

PATHOLOGICAL ALTRUISM—AN INTRODUCTION

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KEY CONCEPTS

- *Pathological altruism* might be thought of as any behavior or personal tendency in which either the stated aim or the implied motivation is to promote the welfare of another. But, instead of overall beneficial outcomes, the “altruism” instead has irrational (from the point of view of an outside observer) and substantial negative consequences to the other or even to the self.
- Many harmful deeds—from codependency to suicide martyrdom to genocide—are committed with the altruistic intention to help companions or one’s own in-group. Thus, it is worthwhile to study how well-meaning altruism can shade into pathology.
- Studies of pathological altruism provide for a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of altruism.

THE PAST DECADE has seen an explosion in research and interest in altruism,¹ and for good reason—not only is altruism beneficial, but neuroscience and genetics are now providing fresh and useful insights. For researchers, it is the best of all worlds—modern breakthroughs can allow us to help others by studying the very phenomenon of altruistically helping others.

The benefits of altruism appear so obvious, and a high regard for altruism is so deeply ingrained in modern Western culture, that it seems almost heretical to suggest that altruism may have a dark side. But some of human history’s most horrific episodes have risen from people’s well-meaning altruistic tendencies. Consider Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of America’s most admired Supreme Court justices, whose well-intentioned rhetoric supported eugenic forced sterilization: “It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind” (*Buck v. Bell*, 1926). Or, master manipulator Adolph Hitler, who confided: “When I appeal . . . for sacrifice, the first spark is struck” (Waite, 1977, p. 396).

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the other or even to the self. Marc Hauser, (Chapter 29), rightly notes that when discussing a pathological altruist, motivation becomes important. A working definition of pathological altruist (besides the obvious "a person who engages in pathological altruism"), might then be: "A person who *sincerely* engages in what he or she intends to be altruistic acts, but who harms the very person or group he or she is trying to help, often in unanticipated fashion; or harms others; or irrationally becomes a victim of his or her own altruistic actions." Thus, a con artist who solicited funds for orphan children, when his real intention was to spend money on himself, would not be a pathological altruist. But the person who gave to the con man *could* be a pathological altruist.

The many authors showcased in this volume have viewed the central idea of pathological altruism from differing perspectives. Each of their approaches points to one disturbing truth: What we value so much, the altruistic "good" side of human nature, can also have a dark side. Altruism can be the back door to hell.

This book focuses on basic psychological schemata designed to explain pathological altruism from a straightforward psychological perspective. But one of its strengths is its accompanying exploration of the underlying neuropsychological and biological processes that actually account for it. Part I deals with the cognitive and emotional foundations that are most visible as the roots of pathological altruism. At their extreme, these involve those psychiatric conditions that are considered in Part II. The diverse and profound societal implications of pathological altruism are discussed in Part III. In Part IV, we turn to the social and macrobiological basis of pathological altruism—how do cultures deal with it, and how did evolution shape it? Part V explores the development of altruism and pathological altruism at the individual level, taking into account the neural processes involved. And finally, in Part VI, three of the most provocative and sophisticated authors in the field (Marc Hauser, Joachim Krueger, and David Sloan Wilson) undertake overall integrations of the subject matter, which encompass evolutionary, psychological, philosophical, and cultural perspectives (see Chapters 29, 30, and 31).

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A major strength of this volume is that the contributing authors bring a combination of eclectic backgrounds and viewpoints to the study of pathological altruism, helping ground the subject in a scientific, social, and cultural matrix. For example, Augustine Brannigan's background as a sociologist helps him form his elegant hypothesis of genocide and pathological altruism based largely on social theory

(Chapter 16). Adolf Tobeña, on the other hand, in Chapter 15, uses his clinical perspective as a psychiatrist, and his firm views on the importance of biological influences, to form a theory of suicide bombings that complements Brannigan's work in an intriguing fashion. Madeline Li and Gary Rodin (Chapter 11) bring their wealth of psychiatric experience from cancer wards, where those who were previously the caretakers become, in turn, the most difficult patients to care for.

