

Beyond Selfishness

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By Alfie Kohn

You realize you left your wallet on the bus and you give up hope of ever seeing it again. But someone calls that evening asking how to return the wallet to you.

Two toddlers are roughhousing when one suddenly begins to cry. The other child rushes to fetch his own security blanket and offers it to his playmate. Driving on a lonely country road, you see a car stopped on the shoulder, smoke pouring from the hood. The driver waves to you frantically, and instinctively you pull over to help, putting aside thoughts of your appointments.

Despite the fact that "Look out for Number One" is one of our culture's mantras, these examples of "prosocial" behavior are really not so unusual. "Even in our society," says New York University psychologist Martin Hoffman, "the evidence is overwhelming that most people, when confronted with someone in a distress situation, will make a move to help very quickly if circumstances permit."

Helping may be as dramatic as agreeing to donate a kidney or as mundane as letting another shopper ahead of you in line. But most of us do it frequently and started doing it very early in life.

Psychologists have argued for years about whether our behavior owes more to the situations in which we find ourselves or to our individual characteristics. Prosocial behavior seems to be related to both. On the situation side, research shows that regardless of your personality, you'll be more likely to come to someone's aid if that person is already known to you or is seen as similar to you. Likewise, if you live in a small town rather than a city, the chances of your agreeing to help increase dramatically. In one experiment, a child stood on a busy street and said to passersby, "I'm lost. Can you call my house?" Nearly three-quarters of the adults in small towns did so, as compared with fewer than half in big cities. "City people adjust to the constant demands of urban life by reducing their involvement with others," the researcher concluded.

You are also more likely to help someone if no one else is around at the time you hear a cry for help. The original research on this question was conducted by psychologists Bibb Latane and John Darley. They offer three reasons to account for the fact that we're less apt to help when more people are in the area: First, we may get a case of stage fright, fearing to appear foolish if it turns out no help was really necessary. Second, we may conclude from the fact that other people aren't helping that there's really no need for us to intervene either. Finally, the responsibility for doing something is shared by everyone present, so we don't feel a personal obligation to get involved.

But some people seem to be more other-oriented than others regardless of the situation. People who feel in control of what happens in their lives and who have little need for approval from others are the most likely to help others. Similarly, people in a good state of mind, even if only temporarily, are especially inclined to help.

"Feel good, do good" is the general rule, researchers say, regardless of whether you feel good from having had a productive day at the office or, say, from finding money in the street. In one study, people got a phone call from a woman who said the operator had given her their number by mistake, and she was now out of change at a pay phone. The woman asked if the person who answered would look up a number, call and deliver a message for her. It turned out that people who had unexpectedly received free stationery a few minutes before were more likely to help out the caller.

But some investigators aren't satisfied with knowing just when prosocial acts will take place or by whom. "Why should we help other people? Why not help Number One? That's the rock-bottom question," says University of Massachusetts psychologist Ervin Staub, who's been wrestling with that problem since the mid 1960s.

Obviously we do help each other. But it's equally obvious that our motives for doing so aren't always unselfish. Prosocial behavior, which means behavior intended to benefit others, isn't necessarily altruistic. The 17th-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who believed that we always act out of self-interest, was once seen giving money to a beggar. When asked why, he explained that he was mostly trying to relieve his own distress at seeing the beggar's distress.

His explanation will ring true for many of us. But is this always what's going on: helping in order to feel good or to benefit ourselves in some way? Is real altruism a Sunday school myth? Many of us automatically assume so—not because there's good evidence for that belief but because of our basic, and unproved, assumptions about human nature.

New research describes how we feel when helping someone, but that doesn't mean we came to that person's aid in order to feel good. We may have acted out of a simple desire to help. In fact, there is good evidence for the existence of genuine altruism. Consider:

* Do we help just to impress others? "If looking good were the motive, you'd be more likely to help with others watching," says Latane. His experiments showed just the opposite. More evidence comes from an experiment Staub did in 1970: Children who voluntarily shared their candy turned out to have a lower need for approval than those who didn't share. "If I'm feeling good about myself, I can respond to the needs of others," Staub explains. So helping needn't be motivated by a desire for approval.

* Do we help just to ease our own distress? Sometimes our motivation is undoubtedly like that of Hobbes. But the easiest way to stop feeling bad about someone else's suffering is "just to ignore it or leave," says Arizona State University psychologist Nancy Eisenberg. Instead we often stay and help, and "there's no reason to believe we do that just to make ourselves feel better."

When people are distressed over another person's pain they may help – for selfish reasons. But if they have the chance simply to turn away from the cause of their distress, they'll gladly do that instead. People who choose to help when they have the opportunity to pass by, like the biblical Good Samaritan, aren't motivated by their own discomfort. And these people, according to C. Daniel Batson, a psychologist at the University of Kansas, describe their feelings as compassionate and sympathetic rather than anxious and apprehensive.

