Abstract
Philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and biologists have debated the existence of altruism in humans for years. Two predominant views across these fields explained altruistic behavior in terms of reinforcement or evolutionary genetics. Today, psychology still adheres to the notion that pure altruism cannot be demonstrated and is better explained through other egoistic models (e.g., reinforcement). The evidence for and against each of these perspectives is weighed. The focus of this review is on the substantial findings accumulated over the past fifteen years in psychology, supporting the idea that pure altruism does exist and is causally linked to feelings of empathy for the victim.

It is more obvious that we learn to help or do good and that we learn because of the consequences that follow…. By giving too much help we postpone the acquisition of effective behavior and perpetuate the need for help. (Skinner, 1978, pp. 250-251)

For decades, the dominant view on the concept of altruism in psychology and other fields (such as sociology, philosophy and sociobiology) echoed the sentiment of Skinner by contending that pure altruism doesn’t exist. Many believed that whatever appears to be altruistic behavior always has, at some level, a reward component for the helper (Wallach & Wallach, 1983). As Rushton (1980) put it, “Finally the behavioral definition also solves the endless, and fruitless, debate as to whether such a thing as true altruism exists...” (p. 10). Researchers believed that since it didn’t exist, why should anyone research a “non-phenomenon”? Donald Campbell (1975, 1978), former American Psychological Association (APA) president, perhaps encapsulated this view best in his presidential address at the 1975 APA convention. He argued for the notion of a genetic predisposition of selfishness in humans which leads to a “social personality of self-serving opportunism,” adding that “socialization and culture ... are necessary to counter this disposition” (Campbell, 1975, p. 1111).

In this article, I briefly review various analyses of the origins of prosocial and altruistic behavior before turning to a discussion of research in social psychology that for the past fifteen years has focused on the notion that empathy may be the motivational foundation for altruism. Contrasting perspectives to the empathy viewpoint will be presented. A major thrust of the present paper will be to contrast the evidence for and against the existence of altruism.¹ The evidence supporting all views will be weighed, highlighting the current state of the literature on prosocial and altruistic behavior, and the article will point to some unanswered research questions that await investigation.

Definitional Issues
Some investigators such as Wilson (1975) have taken an extreme view in defining altruism: “...self-destructive behavior performed for the benefit of others” (p. 578). Lippa (1990) defined
altruism as “helping another person for no reward, and even at some cost to oneself” (p. 480). Other researchers define altruism somewhat vaguely, as in the case of Wispé (1978): “Behavior to be designated as altruistic must be directed to the well-being of another person or group and must involve at least some non-trivial self-sacrifice” (p. 305).

It is important to realize that precisely which definition one employs will be an important determinant of how an investigator conducts research. For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to distinguish between prosocial behavior and altruistic behavior. Prosocial behavior is defined as “voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another” (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p. 92) and which may have either a positive, a negative or a mixed positive/negative motive. Altruistic behavior is a subset of prosocial behavior and is “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another, which is not performed with the expectation of receiving external rewards or avoiding externally produced aversive stimuli or punishments” (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987, p. 92). According to this motivational definition, altruistically motivated helping can be followed by rewards (either external or internal) as long as gaining those rewards is an unintended consequence rather than the ultimate goal. It is important to note that the research to be discussed below was not intended to eliminate the possibility of rewards for altruistic acts. The issue under discussion is whether the rewards are always the reason (motive) for helping. I now turn to a brief discussion of the early philosophical discussions of altruism, and then I discuss the major theoretical viewpoints from which altruism has been approached.

Early Views of Prosocial and Altruistic Behavior

Philosophers have long debated the existence of altruistic behavior in humans (Comte, 1851/1875; Hume, 1740/1896; Smith, 1759). MacIntyre (1967) discusses the view popular among contemporaries of Comte, and which pervaded psychology for many years (and, to some degree, is still evident), that the notion of pure altruism is unfounded (see also Hoffman, 1981; La Rochefoucauld, 1678/1977; Milo, 1973). An altruistic act, following the principle of hedonism, would at some level still please the actor and thus eliminate the possibility of the act being called a truly “selfless” act.

Comte (1851/1875), who first used the term “altruism,” divided prosocial motivation in terms of “egoistic” and “altruistic” motives. Attaining self-gratification and seeking to increase one’s own welfare he called “egoistic prosocial behavior.” Where the ultimate goal is to increase another’s welfare, the behavior is termed “altruistic.” For example, helping other people by volunteering your time in a rape crisis center would be considered truly altruistic if your sole aim was to genuinely help others. However, if you were volunteering in order to have an impressive entry on your vita, the ultimate goal would therefore be to increase your own welfare, and, thus, the volunteering would be considered egoistically motivated.

