Embracing the Other

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Altruistic involvement is frequently explained by psychologists in terms of lack of psychological distance—cognitive and affective closeness—between self and others. On a cognitive level, psychological closeness is conceptualized as the degree of perceived similarity between a person and other people with regard to such qualities as age, social status, and personality. On an affective level, it relates to feelings of “we-ness” and group membership. A spate of studies has found that perception of similarity evokes positive attitudes and altruistic behavior (cf. Byrne 1969; Karylowski 1975; Reykowski 1979). In this chapter we will argue that altruistic involvement is based not only on perceived psychological closeness, but on other psychological mechanisms as well (cf. Schwartz 1970; Karylowski 1978; Reykowski 1979; Hoffman 1989), and that while perceived similarity may lead to some types of altruistic involvement, it may inhibit others.

It is possible to identify at least two types of altruistic involvement on the basis of self-other similarity. Both are based on lack of differentiation between self and other people, but they are related to different properties of the self-structure. The first type is based on an inability to differentiate self from others. Stemming from a low level of self-structure development, it implies an absence of personal standards of evaluation and internal sources of
motivation and reinforcement. Altruistic involvement is regulated by external social factors, which entails dependence and/or conformity.

The second type of altruistic involvement is based on well-consolidated self-structures, indicating well-developed personal standards and internal mechanisms of regulation. In this case, when other people are perceived as similar, a process of personal standard generalization is evoked (cf. Reykowski 1979): perception of similarity stimulates processes by which personal standards are applied to others, which in turn induces people to treat "thy neighbor as thy self." In this case, altruistic involvement is accompanied by strong positive affective reactions, on the one hand, but by egocentricity on the other hand: others are treated like the self. This works fine when others are similar to the self, but perception of others who are different—perception of their internal states, expectations, needs, and goals—is inadequate. In other words, lack of me-we differentiation inhibits the process of taking the perspective of dissimilar others. In order to understand dissimilar people, one must differentiate what is good for himself or herself from what is good for others. This principle is derived from the Piagetian notion that self-other differentiation is a necessary condition for adopting a nonegocentric perspective. Altruistic involvement based on self-other differentiation and decentration is called exocentric involvement (Karylowski 1982b).

The research reported in the present chapter is based on the general assumption that taking others' perspectives is dependent on the differentiation of cognitive representations of the social world. The process of differentiation leads to the consolidation of qualitatively different cognitive schemata. Formation of distinct schemata is a necessary condition for decentration. In this framework, exocentric altruistic involvement may occur only if the self-schema is distinct from schemata representing others. This state is referred to as self-other cognitive schemata distinctiveness and self-distinctiveness. It implies that individuals with low self-distinctiveness (i.e., those whose self-schema is not distinct from their schemata of others) are not able to take the perspective of dissimilar others, and therefore are unable to experience exocentric altruistic involvement toward them. We turn now to empirical evidence collected in our laboratory that supports the framework proposed above.
SELF-DISTINCTIVENESS AND EXOCENTRIC MANIFESTATIONS OF ALTRUISTIC INVOLVEMENT

The Self-distinctiveness Notion and Its Operationalization

We define self-distinctiveness in terms of the distinctiveness of central (prototypical) attributes of the self-schema in relation to central (prototypical) attributes of the other(s)-schemata. Self-distinctiveness is assessed by way of the Social Perception Questionnaire. In this questionnaire, respondents are successively asked to concentrate on (a) others in general, (b) the we-category, and (c) the self. More specifically, respondents are asked to consider a list of seventy nouns describing different categories of human attributes (such as openness, religiousness, helpfulness, persistence, loyalty, elegance, and sense of duty) and to mark those that they "use frequently when thinking about other people." Subsequently, subjects are instructed to choose by circling among the marked items ten that they "use the most frequently." These ten items are considered to be prototypical attributes in others-schema.

Upon completion of the first part of the questionnaire, subjects are administered the second part, in which they are asked to focus on the we-category. First, they are requested to answer in a few sentences the following question: "Who are the people you label WE the most frequently?" Then they are instructed to repeat the procedure described previously for the category "others in general." This time the ten items they "use the most frequently" thinking about the we-category members are considered prototypical attributes of the we-schema. Finally, subjects are given the third part of the questionnaire, in which they are asked to center on the self. Again, they are instructed to choose ten items used "the most frequently" for the self-description. (In all parts of the questionnaire the same list of seventy nouns is presented.) These ten items are considered prototypical attributes of the self-schema.