Social worker Jane Nathanson and veterinarian Gary Patronek (who also has a background in humane law enforcement) discuss the pathological altruism involved in animal hoarding in Chapter 8. Roger Vilardaga and Steven Hayes (Chapter 3) use their clinical sensitivity and behavioral theory of cognition to explain how our language abilities can become a double-edged sword, allowing us to become genuinely altruistic but also keeping us stuck at times in a state of psychological suffering that can ultimately affect others. And Bernard Berofsky brings to bear his philosophical training to illuminate the logic of the key concepts in Chapter 20. In so doing, he shows how “pathological altruism” is an appropriate label, despite the fact that pathological altruists are not really altruists.

The first known reference to *pathological altruism* in the professional literature is from a 1984 paper by Nancy McWilliams “The Psychology of the Altruist” (McWilliams, 1984). The subject was given a more comprehensive psychoanalytic treatment in a 2001 paper by Beth Seelig and Lisa Rosof: “Normal and Pathological Altruism” (Seelig & Rosof, 2001). Early psychoanalysts had been encouraged to think of all altruism as arising from masochistic impulses. But Seelig and Rosof relied on a psychoanalytic framework to discriminate between forms of altruism ranging from the “protoaltruism” observed in animals and parental nurturing, to the “psychotic altruism” of bizarre caretaking behavior seen in deeply disturbed individuals. In this volume, Brent Turvey (Chapter 13) provides an updated perspective on Seelig and Rosof’s work, grounded in Turvey’s substantial experience as a forensic scientist and criminal profiler.

The lack of systematic research and theory in regard to pathological altruism does not mean that maladaptive variants of altruism (as, for example, excessive self-sacrifice) have completely escaped clinical notice: Thomas Widiger and Jennifer Presnall (Chapter 6) connect the concept to dependent personality disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition, Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR), as well as to the maladaptive form of agreeableness in the Five-Factor Model of personality.²

Pathologies involving altruism, however, have broader implications and profound importance in understanding the human condition from neuroscientific, psychological, psychiatric, and social perspectives. For example, autism involves a well-studied syndrome most often seen in males; it is characterized by strong systemizing skills coupled with little or no empathy. But, as described by Simon Baron Cohen in Chapter 26, there is evidence for a converse of autism more often experienced by females. This hyperempathetic condition would be characterized by superior empathizing skills and poor systemizing ability. Although lack of systemizing abilities would severely restrict career choices for the women involved, conditions of hyperempathy have drawn comparatively little research interest.

Indeed, as Michael McGrath and Barbara Oakley point out in Chapter 4, conditions involving hyperempathy may well underlie the mass appeal of such ill-defined concepts as codependency, so little studied from a scientific perspective. “Codependents” may, in pathologically altruistic fashion, support their paramours’ drug addiction while endlessly forgiving their emotional and physical abuse. Or, they may simply be “nice” people who are easily taken advantage of. As Karol Pessin explains in Chapter 27, variations in alleles related to vasopressin and oxytocin may well lie behind this type of behavior, and in fact, may lead to hyperresponsiveness to social signals of all sorts. In another vein of research explored by Debbie Riby and her colleagues, the overfriendliness of Williams syndrome, which can lead to increased risk of victimization, might also shed light on the genetics underlying some forms of codependent behavior (see Chapter 9).

In fact, pathologies of altruism may be related to a variety of conditions. As Rachel Bachner-Melman explains in Chapter 7, treating the selflessness of eating-disordered patients is an important aspect of recovery that goes beyond a focus on issues of food and weight. Olga Klimecki and Tania Singer (Chapter 28) explain how empathy can inadvertently lead to what is commonly called *compassion fatigue*—their chapter shows how the term would be more aptly termed *empathic distress fatigue*. Lynn O'Connor and her colleagues describe survivor guilt, empathy, altruism, and pathological altruism from the perspective of multilevel selection theory (Chapter 2). Carolyn Zahn-Waxler and Carol Van Hulle describe a pathway whereby empathy-based pathogenic guilt in children of depressed parents may lead to costly altruism and eventually culminate in depression (Chapter 25).

Pathological altruism—in the sense of an unhealthy focus on others to the detriment of one's own needs—may have a very early start, and can be seen in developmental personality processes. (Roth, 2008). This can be quantified using data from toddler-age twins (Knafo, 2006). Children were designated as highly *altruistic* if they were in the top 20% in measured prosocial behavior (Goodman, 1997). Another category related to *self-actualizing* behavior, such as “shows pleasure when s/he succeeds,” “continues trying, even when something is hard,” or “wants to do things by him/herself.” Children were rated as *low* in self-actualizing behaviors if they ranked in the bottom 20% of that category. Twins were thought to potentially show the beginning of a form of pathological altruism if they simultaneously ranked in the top 20% of altruistic behaviors and the bottom 20% of self-actualizing behaviors. Of 2,496 children, 73 (3%) met both criteria. That is, these children were very likely to share, care for other children, and help around the house, but were not at all likely to be characterized by “shows pleasure when s/he succeeds,” “continues trying, even when something is hard,” or “wants to do things by him/herself.”