Many definitions of altruism also include what is often considered a critical component of such behavior: that the behavior must have some cost for the actor. That is, there must be an element of the behavior reducing the welfare of the actor. Comte’s definition does not explicitly include this criterion, and it is not meant to. The crucial point to be made here is that there are two types of altruistic acts which are distinguished on the basis of the ultimate goal of the actor. This important distinction has effectively eliminated many of the problems (e.g., definitional, methodological, theoretical) that plagued researchers for years in that it made the investigation of purely altruistic behavior not only possible, but necessary.

The predominant perspective in psychological research and theory has focused almost solely on situational determinants of behavior.
Piliavin and Charng (1990) note that, in the research literature of the last ten years, there has been a “paradigm shift” in psychology from the traditional situational emphasis toward considerations of the importance of the role of empathy as a causal factor that precipitates both egoistic and altruistic motivations behind prosocial behavior. In the sections below, I review the evidence for and against one such perspective, known as the “empathy-altruism hypothesis” (Batson, 1987, 1990, 1991; Batson, O’Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983; Batson et al., 1989; Batson et al., 1988; Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990; Fultz et al., 1986; Schroeder et al., 1988).

The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

There are many advocates of the position that the motivation of the helper is an essential element in determining whether the helper’s act is truly altruistic or merely egoistic altruism (Sober, 1988). These researchers emphasize that truly altruistic behavior must “a) benefit another person, b) be performed voluntarily, c) be performed intentionally, and d) be performed without any expectation of reward” (Piliavin & Charng, 1990, p. 30). Recall the distinction that Comte (1875/1851) made between egoistic and altruistic motives for prosocial behavior. Batson (1987; Batson & Shaw, 1991) argues that this distinction nicely accounts for the true altruism that exists in human nature yet weeds out prosocial behavior that appears altruistic but is actually guided by expectations of reward or fear of negative evaluation from others and is therefore egoistic in motivation. This distinction also counters the traditional egoistic argument that somewhere (i.e., internally or externally) the person is getting a reward from helping. According to Batson, all behavior that has a reward component or some intentional benefit to the actor is relegated to non-altruistic labels (viz., ‘egoistic’).2

Batson (1987, 1991) proposes that a person experiences two types of arousal when witnessing an emergency or the suffering of another person: personal distress (general unpleasant arousal that a person wants to reduce by any means available) and empathy. Batson et al. (1988) define empathy as an “other-oriented emotional response congruent with the perceived welfare of another person” (p. 52). Personal distress, the hypothesis assumes, can be easily eliminated by fleeing from the aversive scene. Empathy cannot be so easily reduced. The model suggests that empathy evokes a motivation in the actor to maximize the welfare of the other via altruistic, helping acts (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978).

Batson et al. (1983) and Batson and Coke (1981) gave evidence supporting the notion that personal distress and empathy constitute distinct emotional states. Batson and Coke (1981) reported factor-analytic data that show that each is comprised of separate groupings of adjectives. This finding was replicated by Archer et al. (1981). Batson and Coke (1981) also successfully manipulated each construct independent of the other (Experiment 2).

Tests of the model. More than a half dozen studies conducted have used a similar paradigm to attempt to ascertain the nature of the motive to help evoked by empathy (Batson, 1991; Fultz et al., 1986; Toi & Batson, 1982). In a prototypical experiment, the participant is asked to watch, via closed-circuit television, another participant (the “target”) getting shocked in a learning experiment (actually it is a prepared video made by the experimenter using confederates). The target clearly experiences more distress as the experiment progresses. The experimenter then pauses, ostensibly to check on the target. The experimenter then returns and asks if the participant would be willing to trade places with the target. Half of the participants are led to believe that the target answered an interest questionnaire quite similarly (“high empathy” condition), while the rest are told the target had quite different responses from the participant on the questionnaire (“low-empathy” condition). Half of the participants are also told that they can stop watching the target if they wish (“easy-escape” condition), while the other half are informed that they must keep watching the target getting shocked (“difficult-escape” condition).