On the basis of the three measures described above, it is possible to make various comparisons between the obtained sets of prototypical schemata attributes. We obtained two self-distinctiveness scores: one by comparing categories of attributes indicated as prototypical for the self with categories indicated as prototypical for others (SDo), and the other by comparing categories of attributes indicated as prototypical for the self with categories indicated as prototypical for the we (SDw). In addition, we obtained a we-
distinctiveness score by comparing categories of attributes indicated as prototypical for the we and categories indicated as prototypical for others (WD). The scores consist of the number of different categories of attributes in the two compared sets.

**The Cognitive Differentiation-Exocentrism Hypothesis**

On the basis of the general theoretical assumptions presented in the first section of this chapter, we expected that different levels of self-distinctiveness would be related to different mechanisms of altruistic involvement. Karylowski (1978, 1982b) distinguishes between two types of altruistic involvement that occur without expectation of external rewards and are related to internal reinforcements for altruistic activity—the endocentric and the exocentric type. Endocentric mechanisms operate when perception of another person’s states stimulates the subject’s centration on himself or herself, specifically on personal norms, which induce feelings of duty to help others, anticipation of guilt, and so on (see Schwartz 1970). This type of motivational state involves expectation of personal satisfaction. In contrast, exocentric mechanisms are related to centration on another person’s states and expectations of his or her satisfaction. Personal goals are not considered at the beginning of the motivational process, but personal satisfaction may occur as a byproduct, as a consequence of perceiving positive change in another person’s situation (cf. Jarymowicz 1979). Karylowski (1982a) argued that each type of altruistic involvement is related to a different set of relatively stable properties of personality.

Karylowski (1982a) presented a special technique to measure endocentrism versus exocentrism as an individual’s dominant orientation and tendency to react in interpersonal contexts. Subjects are presented with descriptions of several situations in which an unknown person needs help. The subject is requested to indicate on a list of possible reactions how he or she would react. The list contains two categories of reactions: (a) endocentric, such as “I would feel bad if I did not help” (centration on personal states), and (b) exocentric, such as “I can imagine how badly he must have felt” (centration on partner’s states). The difference between the number of each type of reaction indicated by a subject is treated as an index of his or her dominant type of altruistic involvement (endocentric or exocentric).
STUDIES ON SELF-DISTINCTIVENESS AND ENDOCENTRIC VERSUS EXOCENTRIC ALTRUISM

We expected people with different levels of self-distinctiveness to differ in the tendency to react in non–self-related, exocentric ways (cf. Jarymowicz, forthcoming, a). In particular, we predicted that individuals with relatively low levels of self-distinctiveness would display less exocentric motivation than subjects with relatively high levels of self-distinctiveness. This hypothesis was verified in several studies (e.g., Szuster-Zbrojewicz 1988). In each study self-distinctiveness and endocentric versus exocentric reactions towards a partner were measured.

Kobuszewska (1989) provides an example of the described line of research. She used the self-distinctiveness measure and Karyłowski’s questionnaire. As shown in figure 8.1, Kobuszewska found that the lower subjects scored on self-distinctiveness, the higher the proportion of endocentric (self-related) justifications of help they supplied ($R^2 = .11; F(2, 117) = 5.63, p = .01$). Put another way, subjects with relatively low levels of self-distinctiveness supplied fewer exocentric justifications of altruistic involvement and more justifications of the endocentric type.

These results support the assumption that at least some degree of self-distinctiveness is necessary for decentration and exocentric involvement. At the same time, they raise another question. The implications of the studies seem to contradict two well-established premises based on empirical studies conducted in the framework of Tajfel’s theory of social identity (Tajfel 1978), namely that weak me-we differentiation is related to high in-group involvement, and strong we-others differentiation leads to intergroup discrimination.

In the next sections we will argue that the present conception does not contradict Tajfel’s theory. We will propose that, as Tajfel suggests, people with low self-distinctiveness may be extremely involved in their group, but only in a particular way.

