

Book Review

Altruism in Humans

A review of C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, 329 pp., US\$34.74, ISBN 978-0-19-534106-5 (hardcover).

Dieneke Hubbeling, Psychology Department, University of East London and South West London and St. George's NHS Mental Health Trust, 61 Glenburnie Road London SW17 7DJ, United Kingdom (dieneke@doctors.org.uk).

Batson's book is a summary of his impressive research career investigating altruism and more specifically the claim that empathic concern is an important motivator for altruistic behavior. Years ago he wrote another book about the topic, *The Altruism Question* (Batson, 1991). In the current book, Batson describes further developments in altruism research by himself and others and reflects on what is not (yet) known. It is not a book about evolutionary psychology per se but it does have implications for altruism research from an evolutionary perspective. Furthermore, by using an evolutionary perspective one could interpret some aspects of Batson's findings differently.

Altruism in Humans consists of three main parts: part I "A Theory of Altruistic motivation", part II "Empirical Evidence", and part III "Altruism in Action." In "A theory of Altruistic Motivation" Batson gives a general introduction to the topic. In Chapter 1, Batson defines empathy as an other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need. Altruism is defined by Batson as a *motivational* state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare. He emphasizes that there are different definitions of empathy and altruism and specifically mentions that his definition is different from evolutionary scientists who focus on behavior. His definition is similar to Sober and Sloan Wilson's concept of psychological altruism (Sober and Sloan Wilson, 1998). In evolutionary research one often uses evolutionary altruism, which refers to behavior of one organism that reduces its own reproductive fitness while the reproductive fitness of another organism increases. This is most often explained as inclusive fitness via kin selection. From the point of view of the gene, this is not really altruism but rather a mechanism to enhance its procreation. Batson's book is about helping strangers, i.e. about behavior that cannot be explained via kin selection.

Chapter 2 discusses the requirements for altruism according to Batson's theory, namely perceiving the other as in need and valuing the other's welfare. Batson mentions how his view has changed over the years. He no longer considers perspective taking fundamental because highly valuing behavior can increase perspective taking in an experiment without having received specific instructions to do so. In one of his experiments, participants were informed that somebody was late, because he helped a vulnerable elderly woman (Batson, Eklund, Chermok,

Hoyt, and Ortiz, 2007) and this increased perspective taking. Furthermore, under experimental conditions one can adopt perspective taking without feeling much empathy, for example if asked how a convicted murderer would feel (Batson et al., 1997). Batson highlights the importance of parental care. Empathic concern is, from this perspective, an extension of parental concern to those outside the family. There is some suggestion that oxytocin plays a part in this process.

In “Behavioral Consequences of Empathy Induced Altruism,” Batson describes how empathic concern can be the motivation for helping but how there are also numerous egoistic alternatives such as seeking rewards (either from oneself i.e. “warm glow” or from others), avoidance of punishment (again either self-punishment or punishment from others) and reduction of arousal, which can also facilitate helping behavior. Batson is a pluralist. He does not deny that people can help others for selfish reasons. However, his main argument is that egoistic motives are not the only cause for helping behavior.

Part II “Empirical Evidence” starts with Chapter 4 in which Batson argues against considering the behavior of saints and martyrs as evidence for altruism. He asserted that one cannot exclude that their reasons have fundamentally been selfish, for example that they did it because they wanted to become famous. According to Batson self-reports should not be used to establish motives, because people might not know why they have done something or if they do know they might not be willing to tell.

Generally, Batson argues against what he describes as Aristotelian science, i.e. explaining observed phenomena. He is of the opinion that one should develop a theory (as he has done in developing the theory that empathic concern causes altruistic behavior) and test this theory rigorously with experiments. In his experiments there is inevitably some kind of deception involved, whereby participants are asked to respond to somebody who is assumed to be suffering. Batson does acknowledge that there are ethical difficulties with this and that the experimenter has a special responsibility towards the welfare and dignity of participants.

In Chapter 5, Batson discusses experiments he and others have conducted. The majority were fairly similar 2x2 experiments, whereby empathy is manipulated between high and low and some other factor is also manipulated in high and low to test an alternative hypothesis. Batson manipulated empathy in various ways, for example by asking participants to read information as objectively as possible or to read the information while trying to imagine what it would be like or by asking participants to fill in a questionnaire beforehand and show them fake answers of somebody who just happens to have given similar answers or very different responses. He sometimes used a self-report scale to check whether his manipulation was successful. Other factors Batson manipulated included the presence of witnesses. Students were asked to help another student either anonymously or not. This was testing the hypothesis that helping behavior occurred because of some reward from others or to avoid some punishment from others. Another manipulation involved asking a student to take the place of another student supposedly undergoing electric shocks in an experiment (in reality somebody acting as if she was experiencing pain), or having to continue to watch the other student undergoing shocks if the student decided not to take the place of the student being “shocked.” This was to examine whether reducing arousal could be the motivating factor. Batson’s results consistently show that empathy is a causal factor for helping behavior but he is careful to add that his experiments also show that other factors play a part as well. The typical result of the 2x2 experiments is that there is less helping in the low empathy/low other factor box and more helping in the three other boxes (high other factor/low empathy and both high empathy boxes). However, high personal costs can override empathy. The typical pattern was not seen in an experiment whereby students were

asked to change places with a student supposedly undergoing electric shocks, which were “clearly painful but of course not harmful”. Even participants in the high empathy group did not want to do that.

