
Empathic Distress and Altruism: Still Inseparable

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have no control over their plight, as in serious illness or accidents. (Empathic distress may be transformed into empathic anger if someone else is the cause of the victim's distress, or into guilt feeling if the actor is the cause; Hoffman, 1987.)

This sympathetic-distress idea can be used to interpret Batson's findings in the crucial easy-versus-difficult-escape experiments discussed earlier. Thus the high-empathy subjects may have strongly identified with the victim and experienced an intense feeling of sympathetic distress in response to the victim's suffering. They may have consequently focused their attention more on the victim's plight than on their own empathic distress. Being concerned about the victim rather than their own empathic distress, the question of whether they have to continue to watch the victim suffer (difficult-escape) or not (easy-escape) would therefore be irrelevant to their decision about whether to help the victim; they would be willing to help in either case. The subjects in the low-empathy condition would identify and feel sympathetic distress to a far lesser degree. They would be relatively more susceptible to pure empathic distress and thus more likely to take the easier way out when given the choice. This interpretation may explain Batson's findings but it is unfortunately subject to the same criticism I leveled at Batson's interpretation: Leaving the situation may not be an easy way out if one retains a vivid mental representation of the suffering victim.

The parallels between my "empathic distress" and Batson's "personal distress" and between my "sympathetic distress" and Batson's "empathy" are obvious. There is one important difference: My concepts of empathic and sympathetic distress are embedded within a larger theoretical framework, whereas Batson's are not. On the question of a pure altruistic motive, however, we are in the same, not opposite camps. Evidence for a pure altruistic motive would

be as friendly to my formulation as to his. I would like to see such evidence. Perhaps Batson will come up with it. As yet he has not.

Note

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Empathic Distress and Altruism: Still Inseparable

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Batson and Shaw's account of egoistic explanations for helping behavior warrants debate. It includes assumptions that are neither essential to these explanations nor generally proposed by their various authors (Hoffman, 1976, 1981, 1982; Hornstein, 1982; Krebs, 1970; Stotland, 1969). By burdening the opposition with these assumptions, Batson and Shaw impose on them a theoretical restriction that then seemingly provides Batson and Shaw an opportunity to unambiguously test predictions derived from empathy-altruism against those derived from competing egoistic explanations but in fact does not.

Frankly, I wish that they had been successful. The idea of human beings possessing unmitigated altruistic motivation is appealing to me. I also respect Batson's commitment to a decade of sustained, systematic work on one question. Indeed, despite the commentary which follows, I believe that

the work reported by Batson and Shaw is an example of the kind of programmatic scholarly endeavor that students should study and subsequently model during their professional careers.

Out of Sight, but Not Out of Mind

The authors' formulation of the empathy-altruism explanation contends that empathy produces "altruistic motivation," for which the ultimate goal is helping needy others, not avoiding witness of their plight to reduce any distress that it may be producing. Consequently, people experiencing empathy toward someone in need are likely to help regardless of the ease with which they are able to escape the situation.

In contrast, if "the motivation to help resulting from empathic motivation is egoistic, as seems to be implied by those

who speak of 'empathic pain,' helping in the high-empathy condition should be affected by the ease of escape" (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981, p. 292). Conclusion: If empathy-altruism is correct, then, in a design that crosses empathy (high and low) with escape (easy and difficult), the result should be a one-by-three interaction, with the low-empathy-high-ease-of-escape condition showing the lowest rate of helping.

The troubling assumption is that "empathic pain" is not experienced when the other's suffering is not witnessed: If another's plight is out of sight, then it is also out of mind. This assumption is unwarranted. Because empathy, if anything, probably increases observers' cognizance of another's plight (Krebs, 1975; Stotland, 1969; Wispé, 1987), we must assume that, if empathic pain is the motivator of helping, then it will occur in empathically aroused observers simply because they know another is suffering. Therefore, the escape condition does not offer high-empathy subjects escape from empathic pain. In fact, the pattern of results that an empathic-pain explanation predicts is exactly the one-by-three interaction obtained by Batson and his colleagues.

The same reasoning can be applied to the research on empathy-specific punishment and empathy-specific reward. The findings are not contrary to egoistic explanations of helping which imply that empathy for another who is in need causes the other's relief to be specifically preferred as the instrumental means for achieving one's own relief from distress caused by the other's plight (e.g., Hoffman, 1981; or Hornstein's, 1982, promotive-tension explanation).

These explanations are certainly egoistic in the sense that own relief is identified as the motivator of helping. But the *egoism* label can be misleading because it conjures up the image of someone selfishly seeking distress reduction in any way possible. This image is contrary to one presented by egoistic explanations arguing that empathy for another who is in need constrains the pathways to reduction of distress, hampering those who are experiencing distress from enjoying relief through whatever means happen to be available. Hence, in the empathy-specific punishment experiments, relief from either negative feelings or concerns about unfavorable self-attributions would be contingent on knowing that a specific other who has a credible need has experienced relief.

The same thesis can account for the empathy-specific reward research's "prior relief of victim's need" study. Perhaps, as Batson and Shaw say when they discuss this study, it is true that social rewards are generally reserved for helpers. But the case for self-rewards seems more complicated. When high empathy links one person's distressing feelings to another's plight, relief of the other's plight emerges as a specific determiner of the person's level of distress (or joy), and exactly who delivers that relief should not be relevant. That is, good feelings, even if not more positive self-attributions, should result when the other is effectively helped.