Me-We Distinctiveness and In-group Involvement

According to Tajfel, lack of cognitive me-we distinctiveness is related to strong emotional identification with reference groups, which in turn leads to manifestations of in-group involvement such as loyalty, effort in realization of common goals, etc. We, however,
argue (on the basis of the previously presented theoretical conception and empirical findings) that this involvement occurs exclusively within an intergroup context. In contrast, in the context of intragroup and interpersonal relations, another type of mechanism plays a regulative role.

It is important to distinguish between myself as a representative of the we-category and myself as an individual in interpersonal relations. Different identity perspectives are stimulated in each case: the former relates to social identity and the latter relates to personal identity. As a consequence, different determinants of functioning are evoked (cf. Brown and Turner 1981). But before discussing this premise further, we will present empirical data.

Figure 8.1
Endocentric versus exocentric involvement scores as a function of degree of self-distinctiveness.
showing that lack of cognitive me-we distinctiveness is related to personal identity problems that cause a particular type of in-group involvement.

The Similarity Underestimation Effect

In several studies on social comparison, we found a recurrent tendency for individuals to underestimate the degree of similarity between themselves and others. In each study, subjects were asked to describe themselves using a list of personality traits, then to become acquainted with a “self-description,” supposedly made by another person, on the same list of traits. (Comparing both descriptions, we obtain an “objective similarity” score for each trait.) Next, subjects were requested to assess the degree of self–target person similarity on scales based on the same list of personality traits as shown above. The relationship between perceived similarity and objective similarity is displayed in figure 8.2 (data from Jarymowicz and Codol 1979).

As may be seen, the higher the objective similarity scores, the
greater the degree of similarity underestimation. More specifically, there is no similarity underestimation at low levels of objective similarity, and the most similarity underestimation occurs at the highest levels of objective similarity. In general, we have found that the degree of underestimation may vary depending on the category of compared object. However, the effect occurs even when the object is defined as an attractive person or reference group (Jarymowicz 1987).

The results of our studies on similarity underestimation seem consistent with the results of Snyder's and Fromkin's study (cf. Snyder and Fromkin 1980) showing that when a person is confronted with information revealing very high similarity to others, he or she will attempt to create some distance. According to the authors' explanation, high degrees of similarity are aversive because they may cause identity problems. We assume that me-we and we-others cognitive differentiation plays a fundamental role in the process of personal and social identity formation (cf. Jarymowicz, forthcoming, b), and turn now to evidence supporting this assumption.

**Personal Identity Problems and Me-We-They Differentiation**

Mandrosz-Wroblewska (1988) selected two groups of subjects (university students) who either declared that they had identity problems (group IP) or did not declare that they had identity problems (group NIP). After characterizing themselves in terms of the list of adjectives described above, subjects were asked to describe, with the same list of adjectives, in a very general and simple way, an unknown person presented by the experimenter (by a one-page description of a trivial event that supposedly happened to her “two weeks ago”). Then subjects were asked to estimate directly their degree of similarity to the target person. In one experimental condition the target person was presented as a student (a member of the we-category), and in another experimental condition the person was presented as a person twenty years older and from a peasant-worker social stratum (out-group member).

The results of this study revealed that in both the IP and NIP groups the degree of perceived similarity to another student was significantly higher than the degree of perceived similarity to the older peasant-worker. However, the relationship between the self-description and description of the target person was quite different
in the two groups. The description of the unknown student (ingroup member) was significantly more similar to the self-descriptions of subjects with no identity problems than the description of an unknown peasant-worker, whereas subjects who declared identity problems described the we-category member (another student) as significantly more different from them than the peasant-worker! The data are shown in figure 8.3. The interaction shown in figure 8.3 was statistically significant. In contrast to the group without identity problems, the group with identity problems described the we-category member as less similar than the out-group member to the self-description.

It should be emphasized that this (intuitively unexpected) result showing a stronger me-we than me-they differentiation (as measured in our study) was unconscious. On a conscious level, subjects' estimates of similarity between themselves and another student were higher than their estimates of similarity between themselves and a peasant-worker. The data in figure 8.3 are based on comparisons between self and other made by the experimenter.