Batson hypothesized that all participants should feel personal distress in the experiment but that only those who were in the “high empathy” conditions should show a greater
tendency to volunteer to take the target’s place, regardless of the escape condition. Those who are in the “low-empathy/easy-escape” cell should evidence the least amount of altruism. The data (Batson et al., 1983; Batson et al., 1988) support this hypothesis. These findings provide a compelling basis upon which to make the assertion that empathy plays a key role in the motivation to help. When escape is easy and empathy is low, helping behavior dramatically decreases. Batson et al. (1988) assert that these data also effectively negate the plausibility of egoistic assumptions regarding motivation to help (i.e., that helping behavior is performed solely to eliminate the distressing arousal experienced by the helper).

Challenges to the Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis

While the findings published by Batson and others were quite compelling, other hypotheses have been offered that attempt to account for the motives behind altruistic behavior. Batson et al. (1988) argued that these new alternatives are egoistic. The authors further refute the claim implicit in these alternatives that empathy has some accompanying specific rewards. Below, four of the most notable alternatives are presented along with the evidence supporting them. These alternatives shall be rejoined by Batson’s answer to each.

The empathy-specific reward hypothesis. Cialdini and his colleagues (Cialdini et al., 1987; Schaller & Cialdini, 1988) have proposed that Batson’s results could parsimoniously be accounted for by examining the reward history of the individual. Specifically, this new explanation asserts that whenever a person feels empathy, he or she remembers being reinforced for helping in the past. In addition, the individual’s empathy may create a special need for reinforcement from helping (Archer et al., 1981; Dovidio, 1984).

Batson et al. (1988, Experiment 1) designed a study to test whether those high in empathy report greater positive affect when they are the helper, as predicted from the empathy-specific reward hypothesis. Participants were exposed to another in need; then they were told that they could help the other person. Participants then completed a self-report measure of empathy for the other. Half were later told they would not be helping the other person. Among those told they could or could not help, half were also told the other was still in need, and half were told that the other person was no longer in need (i.e., the need has been relieved by another means). The main dependent measure was change in participants’ reported mood after they were or were not allowed to help.

The results of this experiment indicated no difference between high-empathy participants who were told either that they were the direct helper in relieving the other’s need or that the other’s need had been relieved by some other means. Batson et al. (1988) concluded that the empathy-specific reward hypothesis was not supported and, instead, that the high-empathy participants were directed toward reducing the need of the other and worked hard to accomplish this, thus supporting the empathy-altruism hypothesis.

The empathy-specific punishment hypothesis. Increased helping may be due to a fear of empathy-specific punishments for failure to help, according to another alternative (Dovidio, 1984). Again, through reinforcement history, people learn to associate guilt with feeling empathy when they do not help. Therefore, proponents of this position assert that subsequent feelings of empathy evoke this guilt (and attendant fear of punishment, or negative social evaluation) and quickly motivate the person to help.

In the second experiment reported by Batson et al. (1988), the investigators set out to test the hypothesis derived from the empathy-specific punishment hypothesis: that justification for failure to help can be found by pointing to an earlier failure to help by others who potentially could have rendered assistance. In this design, participants were exposed to either a high versus low empathy condition, crossed with a high versus low justification for not helping condition. Participants were exposed to a broadcast about another (fictitious) student whose parents had been killed and who was struggling to make ends meet and support her children. Participants were presented with a card which asked students to volunteer their
time and which had eight spaces for eight potential volunteers to sign up. In the low-justification condition, 5 of the 7 previous participants had volunteered (i.e., five fictitious participants’ names, ostensibly from previous experiments, were written on the card). In the high-justification condition, only 2 of the 7 previous participants had volunteered their assistance. Participants in the low empathy condition were instructed to focus on the technical aspects of the broadcast and how it might be effective. Participants in the high empathy condition were told to imagine how the needy other feels about what has happened to her and to try to feel the impact of these events themselves.

Batson and his colleagues (Batson et al., 1988) also tested further predictions from the empathy-specific punishment hypothesis. They investigated the idea that justification for not helping may be due to attributional ambiguity (Experiment 3) or to making it difficult to qualify to help (Experiment 4). All of these studies (Experiments 2 through 4) showed that, for low-empathy participants, the helping behavior was motivated in part by a desire to avoid punishment. However, the studies consistently supported the predictions about high-empathy participants that were derived from the empathy-altruism hypothesis. High-empathy participants, even when justification for not helping was high, still worked hard to relieve the distress of the other.