In Chapter 6, “Two Further Challenges,” Batson discusses some criticism of his own experiments and how further studies he has conducted provide some additional evidence for his view. It was argued that being able to leave the experiment would not really reduce arousal because participants would still worry about the student supposedly undergoing electric shocks. However, a questionnaire administered some time after the experiment suggested that this was not the case. Having said that, it is extremely difficult to disentangle empathy and some kind of reward or punishment in the distant future and Batson’s experiments have not really tested future pain hedonism (Schulz, 2011). Another criticism was that emphatic concern was really some kind of merging of oneself with somebody else; thereby helping the other would really be helping oneself. However, imagining another person’s pain in a scanner not only activated areas for emphatic concern but also the right inferior parietal cortex, a region associated with distinguishing self from others (Lamm, Batson, and Decety, 2007). Batson does acknowledge however that this evidence is quite preliminary.

Part III starts with Chapter 7, “Benefits of Empathy Induced Altruism”. The person in need is more likely to receive help and more likely to receive more sensitive help, if the helper experienced more empathy. Empathy can also be beneficial for groups in need and there is some evidence that being empathic could be beneficial for the health of the helper, although Batson again acknowledges that this is quite speculative. Chapter 8 discusses the downside of empathy as Batson describes experiments whereby empathy interferes with rational choice. Batson and Ahmad conducted a pseudo prisoner’s dilemma experiment (Batson and Ahmad, 2001) in which participants were informed that the person they were playing with had defected. The only rational decision from a game theory perspective would be to defect as well. However, if empathy was induced in participants almost half did not defect. When empathy was not induced, almost everybody did defect.

Batson expands on the prosocial nature of altruism in “Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives – and a More Human Society”. He claims that there are four reasons for prosocial motivation: egoism, altruism, collectivism and principlism. Principlism used to be considered important for moral behavior. In Kohlberg’s hierarchy, following principles was considered the highest form of morality. Batson’s view is that it is still unknown whether principlism really exists or whether it is a form of egoism, i.e. one wants to be seen as somebody who is following principles in difficult circumstances. Evidence for and against principlism as a separate mechanism is rather weak. Batson does not refer here to correlational studies as he favors experiments but there are some interesting correlational studies conducted by Schwitzgebel and his group suggesting that ethicists, i.e. experts in moral principles, do not behave better than other philosophers (Schwitzgebel and Rust, 2009; Schwitzgebel, 2009).

The aim of Batson’s book is to offer an explanation of helping behavior at proximal level. He has very specific methodological views. He favors doing experiments and he doubts self-reports as evidence for altruistic motivation with good arguments. He does use self-reports to check experimental manipulation, but this is something quite different. Batson’s definition of altruism as a motivational state is very different from the standard focus on behavior in behavior ecology. However, in practice the difference is not so big as Batson seems to suggest. Batson’s measures altruism by measuring behavior, namely number of participants in experiments offering to help, e.g. willing to take the place of a student supposedly undergoing electric shocks.

Batson's experimental rigor and emphasis on theoretical predictions is admirable and he is correct that one needs experiments to draw causal conclusions. This is something that could be done more in evolutionary psychology. However, his experiments are artificial and he does not discuss how he loses ecological validity by choosing this particular research methodology. Furthermore, given that most of Batson's research participants were undergraduate students taking an introductory psychology class at the University of Kansas and given that he has conducted similar experiments for decades, research participants might have been aware of the rationale behind some of his studies. Even, if this is not the case, Batson has only shown that empathy can cause altruistic behavior under strict experimental conditions. Whether it is an important factor in practice remains to be seen.

Batson himself does not think that kin selection and reciprocal altruism are important causal mechanisms for altruism. He is of the opinion that it is probably more an extension of parental nurturance. Altruism could well have started that way during evolution but given the enormous costs, it seems unlikely that other mechanisms have not maintained it. Also, there is some evidence that people are more altruistic towards family members, at least they seem to be willing to withstand some pain or discomfort for a longer time period, if a family member benefits from it (Madsen, Tunney, Fieldman, Plotkin, Dunbar, Richardson, and McFarland, et al., 2007). So, the explanation of altruism from an evolutionary perspective is still not clear.

Altruism in Humans is an excellent book but there remains a lot to discover about altruism despite the research already done.

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