These findings suggest that me-we differentiation is much more important than me-they differentiation for personal identity for-
mation. This interpretation is consistent with some predictions from Festinger's classical theory of social comparison (cf. Festinger 1954). Specifically, according to Festinger, people prefer to compare themselves to similar others more than to dissimilar others because the former type of comparison is more useful for self-definition. As an implication of this assumption, we may expect that me-we comparisons are more useful and more important for identity formation than me-they comparisons. We may expect that the lack of self-we schemata distinctiveness, as related to identity problems, stimulates an unconscious tendency to search for differences. Fromkin has presented experimental data indicating that this tendency manifests itself on a cognitive as well as on a behavioral level of functioning. We may expect that it influences social behavior. For example, to resolve identity problems, individuals may search for ways in which they differ from others. Sometimes this process would be expected to produce so-called prosocial acts (to be recognized, visible, as shown by Codol 1979), but in other cases it may produce egocentric behavior.

**Desired Level of Mutual Control within Groups with Different Levels of Me-We Distinctiveness**

In one of our studies, we assessed the relationship between me-we-other distinctiveness and the degree of perceived and desired mutual control. We were particularly interested in people's desired level of control in within-group relations, and the relationship between desired level of own control over others to desired level of others' control over the self in me-we relationships. We expected that tendencies to control others and to resist control from them would be stronger among subjects with low self-distinctiveness than among subjects with high self-distinctiveness. Data on subjects with low, medium, and high self-distinctiveness are shown in figure 8.4 (the higher the mutual control score, the more imbalanced the equilibrium between a tendency to control others and to accept their control). As it may be seen, the higher self-distinctiveness (SDw), the lower the mutual control score ($F(2, 25) = 5.98, p = .01$)—that is, the higher the self-distinctiveness, the more balanced the equilibrium between the tendency to control other members of the we-category and to accept their control. The group with the lowest level of self-distinctiveness expressed the
strongest motivation to control in-group members, relative to their motivation to accept control.

The results in figure 8.4 may be interpreted as suggesting that the higher the self-distinctiveness (here, self-we schemata distinctiveness), the greater the respect for the norm of reciprocity, which in this case is reflected in mutual control. The data may be viewed in the context of our theoretical framework as indicating that people with low self-distinctiveness are not able, in cognitive terms, to coordinate different social perspectives, and therefore are not sensitive to the norm of reciprocity. In addition, a motivational interpretation may be applied. Trouble stemming from the process of identity formation generates egocentricizing tension, decreasing the probability of exocentric involvement (cf. Reykowski 1979). In order to resolve the problem, individuals search for self-differentiation between me and we.

This assumption—that lack of me-we cognitive differentiation induces identity problems that motivate people to search for differences between themselves and others, and that the process may induce egocentric behavior—does not imply that people with low self-distinctiveness are not able to identify with their in-group
goals, to be loyal and strongly involved. We argue that in such conditions the mechanisms of involvement are different (see opening section), and in some conditions personal problems inhibit exocentric motivation. In we-other contexts (i.e., of intergroup relations), a defensive tendency to maintain an identity based on the we-schema may occur. As a consequence, people with low levels of self-distinctiveness may be very loyal towards their own group, and low self-distinctiveness may lead to intergroup discrimination.

**Me-We Distinctiveness and Intergroup Relations**

As shown by Brown and Turner (1981), principles of human behavior change as a function of personal versus social identity subsystems. Adopting a personal perspective (myself as an individual) or adopting a social perspective (myself as a representative of a reference group) induces different processes in in-group as well as in intergroup relations. The same person who orients to differences between self and others when centered on herself or himself may search for similarities when centered on in-group–out-group relationships. It is important to consider the implications of lack of self-we distinctiveness for intergroup relations: the differential treatment of in-group and out-group members.