The negative-state relief model. In a version of the empathy-specific reward hypothesis, Cialdini (Cialdini et al., 1987; Cialdini, Baumann, & Kenrick, 1981; Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973; Schaller & Cialdini, 1988) has proposed that the motivation to help another evoked by empathy is egoistic. Specifically, he contends that seeing another in need places one in a temporary negative affective state and that helping occurs to reduce or eliminate this negative affective state. In short, Cialdini proposes that the motivation to help evoked by empathy is not altruistic but rather is a form of mood management for the self.

Studies conducted to test this model have been published by Batson et al. (1989), Dovidio et al. (1990) and Schroeder et al. (1988). According to the negative state relief model, beliefs about the lability of one’s mood (e.g., temporarily fixed versus flexible/manageable) should mediate the link between feelings of empathy and prosocial behavior. That is, the temporary negative affective state (sadness) should mediate the relationship between empathy and helping. Dovidio et al. (1990) found no support for this claim: empathic concern was a significant predictor of helping, while sadness did not reliably predict subsequent helping behavior. Additionally, these researchers found evidence to bolster the previous findings testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis: “The findings of the present study...add substantial weight to Batson's (1987) position that altruistic motivation may exist under some conditions and that all motivation for helping is not necessarily egoistic” (p. 259).

Another experiment by Schroeder et al. (1988) also pitted the negative state relief model against the empathy-altruism hypothesis. These investigators told participants either to imagine a victim's feelings (empathic concern) or to watch a victim's reaction (personal distress). Escape from the situation was also made either easy or difficult. Participants were led to believe that their mood was either fixed or changeable. Consistent with several previous experiments supporting the empathy-altruism model, these results showed that participants in the easy-escape, personal distress conditions helped least. Those in the empathic concern conditions (across both escape conditions) tended to help the most. Lability of mood did not mediate the relationship between empathy and helping behavior.

Further tests of the model were conducted by Batson et al. (1989). Based on the negative state relief model, Batson and his colleagues conducted three experiments designed to test the notion that those induced to feel sad would help more when they expected to have their mood enhanced in the near future while those who did not expect to have their mood enhanced should help less. Results showed that high empathy participants did not differ in amount of helping regardless of whether they anticipated mood enhancement or not. High empathy participants tended to help more than low empathy participants. There-
fore, these findings did not support the negative-state relief model.

The empathic-joy hypothesis. Smith, Keating and Stotland (1989) proposed that empathically aroused people help in order to gain the good feeling of sharing vicariously in the “resolution of the help recipient's needs” (p. 642). In other words, according to the empathic-joy hypothesis, the ultimate goal of the motivation to help evoked by empathy is to attain the rewarding experience of empathic joy. In contrast, in the empathy-altruism hypothesis, empathic joy is viewed as a consequence of the motivation to help, not the ultimate goal for helping. When prospective helpers do not anticipate receiving feedback about the other's condition, empathic witnesses should refuse to help as often as their non-empathic counterparts.

Smith et al. (1989) had undergraduates watch a video about a young woman having difficulty adjusting to college life. High and low empathy participants were asked to write down answers to questions the woman had about her difficulties. Half of the participants were then told that they would come back for a second session (no feedback condition). The other half of the participants were given the expectation that if they helped (by writing helpful advice for the woman), they would watch a video at the second session made of the woman which would be made after the woman tried the helpers’ advice. These participants were led to believe that the video would report her improvement as a result of following their advice (feedback condition).

Contrary to their predictions, yet consistent with the empathy-altruism hypothesis, Smith et al. found an empathy helping relationship in the feedback and no-feedback conditions. The authors downplayed this finding and instead focused on other analyses in which high and low empathy persons in their experiment were differentiated by a median split on a self-report measure of empathy and personal distress. With this analysis, the expected pattern of results (as predicted by the empathic-joy hypothesis) emerged: among those expecting feedback, more helping was evidenced among those high in empathy versus those low in empathy. There was no difference in helping between high and low empathy participants who did not expect feedback.

Batson et al. (1991) conducted three experiments designed to test whether empathy leads to an egoistic motive to share vicariously in the victim’s joy (the empathic-joy hypothesis) or whether empathy evokes a motive to increase the victim’s well-being (the empathy-altruism hypothesis). In a conceptual replication of Smith et al. (1989), Batson and his colleagues (1991, Experiment 1) found evidence contrary to the empathic-joy hypothesis. Specifically, among those expecting no feedback, those high in empathy helped more than those low in empathy.

