

by Lynn O'Connor, Ph.D.

## Altruism as a Fundamental Unconscious Motivation

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According to Weiss's theory of human psychology, people are highly motivated to help others, often at the expense of their own well-being. In biological science, care-giving behavior is considered one of the primary categories of behavior exhibited by all social animals. It is traditionally discussed in terms of the more mature and powerful animal helping the less mature. Likewise, in human psychology, care-giving behavior is accepted as an authentic feature present in legitimate care-giving roles, such as mothers caring for their children. However, throughout human life we often see care-giving behavior extended from the less mature, less powerful individual to the more mature and powerful person. Steve Foreman (1994), in discussion of children's development, has hypothesized that care-giving behavior is an equally inherent component of the psychology of parents and children both, and that it is an integral part of everyone's motivation, at all ages. Frans de Waal (1989, 1996) has discussed the presence of care-giving behaviors extended from lower-ranking primates to those of greater power. There is a growing body of both research and clinical evidence to suggest that care-giving behavior may be a significant motivation for all. It has been demonstrated that infants and children often attempt to engage or even cheer up depressed mothers (Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, Richardson, Susman, and Martinez, 1994; Cohn, Campbell, Matias, and Hopkins, 1990; Tronick, Als, Adamson, Wise, and Brazelton, 1978; Weiss,

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1993); children in families will sacrifice themselves in an attempt to prevent siblings or parents from feelings of being less fortunate (Modell, 1965, 1971; Weiss, 1983, 1986, 1993); and patients in therapy will attempt to care for their therapists (Bader, 1995).

Care-giving behavior is closely related to altruism and empathy, which are widely accepted as universal and possibly 'hard wired.'

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Both empathy and altruism are often interpreted to be an indirect form of egoism or selfishness. The argument for egoism as a primary motive maintains that when a person helps another they are trying to help themselves in an indirect manner, although this may be unconscious. According to this argument, if a child tries to cheer up a depressed mother, that child is unconsciously motivated by the desire to make sure that their mother is happy enough to be able to successfully carry out care-giving mothering functions. The child is attempting to be sure that their own needs will be met. While this perspective is convincing, when attempting to explain all altruism from child to parent, it may be ignoring part of the story and denying that the child might in some instances, be motivated by primary altruism, that is, an inherent desire to make their mother happy for the mother's sake.

The egoism perspective is accepted by many evolutionary biologists and psychologists who maintain that altruism is always of two types, both of which represent

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underlying selfishness. The first type is related to the theory of *kin selection* and *inclusive fitness*, and describes acts of altruism which provide help to individuals who carry many of the same genes as the helper (Hamilton, 1963). In this case it is assumed that the motivation is the desire to perpetuate the gene, to engage in behaviors that lead to the maximum reproduction of the gene —referred to as “the selfish gene”— even at the expense of the self (Dawkins, 1976). The other type of altruism described by evolutionary biologists and psychologists is referred to as *reciprocal altruism*, that is altruism with the motivation of obtaining a favor in return (Trivers, 1971). In both cases, the underlying motivation continues to be described as selfish. In contrast, a re-emerging trend in evolutionary biology is to include group selection as a significant factor in social behavior in general, and in altruism in particular. This perspective is questioning the individualistic, egoistic perspective of “gene-centric” evolutionists (Wilson, 1989; Wilson & Sober, 1994). The reconsideration of group selection may lead to support for primary social altruism, that is altruism based on the need to help others and the good of the group.

Weiss's theory of motivation suggests that altruism may be based on an unconscious need to help others, rather than unconscious selfishness. The persistent and popular belief in unconscious selfishness may reflect a bias derived from the intellectual ideologies of individualistic societies. It may also be a bias based on the tendency of the conscious human mind to perceive of one's own motivations as selfish. When our patients come into therapy, they often are soon able to show awareness of and to discuss their greed, hostility, jealousy, and selfishness. They may initially make efforts to conceal these quite conscious motivations, because they feel guilty about them, and because often they were criticized in childhood by their parents for the crime of “selfishness.” However, soon they speak easily and with consciousness of long standing feelings of jealousy and envy for siblings, of feelings of anger towards their family members, or of hostile impulses to people in their

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current lives. What they seem unaware of is the extreme sacrifices they actually make, in efforts to help their siblings and their parents. It is in the course of therapy that patients become conscious of these previously unconscious memories and feelings, of trying to care for family members, of survivor and separation guilt.

The traditional psychoanalytic perspective on unconscious motivation has emphasized anti-social impulses. This may be because in fact, these are the motives that are more accessible to consciousness. In contrast, a person's altruistic motives are often entirely unconscious and inaccessible until brought to light by a therapy cognizant of altruism as a fundamental motivation. For example, a patient may in the course of therapy disclose that he remembers behaving cruelly towards his siblings. It then emerges that they were in fact imitating cruel parental behavior, and their behaviors towards their siblings were driven not by hostility, but by an effort to be loyal to their parents, that is, by altruistic motivation toward their parents.

In response to the psychoanalytically informed belief that hostility (and sex) is the unconscious motivation that needs to see the light of day, much psychotherapy has been focused on encouraging people to become aware of their anger, to focus on it and to express it. This unfortunately leaves people who suffer from self-sacrifice related to unconscious altruism, vulnerable to ever greater amounts of guilt. And guilt itself may evoke anger, as anger is often a defense against guilt. The focus on anger may be one of the more damaging aspects of traditional psychoanalytically-based psychotherapy. This is particularly true, as people's psychological problems are often derived from self-sacrifice driven by their unconscious altruism.

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Altruism may be reconsidered in light of this perspective, and may be found to be based on an authentic need to help others—which is most often unconscious—and not on indirect egoism. Recent empirical laboratory research conducted by C. Daniel Batson (1991) supports this view. Care-giving behavior is universal among social animals, and is the background of group cohesion. The need to belong has been described by Roy Baumeister (1995) as a fundamental human motivation, and care-giving is an integral part of this picture. Altruism, belonging and care-giving have been supported by natural selection because they are adaptive (Friedman, 1985; Slavin and Kriegman, 1992), not only for the individual gene and animal, but also for the group.

The difficulty that we have in understanding inherently altruistic motivation, may be because it is so often unconscious. And this motivation may be largely unconscious because, as we know from our patients, to be overwhelmed with conscious altruism may lead to even greater self-sacrificial behavior and thus be maladaptive. More empirical research as well as clinical evidence and review of animal studies may shed further light on the importance of altruism.

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or not the attitudes exhibited by the therapist are *useful* to the patient, not whether or not they are authentic, role-based, or overly strategic.

All therapists, at their best, move effortlessly between states of mind in which they feel "natural" and "unnatural." Classical abstinence and neutrality, for instance, is certainly one of the most *unnatural* stances imaginable. Daniel Kriegman has written of self psychology that a truly empathic stance also requires the therapist to continually, deliberately, and effortfully suppress her own natural self-interest. And Control-Mastery therapists routinely speak of what kind of attitude or stance the patient requires, without regard to how natural it feels to the therapist. In my view, the current emphasis on the therapist's "irreducible subjectivity," while an impor-

tant corrective to an impossible classical stance of neutrality, idealizes authenticity, fails to appreciate the ubiquity and necessity of role-based behavior, and diverts attention from our focus on clinical usefulness to abstract and principled claims about emotional truth and falseness.

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