

A New Monument to Human Altruism

Review By: [Robert D. Mather](#)

Review of: Altruism in Humans

By: C. Daniel Batson, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011. 329 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-534106-5. \$39.95

On May 5, 2011, I visited Ground Zero in New York City, the location of the World Trade Center terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. President Barack Obama also visited that day and laid a wreath to honor the men and women who lost their lives in the attack. At the time of my Ground Zero visit, I was halfway through *Altruism in Humans*, by C. Daniel Batson, and I was searching for something to inspire me to write of the usefulness of the book.

As I stood next to the wife and son of a fallen New York City police officer, in the shadow of what was once an enormous monument to humanity, I saw Ground Zero for what it was—a new monument to human altruism. Indeed, as Batson notes, “More than 350 firemen and emergency rescue workers and 23 police lost their lives attempting to direct others to safety” (p. 84) at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. What imperative drives so many men and women into harm’s way and toward danger?

Batson has long been a champion for the study of altruism in humans. Indeed, he studied under John Darley at Princeton University and wrote the representative chapter on altruism in a widely used textbook (Batson, 1995). Batson has been conducting experimental social psychological research on altruism since the early 1970s and is one of the eminent figures in research on prosocial behavior. Indeed, the first three editions of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (Lindzey, 1954; Lindzey & Aronson, 1968; Murchison, 1935) did not feature a distinct, stand-alone chapter on helping behavior.

Fittingly, Batson has provided an unselfish gift to scientists interested in the study of altruism. He has written a comprehensive explanation of how his theory of altruism, the empathy–altruism hypothesis, fits with the entire body of experimental research on prosocial helping behavior. *Altruism in Humans* is Batson’s magnum opus, and it lives up to this billing.

To preface this review, I should disclose that I have long been a silent critic of Batson’s empathy–altruism hypothesis. Having read a great deal about Batson’s theory prior to his recent book, I had not previously liked the use of the term *altruism* but certainly valued his data, respected him as a researcher, and promoted the usefulness of his model in predicting helping behavior. I also previously believed that his model was a good proximal model but that the rhetoric denied the usefulness of an ultimate model of helping behavior.

In the current book, Batson has convinced me that the term *altruism* is appropriate on the basis of earlier philosophical debates, and also he discusses in depth how his theory of altruism is highly compatible with evolutionary research. His discussion of this is an updated, more detailed review of his previous arguments.

In *Altruism in Humans*, Batson explicates the empathy–altruism hypothesis and tests the theory with specific predictions derived from the hypothesis. He compares experimental research with the predictions and makes a compelling argument that empathic concern motivates altruistic helping. The empathy–altruism hypothesis is contrasted with the aversive–arousal–reduction hypothesis and the self-merging account of helping behavior. Additionally, Batson discusses the philosophical debates surrounding the presence or absence of altruism in humans (the egoism versus altruism debate). It is evident that Batson does not operationally define altruism arbitrarily, but rather he keeps his argument well grounded in theory from both psychological and philosophical perspectives.

Why is altruism important to understand? Batson discusses some of the benefits of understanding altruism, such as using the knowledge to create more overall help, less aggression, and less intergroup conflict. He also discusses some of the costs of altruism, such as dangers to the helper, caregiver fatigue, and compassion abuse by would-be tricksters. Many of the applications of the empathy–altruism hypothesis include the use of attitudes and persuasion findings to solve the specific problems of increasing (or decreasing) altruism, reminiscent of the use of persuasion findings to promote HIV prevention (Petty, Gleicher, & Jarvis, 1993).

Similar to *Attention and Self-Regulation* by Carver and Scheier (1981), *Altruism in Humans* is a detailed, empirically based theoretical argument that is appropriate for graduate students in social psychology and other professionals in the field. It presents a very complex theoretical argument, though any educated critical thinker of any level would be capable of struggling with the material and gaining quite a bit from it. As it is based in experimental research, familiarity with the methods of experimental psychology is ideal, though Batson briefly reviews the basics of experimental design.

I believe that *Altruism in Humans* is a momentous work that comes after Batson's retirement and will stand as the hallmark of his career.

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