hundreds of tabloid stories and 44 *People* magazine cover articles) wept for her and her motherless sons—but shed no tears for the nearly 1 million faceless Rwandans murdered or having died in squalid refugee camps since 1994.

empathy
The vicarious experience of another's feelings; putting oneself in another's shoes.

"When people ask me how I'm doing, I say, 'I'm only as good as my most sad child.'"
—MICHELLE OBAMA, OCTOBER 24, 2008

When we feel empathy, we focus not so much on our own distress as on the sufferer. Genuine sympathy and compassion motivate us to help others for their own

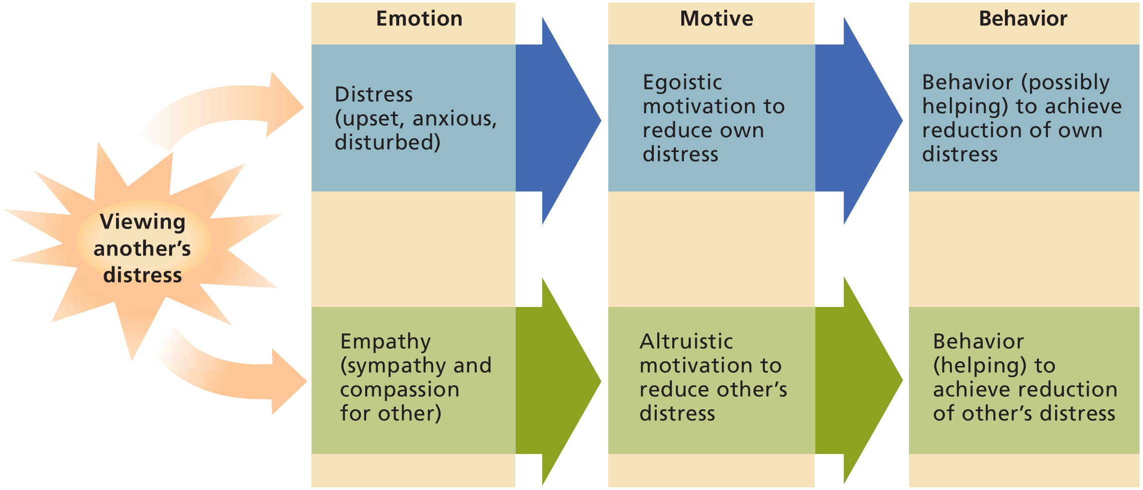
Emotion
Motive
Behavior
Viewing another's distress
Distress (upset, anxious, disturbed)
Egoistic motivation to reduce own distress
Behavior (possibly helping) to achieve reduction of own distress
Empathy (sympathy and compassion for other)
Altruistic motivation to reduce other's distress
Behavior (helping) to achieve reduction of other's distress

FIGURE :: 12.4

Egoistic and Altruistic Routes to Helping

Viewing another's distress can evoke a mixture of self-focused distress and other-focused empathy. Researchers agree that distress triggers egoistic motives. But they debate whether empathy can trigger a pure altruistic motive.

Source: Adapted from Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987.

sakes. When we value another's welfare, perceive the person as in need, and take the person's perspective, we feel empathic concern (Batson & others, 2007).

In humans, empathy comes naturally. Even day-old infants cry more when they hear another infant cry (Hoffman, 1981). In hospital nurseries, one baby's crying sometimes evokes a chorus of crying. Most 18-month-old infants, after observing an unfamiliar adult accidentally drop a marker or clothespin and have trouble reaching it, will readily help (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). To some, this suggests that humans are hardwired for empathy. Primates and even mice also display empathy, indicating that the building blocks of altruism predate humanity (de Waal, 2005, 2007, 2008; Langford & others, 2006). In one classic experiment, most rhesus monkeys refused to operate a device that gained them food if it would cause another monkey to receive an electric shock (Masserman & others, 1964).

Often distress and empathy together motivate responses to a crisis. In 1983, people watched on television as an Australian bushfire wiped out hundreds of homes near Melbourne. Afterward, Paul Amato (1986) studied donations of money and goods. He found that those who felt angry or indifferent gave less than those who felt either distressed (shocked and sickened) or empathic (sympathetic and worried for the victims).

To separate egoistic distress reduction from empathy-based altruism, Batson's research group conducted studies that aroused feelings of empathy. Then the researchers noted whether the aroused people would reduce their own distress by escaping the situation or whether they would go out of their way to aid the person. The results were consistent: With their empathy aroused, people usually helped.

In one of these experiments, Batson and his associates (1981) had University of Kansas women observe a young woman suffering while she supposedly received electric shocks. During a pause in the experiment, the obviously upset victim explained to the experimenter that a childhood fall against an electric fence left her acutely sensitive to shocks. The experimenter suggested that perhaps the observer (the actual participant in this experiment) might trade places and take the remaining shocks for her. Previously, half of these actual participants had been led to believe the suffering person was a kindred spirit on matters of values and interests (thus arousing their empathy). Some also were led to believe that their part in the

Might genuine altruism motivate an international health educator leading exercise with children in Uganda? Daniel Batson believes it might.

experiment was completed, so that in any case they were done observing the woman's suffering. Nevertheless, their empathy aroused, virtually all willingly offered to substitute for the victim.