Batson explored this behavior by having students listen to a radio news broadcast about a college senior whose parents had just been killed in a car accident. The students who responded most empathically to her problem also offered the most help, even though it would have been easy for them to say no and put the whole thing out of their minds.

* Do we help just to feel pleased with ourselves or to avoid guilt? The obvious way to test this, Batson argues, is to see how we feel after learning that "someone else" has come to a victim's aid. If we really cared only about patting ourselves on the back (or escaping twinges of guilt), we would insist on being the rescuer. But sometimes we are concerned only to make sure that the person who needs help gets it, regardless of who does the helping. That suggests a truly altruistic motivation. Pretend you are one of the subjects in a brand-new study of Batson's. You are told that by performing well on a game with numbers, you might be able to help someone else (whose voice you've just heard) avoid mild but unpleasant electric shocks. A little later, you're informed that the person won't be receiving shocks after all.

How do you feel? Batson found that many subjects were pleased even though they personally didn't get the chance to do the good deed.

Batson, incidentally, used to assume that we help others primarily to benefit ourselves. But after a decade of studying empathic response to distress, he's changed his mind. "I feel like the bulk of the evidence points in the direction of the existence of altruism," he says.

* If we're naturally selfish, who does helping behavior start so early in life? At the age of 10 to 14 months, a baby will often look upset when someone else falls down or cries. Obviously made unhappy by another person's unhappiness, the child may seek solace in the mother's lap. In the second year, the child will begin comforting in a rudimentary way, such as by patting the head of someone who seems to be in pain. "The frequency (of this behavior) will vary, but most kids will do it sometimes," says Eisenberg.

By the time children are 3 or 4, prosocial behavior is common. One group of researchers videotaped 26 3-to-5-year-olds during 30 hours of free play and recorded about 1,200 acts of sharing, helping, comforting and cooperating. Children can be selfish and mean, too, of course, but there's no reason to think that these characteristics are more common or "natural" than their prosocial inclinations.

Psychologist Hoffman points to two studies showing that newborns cried much more intensely at the sound of another baby's cry than at other, equally loud noises. "That isn't what I'd call empathy," he concedes, "but it is evidence of a primitive precursor to it. There's a basic human tendency to be responsive to other persons' needs, not just your own."

Hoffman rejects biological theories that claim altruism amounts to nothing more than "selfish genes" trying to preserve themselves by prompting the individual to help relatives who share those genes. But he does believe "there may be a biological basis for a disposition to altruism. Natural selection demanded that humans evolve as creatures disposed toward helping, rescuing, protecting others in danger" as well as toward looking out for their own needs.

According to Hoffman, the inborn mechanism that forms the basis for altruism is empathy, which he defines as feeling something more appropriate to someone else's situation than to your own. The way he sees it, empathy becomes increasingly more sophisticated as we grow. First, infants are unable to draw sharp boundaries between themselves and others and sometimes react to another's distress as if they, themselves, had been hurt.

By about 18 months, children can distinguish between "me" and "not-me" but will still assume that others' feelings will be similar to their own. That's why if Jason sees his mother cry out in pain, he may fetch his bottle to make her feel better. By age 2 or 3, it is possible to understand that others react differently and also to empathize with more complex emotions.

Finally, older children can feel for another person's life condition, understanding that his or her distress may be chronic or recognizing that the distress may result from being part of a class of people who are oppressed.

Other psychologists, meanwhile, believe that you are more likely to help others not only if you feel their pain but also if you understand the way the world looks to them. This is called "role-taking" or "perspective-taking." "When people put themselves in the shoes of others, they may become more inclined to render them aid," according to Canadian researchers Dennis Krebs and Cristine Russell.

When they asked an 8-year-old boy named Adam whether that seemed right to him, he replied as follows: "Oh yes, what you do is, you forget everything else that's in your head, and then you make your mind into their mind. Then you know how they're feeling, so you know how to help them."

Some people seem more inclined than others to take Adam's advice – and, in general, to be prosocially oriented. Staub has found that such people have three defining characteristics: They have a positive view of people in general, they are concerned about others' welfare and they take personal responsibility for how other people are doing.

All these, but particularly the first, are affected by the kind of culture one lives in. "It's difficult to lead a competitive, individualistic life" – as we're raised to do in American society – "without devaluing others to some extent," says Staub. So raising children to triumph over others in school and at play is a good way to snuff out their inclination to help.

It appears, then, that caring about others is as much a part of human nature as caring about ourselves. Which impulse gets emphasized is a matter of training, according to the experts. "We fundamentally have the potential to develop into caring, altruistic people or violent, aggressive people," says Staub. "No one will be altruistic if their experiences teach them to be concerned only about themselves. But human connection is intrinsically satisfying if we allow it to be."

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