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Interestingly, these children were different from other children in their measured temperament. They were less likely to show high degrees of activity, and—unsurprisingly—were slightly more sociable (high motivation for sharing the company of others). Figure 1.1 demonstrates that pathological altruism can

have some benefits for children's adjustment, as it was associated with low degrees of conduct problems (aggression, tantrums). On the other hand, it may exact a psychological price even at this early age, as shown by the high scores in emotional symptoms, including worries, unhappiness, fear, nervousness, and somatization.

Viewing altruism as a potentially negative influence provides a new and surprisingly valuable perspective for a variety of complex problems. For example, altruism by its very nature can position the altruist for various types of victimization, as well as praise. Even if groups of altruists out-compete groups of nonaltruists, how could altruism have spread within a community in the first place? Jorge Pacheco and Francisco Santos's “The Messianic Effect of Pathological Altruism” (Chapter 23) provides an elegant new approach to this crucial, evolutionary conundrum. In some sense, unrequited altruism, even when it has apparently negative aspects from every perspective, can still have positive implications.

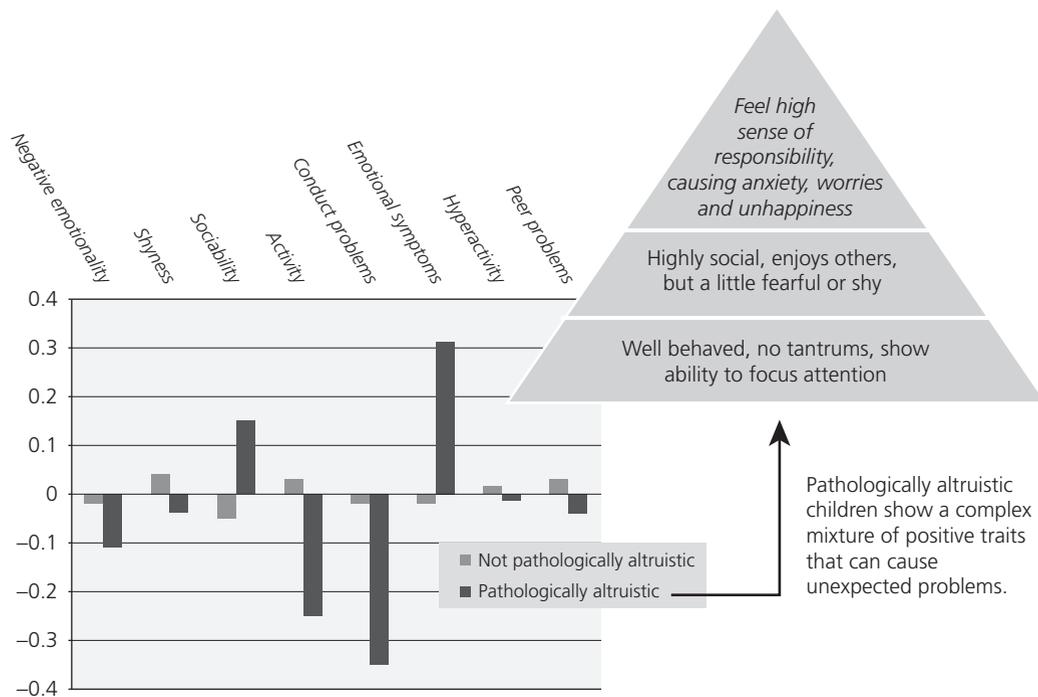


FIGURE 1.1

Mean levels of temperament and behavior problems of 3-year-old twins who display early signs of pathological altruism, as compared with other twins without the syndrome. One twin was selected per pair ($N = 1,248$ pairs). The data presented are based on mother-reported scores standardized separately for girls and boys.

* difference significant ($p < 0.05$ or lower).