In Experiments 2 and 3, Batson et al. (1991) gave participants an opportunity to experience empathic joy without helping a victim about whom participants read: participants merely chose (or did not choose) to get updated information about the victim. Participants’ expectations that the victim’s situation would be improved by the time of the updated interview were also manipulated (participants were led to believe that there was either a 20%, a 50% or a 80% likelihood that the victim’s plight would be decreased). Results did not indicate evidence of a linear increase in helping (as a participant’s expectancy for the victim’s improvement increased) that was predicted by the empathic-joy hypothesis.

A number of characteristics of the Smith et al. (1989) study suggest that their design and analysis of the data may have contributed to their finding support for the empathic-joy hypothesis and no support for the empathy-altruism hypothesis. First, the plight of the woman in their video was quite similar to that of situations the participants may have been encountering (e.g., coping with transition to college life). Second, participants may have desired to present themselves as empathic and therefore reported high empathy and helped in order to meet these self-presentation needs (Batson et al., 1991). Therefore, their results supporting the empathic-joy hypothesis may be more appropriately characterized as an artifact of these design, analysis and participant self-presentation issues.
Motives for Altruism

Conclusion

Philosophers have long debated the existence and possibility of a concept such as altruism as part of human nature (Comte, 1875/1851). When psychology took up the question, the behaviorist and sociobiological viewpoints pervaded the thinking of the day, thereby influencing many to believe that altruism is non-existent since all prosocial (altruistic) behavior has, at some level, a reward component for the helper. The evolutionary perspective posited that helping behavior came about through natural selection of those who helped their kin, or who helped those who helped them. Indeed, this perspective was promoted by the father of American psychology, William James:

Each mind, to begin with, must have a certain minimum of selfishness...in order to exist. This minimum must be there as a basis for all further conscious acts, whether of self-negation or of a selfishness more subtle still. All minds must have come, by the way of survival of the fittest, if by no directer path, to take an intense interest in the bodies to which they are yoked (James, 1890, cited in Batson, 1990).

Today, the evidence against the behaviorist and sociobiological perspectives on altruism is substantial (Batson, 1987, 1990, 1991; Piliavin & Charng, 1990). Yet, philosophers and psychologists still largely agree that the concept of purely altruistic behavior is a fantasy (Batson, 1990, 1991; see also, Rand, 1961). There is now considerable empirical evidence accumulated by numerous researchers, using rigorous tests of different models, varied methods and different population samples, that strongly supports the notion that altruistic behavior in humans does exist. This “pure” altruism is linked to feelings of empathy for the victim. When the goal of the helper is to enhance his or her own welfare, to gain some form of self reward or to avoid punishment, then the helping behavior is egoistic in motivation. Empathy has been causally related to pure altruism but not to egoistic helping behavior.

Research on the motivational bases of altruistic and prosocial behavior continues to be a fascinating and fertile area of inquiry for social psychologists. Although we know much about altruism, many questions remain. Of particular value will be investigations of prosocial and altruistic behavior that focus on exploring different ways of measuring empathy (Batson et al., 1991). Additionally, it would be particularly theoretically important to assess the degree to which implicit attitudes (defined as “introspectively unidentified traces of past experience that mediate favorable or unfavorable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects” [Greenwald & Banaji, 1993, p. 9]) toward helping others affect an individual's propensity to feel empathy toward another in need. These and other questions await investigation. Until then, although further tests of the empathy-altruism hypothesis are necessary, increasingly it is difficult to find egoistic alternatives to account for the considerable evidence that when people feel empathy, they are more likely to act solely for the welfare of the victim.

References


Motives for Altruism


Notes

1 I do not attempt an exhaustive review of the literature on altruism, nor do I cover altruism from the perspective of the varied fields from which researchers have approached the concept. Rather, the purpose of this review is to examine the empirical findings regarding altruistic behavior in the psychological literature bearing on the motivational basis of such behavior—that is, whether altruistic behavior is ever truly selflessly motivated. Elsewhere, one may find comprehensive reviews of the reinforcement theory perspective (Gelfand & Hartmann, 1982), the sociobiological literature (Wilson, 1975) and the sociological research (Piliavin & Charng, 1990). Dovidio (1984), Krebs and Miller (1985) and Batson (1987) each provide a critical review of the psychological literature as well.

2 Batson (1987) makes a strong case against each of six views (Lerner, 1982; Karylowski, 1982; Piliavin et al., 1981; Krebs, 1975; Hoffman, 1981a; Rosenhan, 1978) that claim to support altruism. Upon closer examination, however, it can be seen that each has an egoistic foundation.