Is this genuine altruism? Mark Schaller and Robert Cialdini (1988) doubted it. Feeling empathy for a sufferer makes one sad, they noted. In one of their experiments, they led people to believe that their sadness was going to be relieved by a different sort of mood-boosting experience—listening to a comedy tape. Under such conditions, people who felt empathy were not especially helpful. Schaller and Cialdini concluded that if we feel empathy but know that something else will make us feel better, we aren't as likely to help.

Everyone agrees that some helpful acts are either obviously egoistic (done to gain external rewards or avoid punishment) or subtly egoistic (done to gain internal rewards or relieve inner distress). Is there a third type of helpfulness—a genuine altruism that aims simply to increase another's welfare (producing happiness for oneself merely as a by-product)? Is empathy-based helping a source of such altruism? Cialdini (1991) and his colleagues Mark Schaller and Jim Fultz have doubted it. They note that no experiment rules out all possible egoistic explanations for helpfulness.

But other findings suggest that genuine altruism does exist: With their empathy aroused, people will help even when they believe no one will know about their helping. Their concern continues until someone *has* been helped (Fultz & others, 1986). If their efforts to help are unsuccessful, they feel bad even if the failure is not their fault (Batson & Weeks, 1996). And people will sometimes persist in wanting to help a suffering person even when they believe their own distressed mood arises from a "mood-fixing" drug (Schroeder & others, 1988).

"The measure of our character is what we would do if we were never found out."

—*PARAPHRASED FROM THOMAS MACAULAY*

After 25 such experiments testing egoism versus altruistic empathy, Batson (2001, 2006) and others (Dovidio, 1991; Staub, 1991) believe that sometimes people do focus on others' welfare, not on their own. Batson, a former philosophy and theology student, had begun his research feeling "excited to think that if we could ascertain whether people's concerned reactions were genuine, and not simply a subtle form of selfishness, then we could shed new light on a basic issue regarding

focus ON The Benefits—and the Costs—of Empathy-Induced Altruism

People do most of what they do, including much of what they do for others, for their own benefit, acknowledge University of Kansas altruism researcher Daniel Batson and his colleagues (2004). But egoism is not the whole story of helping, they believe; there is also a genuine altruism rooted in empathy, in feelings of sympathy and compassion for others' welfare. We are supremely social creatures. Consider:

Empathy-induced altruism

- *produces sensitive helping.* Where there is empathy, it's not just the thought that counts—it's alleviating the other's suffering.
- *inhibits aggression.* Show Batson someone who feels empathy for a target of potential aggression and he'll show you someone who's unlikely to favor attack—someone who's as likely to forgive as to harbor anger. In general, women report more empathic feelings than men, and they are less likely to support war and other forms of aggression (Jones, 2003).
- *increases cooperation.* In laboratory experiments, Batson and Nadia Ahmad found that people in potential conflict are more trusting and cooperative when they feel empathy for the other. Personalizing an outgroup, by getting to know people in it, helps people understand their perspective.
- *improves attitudes toward stigmatized groups.* Take others' perspective, allow yourself to feel what they feel, and you may become more supportive of others like them (the homeless, those with AIDS, or even convicted criminals).

But empathy-induced altruism comes with liabilities, notes the Batson group.

- *It can be harmful.* People who risk their lives on behalf of others sometimes lose them. People who seek to do good can also do harm, sometimes by unintentionally humiliating or demotivating the recipient.
- *It can't address all needs.* It's easier to feel empathy for a needy individual than, say, for Mother Earth, whose environment is being stripped and warmed at the peril of our descendants.
- *It burns out.* Feeling others' pain is painful, which may cause us to avoid situations that evoke our empathy, or to experience "burnout" or "compassion fatigue."
- *It can feed favoritism, injustice, and indifference to the larger common good.* Empathy, being particular, produces partiality—toward a single child or family or pet. Moral principles, being universal, produce concern for unseen others as well. Empathy-based estate planning bequeaths inheritances to particular loved ones. Morality-based estate planning is more inclusive. When their empathy for someone is aroused, people will violate their own standards of fairness and justice by giving that person favored treatment (Batson & others, 1997; Oceja, 2008). Ironically, note Batson and his colleagues (1999), empathy-induced altruism can therefore "pose a powerful threat to the common good [by leading] me to narrow my focus of concern to those for whom I especially care—the needing friend—and in so doing to lose sight of the bleeding crowd." No wonder charity so often stays close to home.

human nature" (1999a). Two decades later he believes he has his answer. Genuine "empathy-induced altruism is part of human nature" (1999b). And that, says Batson, raises the hope—confirmed by research—that inducing empathy might improve attitudes toward stigmatized people: people with AIDS, the homeless, the imprisoned, and other minorities. (See "Focus On: The Benefit—and the Costs—of Empathy-Induced Altruism.")

During the Vietnam War, 63 soldiers received Medals of Honor for using their bodies to shield their buddies from exploding devices (Hunt, 1990). Most were in close-knit combat groups. Most threw themselves on live hand grenades. In doing so, 59 sacrificed their lives. So did several Iraq war soldiers, such as Corporal Jason Dunham, whose family in 2007 received his Medal of Honor after he threw himself on a grenade to save his unit. Unlike other altruists, such as the 50,000 Gentiles now believed to have rescued 200,000 Jews from the Nazis, these soldiers had no time to reflect on the shame of cowardice or the eternal rewards of self-sacrifice. Yet something drove them to act.

> "As I see it, there are two great forces of human nature: self-interest, and caring for others."
>
> —*BILL GATES, "A NEW APPROACH TO CAPITALISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY," 2008*