**Feelings towards Out-Group Members**

Some of our studies were designed to evaluate the assumption that the ability to coordinate different social perspectives is related to self-we schemata distinctiveness as a result of within-group comparison processes. We expected that me-we differentiation is a necessary condition for the ability to take the perspective of other social groups. Preliminary data from a field study were collected in Israel. In this study, young Israeli Jewish subjects (aged thirteen to seventeen) were requested to answer different questions concerning their reactions towards Israeli Arabs on measures tapping negativity/positivity of feelings, attribution of negative social traits, trust, social distance, and tendency to discriminate. Each subject estimated the extent to which he or she possessed characteristics typical of Jews (that is, for the we-category). A multiple regression showed that, as expected, the lower the me-we differentiation, the more negative the reactions towards the out-group members (Israeli Arabs).
Attitudes towards Dissimilars

In another set of studies, we tested the hypothesis that subjects with low levels of self-distinctiveness would display more positive feelings towards a similar partner than towards a dissimilar one, whereas subjects with relatively high levels of self-distinctiveness would not display such a discrimination. In two experimental studies containing different operationalizations of each variable (cf. Jarymowicz and Truszewski 1985; Krzemionka, forthcoming), we obtained the same picture of the relationship between self-distinctiveness, partner’s similarity to the subject, and attitudes towards the partner. The dependent variable in the first study was tolerance for a partner’s behavior and opinions, and the dependent variable in the second study was feelings of attraction to a partner. The results are shown in figures 8.5 and 8.6. In both studies, the groups with low levels of self-distinctiveness obtained higher scores on the measures of tolerance and partner’s attractiveness when making judgments about a similar partner than when making judgments about a dissimilar one. As shown on figure 8.6, however, dissimilar and similar partners obtained equally positive
Figure 8.5b
Mean scores on tolerance of opinions (TO) of dissimilar versus similar partners in the low self-distinctiveness group.

Figure 8.5c
Mean scores on attractiveness estimation (Attr) of dissimilar versus similar partners in the low self-distinctiveness group.
scores in the groups with high levels of self-distinctiveness (the differences were not significant). In the second study, a multiple regression showed that the attractiveness of a similar partner was not related to the level of self-distinctiveness, but the attractiveness of a dissimilar partner was negatively related to self-distinctiveness (the lower the self-distinctiveness, the lower the attractiveness ratings of the dissimilar partner). It should be emphasized that the latter effect pertained only to one index of distinctiveness—to the SDw scores, which refer to self-we distinctiveness ($R^2 = .34, F(9, 84) = 7.24, p = .0001$). Figure 8.7 shows that subjects with low self-distinctiveness estimated the attractiveness of a similar partner as higher than the attractiveness of a dissimilar partner, whereas subjects with high self-distinctiveness rated both partners as equally attractive.

The results of these studies suggest that a similar partner stimulates a relatively high level of liking among all subjects; people like those whom they view as similar. The results presented in figure 8.5 are consistent with the classic effect described by Byrne (1969): the higher the partner's similarity, the higher the partner's attractiveness. However, this effect did not occur in groups with high self-distinctiveness (see figure 8.6). Subjects in these groups
Figure 8.6b
Mean scores on tolerance of opinions (TO) of dissimilar versus similar partners in the high self-distinctiveness group.

Figure 8.6c
Mean scores on attractiveness estimation (Attr) of dissimilar versus similar partners in the high self-distinctiveness group.
did not display the classic similar-dissimilar partner discrimination, suggesting that people with high self-we schemata distinctiveness do not employ self-related criteria for evaluating others. Indeed, as shown in figure 8.7, subjects with extremely high levels of self-distinctiveness appear to find dissimilar partners more attractive than similar partners.

CONCLUSION

In summary, our research suggests that self-we-others cognitive schemata distinctiveness is related to some important prerequisites of altruistic involvement. First, in some conditions, lack of self-distinctiveness—for example, stemming from identity problems—seems to lead to egocentricizing tension that inhibits altruistic involvement. Second, in other conditions, lack of self-distinctiveness appears to lead to dependence and conformity. In such cases, altruistic involvement is based on external motivation, which does not occur without external influence. Third, low levels of self-distinctiveness appear to stimulate generalization of per-
sonal standards and the tendency to treat others from the self's perspective. Because generalization seems to be based on similarity of the other to the self, similar others evoke positive attitudes. Fourth, self-distinctiveness seems necessary for exocentric altruistic involvement, which requires the ability to center and take the perspective of others. Finally, self-we schemata distinctiveness seems necessary for taking the perspective of others from outside one's own group, implying that the probability of social discrimination is relatively low among people with high me-we differentiation. Lack of self-we distinctiveness leads to the defensive tendency to maintain an identity based on the we-others dichotomy, which is a source of prejudice and hostility.

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