Feeling Empathy Versus the Feeling Produced by Empathy

Citing only the work of Batson and his co-authors (Batson et al., 1981; Batson, O'Quin, Fultz, Vanderplas, & Isen, 1983; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Toi & Batson, 1982), Batson and Shaw argue that, since the late 1970s, empathy ceased to mean "taking another's perspective" or

"imagining other's experiences given their situation" and instead referred "to one particular set of congruent vicarious emotions, those that are more other-focused than self-focused, including feelings of sympathy, compassion, tenderness, and the like."

This late-1970s definition confuses sympathetic feelings, a possibly common but not necessary affective concomitant of empathy with someone in need, for empathy itself, which concerns perspective taking (Hoffman, 1976; Krebs, 1975; Krebs & Russell, 1981; Stotland, 1969; Wispé, 1968, 1986, 1987). Batson appeared to be aware of the problem that this revised definition was creating when he wrote, "Some psychologists . . . have called this emotional response to another's need sympathy rather than empathy. . . . The specific label one applies to this emotional state is less important to me than understanding its behavioral and emotional consequences" (Batson, 1990, p. 339).

I do not share this assessment of the label's importance. Its use is important because it implies that the consequences are a product of particular dynamics. Nonetheless, if for the sake of discussion we were to grant that these feelings warrant the *empathy* label, then it is still necessary to recognize that the feelings should be thought of as distressing, linked to the other's plight, and a likely motivator of helping. The case for these feelings being distressing (in the sense that they are unwanted) can be made by asking a simple question: Would you expect people empathically observing the plight of another to want the other's condition to either remain unchanged or deteriorate so that they could experience still more sympathy, compassion, or the like?

The three-adjective "empathy index" (sympathetic, moved, and compassionate) used by Batson and his colleagues (Batson et al., 1983) might be renamed the personal distress index because all three adjectives suggest an onlooker who is troubled about another's circumstance, and the six-adjective "distress index" (alarmed, grieved, upset, worried, disturbed, and perturbed) might be renamed the situational distress index because these adjectives describe upset having no specific referent. The distinction between personal distress and situational distress can be illustrated by the example of two people seeing the bloodied victim of some mishap. One says, "I am so troubled by the sight of blood. It makes me feel alarmed [etc.]," whereas the other says, "I am so troubled to see another person bleeding. It makes me feel sympathetic . . . moved . . . compassionate." For the first person, escape from the situation might bring relief. But, because the second person is specifically distressed by the victim's plight, relief is more likely to require relief for the victim.

This distinction provides an alternative explanation of the negative-state-relief experiments (Batson et al., 1983), which assume that moods are interchangeable regardless of their source (i.e., a good mood is a good mood). However, when empathy causes unhappy feelings to be a product of concern about another's need, altering feelings of personal distress tends to require a change in the other's circumstance. Therefore, high-empathy (or high-sympathy, or personally distressed) subjects forego opportunities for mood enhancement and choose to help because they do not anticipate that their concern about the other (i.e., their personal distress) is going to be mechanically diminished by an unrelated, mood-enhancing experience.

Neither Altruism nor Egoism

Batson and Shaw's evidence does not invalidate Hoffman's (1981) conclusion: "Empathy may be uniquely well suited for bridging the gap between egoism and altruism, since it has the property of transforming another person's misfortune into one's own feeling of distress" (p. 133).

According to Batson and Shaw, helping behavior that is promoted by helpers' efforts to relieve their own distress about the misfortune of others qualifies as egoistic, not altruistic. They define behavior as altruistic only when help is given to another as an end in itself, not as an intermediate means for benefiting self.

But, when another's needs and one's own feelings of distress are linked because of either empathy or sympathy, the linear sequencing implied by Batson and Shaw's key definitional criteria—ultimate and intermediate goals—loses meaning. With this linkage, the observer's concern (i.e., distress) is the other's plight; neither becomes an intermediate or an ultimate goal. Despite an enormous effort, the data that Batson and Shaw bring to bear are unable to counter explanations of helping that claim that, whenever empathy causes one person's plight to become another's concern, helping to relieve that person's plight and one's concern about it are psychologically inseparable goals.

Note

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Proximate Altruism and Ultimate Selfishness

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Batson and Shaw's thesis—that another person's suffering can engage a motivational state which is best satiated by stopping that suffering—is a reasonable one. Their insistence that such a motivation is ultimately "unselfish" may be misguided, and may depend on one's level of analysis. On the proximate level of analysis with which social psychologists usually deal, Batson and his colleagues may be able to prove that some helping behavior is truly not "selfish." I do not share Batson's confidence that his research thus far has eliminated the selfish alternatives. There are several problems with the basic logic of their attack on the hedonistic models. For instance, I do not believe that any well-considered hedonistic model would predict a negative mood if

someone other than the target helped a victim (as Batson & Shaw assume). It is also questionable whether any hedonistic models would predict that an easy escape from another's suffering is a subjectively desirable way to make oneself feel good. Even ignoring these sorts of problems, this line of research continues to reveal people's unabashed selfishness. One can only marvel, for instance, at the number of low-empathy and even high-empathy subjects willing to slip out the back door to avoid helping a suffering other.

Granting for the moment that some high-empathy subjects are truly motivated to help the other, guilt and garlands aside, the behavior is still likely to be rooted in motivations that are, in an ultimate sense, "selfish." The more important issue is