One simple way of defining pathological altruism is to say that it involves well-meaning efforts that worsen the very situation they mean to help. This is explored by coeditors Guruprasad Madhavan and Barbara Oakley in their “Too Much of a Good Thing? Foreign Aid and Pathological Altruism” (Chapter 17). Such well-meaning behavior often involves self-righteousness, as explained by neurologist Robert Burton, in his personal story of one doctor’s abuse of power to “help” a mortally ill patient (Chapter 10). The dangers of “altruistic” self-righteousness in political partisanship (Chapter 5) are underscored by physicist and science fiction grand master David Brin, who also explores the dangers of modern Western notions of altruism as panacea in regard to the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project in Chapter 19.

A more sophisticated, nuanced view of altruism allows us to understand cultural differences in the concept, which in turn offers a better understanding of altruism’s core, as anthropologist John Traphagan explains in “Altruism, Pathology, and Culture” (Chapter 21). Similar sentiments are conveyed from a surprising evolutionary perspective by Satoshi Kanazawa in his “Battered Women, Happy Genes: There Is No Such Thing As Altruism, Pathological or

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Otherwise” (Chapter 24). Joan Chiao and her colleagues knit both cultural and genetic perspectives together as they describe the importance of culture–gene coevolutionary forces in shaping distinct cultural norms of empathy and altruism in Chapter 22.

That different people may view a single act as either beneficial or harmful has legal ramifications, as explored by mental disability law expert Michael Perlin in his discussion of the field of therapeutic jurisprudence (Chapter 12). This cuts to the heart of life-or-death issues, such as whether people should be allowed to sell their own kidneys, or whether a cultural defense for beating one’s wife is, indeed, defensible. And, as Robert Homant and Daniel Kennedy explain in the aptly titled “Does No Good Deed Go Unpunished? The Victimology of Altruism” (Chapter 14) viewing altruism with nuance also allows us to understand phenomena that are often unmentioned or unexplored. Thus, for example, the more altruistic behavior reported by subjects, the higher their level of criminal victimization: Self-reported altruism appears to be a significant predictor of both property and personal crime victimization.

Researchers shy from examining the seamy side of altruism for many reasons. But one of the most important seems to be that exposure of altruism’s gloomy underbelly might discourage people from being altruistic. One could argue that pathological altruism isn’t discussed for altruistic—perhaps pathologically altruistic—reasons. The consequence is that few recognize the phenomenon for what it is. Without an understanding of all aspects of altruism—misguided activities are perpetuated, and horrific acts can result. It is vital to understand how attempts to do good can inadvertently worsen the very situation they were meant to solve, or create other problems, either anticipated or unanticipated. This is set into sharp view in Chapter 15, where Adolf Tobeña notes the single shared characteristic of suicide bombers—their altruism. And Augustine Brannigan points out, in Chapter 16, that genocide is committed by those seeking to *help* their fellow man.

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Pathologies of altruism, it seems, form a great, dark, unexplored frontier. *Pathological Altruism* is the first work to explore this phenomenon from multiple perspectives, rather than relying on a merely (and from some perspectives, outmoded) psychoanalytic approach. The volume synthesizes work from multiple fields, offering many viewpoints on aspects of pathological altruism. Each author brings a unique background to the work. The sum of their contributions will, it is hoped, serve as a scientifically grounded focal point for a new field—pathological altruism—providing a nuanced counterbalance to the study of altruism.

Let us introduce this volume’s contributions by following Goethe’s lead, as Faust asks:

“All right—who are you, then?”

and Mephistopheles answers:

“Part of that force which would do ever evil, and does ever good.”

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Notes

1. A succinct parsing of altruism is provided by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton in their *Altruism in World Religions* (p. xi):

A standard dictionary definition describes altruism as “unselfish concern for the welfare of others: opposed to egoism.” The four components of this definition distinguish altruism from other kinds of care for others. “Unselfish” carries with it the notion that the altruist acts for the sake of the other rather than himself or herself. “Concern” suggests that altruism entails a motivation as well as an action. “Welfare” means that the goal is to benefit, rather than harm, the other. And “others” implies that the altruist is capable of seeing the object of concern as someone distinct from himself or herself. (Neusner & Chilton, 2005)

2. The domains of the Five-Factor Model are neuroticism, extraversion (versus introversion), openness to experience, agreeableness (versus antagonism), and conscientiousness.

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