Embracing the Other

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One of the most intriguing questions for those who encounter acts that seem genuinely altruistic concerns their motivation. What could instigate some people to sacrifice not only their effort, time, and money, but also their lives, for other human beings? This is a question often asked by recipients of altruistic aid. In the present paper, we would like to discuss this issue on the basis of data collected in the framework of the Altruistic Personality Project—an extensive study of a large sample of people who helped Jews survive the Nazi occupation in Europe. The project was originated in the early eighties by Professor Samuel Oliner, who assembled a team of researchers from several countries—the USA, Poland, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Italy.

The main goal of the Altruistic Personality Project was to determine the psychological characteristics of people involved in rescuing Jews, who could not have expected any material or other tangible reward. The essential feature of the behavior of such rescuers was its orientation toward the protection and maintenance of other people, in spite of the fact that such action entailed a grave threat to the individual involved and his or her close ones. In Poland, discovery of such activity by the Nazis was tantamount to a death sentence to the rescuer and to his or her family members. In Western countries—in France or in Holland, for example—rescuers risked internment in a concentration camp. It should be emphasized that such rescue behavior was not, as a rule, an im-
pulsive response to an immediate situation, but rather an ongoing activity, carried out over a period of weeks, months, or years.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Selection of subjects was based upon documentation gathered by Jewish institutions. First, we obtained a list of people who had been decorated with the medal “Righteous among the Nations of the World,” awarded by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem for help extended to Jews. In Poland we also received the names and addresses of rescuers from the Jewish Historical Institute.

The main instrument of the study was a questionnaire containing several dozens of items pertaining to the personal history of the rescuer and to the details of his or her rescuing activity. On this basis, it was possible to recreate in considerable detail what happened to the rescuers during the occupation, of what their rescue activity consisted, how long it lasted, what its scope was, and so on. In addition, the questionnaire contained a number of items dealing with the situation of respondents before and after the war. Finally, the rescuers were given several standard psychological tests (for a detailed description of all the instruments, see Oliner and Oliner 1988).

The data were collected in the course of an interview conducted by specially trained interviewers. Each interview lasted for several hours: the answers were written down by the interviewer and tape recorded. The design of the research consisted in comparing rescuers from different cultural settings, and comparing rescuers to people who were not involved in helping Jews. To this aim, two control groups were studied: “passive controls”—people living during the same period in the same neighborhood as rescuers who did not engage in any rescuing; and “active controls”—people involved in resistance against occupants, without helping Jews. The subjects from the control groups were studied by means of the same instruments as those used with rescuers.

RECOGNITION OF THE NEEDS OF OTHERS:
THE PREREQUISITE OF HELPING

It is commonly accepted that a precondition for undertaking any action on behalf of other people is recognition of their needs (La-tane and Darley 1970; Schwartz 1977). Recognition of needs is the
basis for goal setting, in this case for setting a prosocial goal (Staub 1980). We may leave aside the problem of accuracy of this recogn-
ition, focusing instead on the process through which prosocial
goals are formed.

The recognition of need in another person is not always an easy
task, to be sure. Even in cases where others’ needs seem obvious—
when their survival is at stake, when they are badly mistreated
and deprived of their rights and possessions, for example—some
observers may not recognize their needs. Studying our subjects’
responses to questions designed to probe their reactions to the fate
of persecuted Jews, we noticed that the vast majority of subjects
from all groups was, more or less, aware of the stigmatization of
Jews (e.g., they knew that Jews were compelled to wear the arm-
band with the Star of David), expropriation of Jewish property
(e.g., they had heard of or witnessed acts of expulsion of Jews from
their homeplaces), physical abuse, and murders. But they differed
in their reactions. Three different ways of reacting to this situation
could be distinguished. First there were people (from the control
groups) for whom this information was simply factual, stored in
their memories as a record of (historical) events. It expanded their
knowledge, but the concept of someone in need, apparently, was
not salient in their interpretation of these events.

Another type of reaction consisted of emotional arousal (e.g.,
crying, agitation), feelings of compassion, horror, repulsion, and
evaluative judgments (e.g., disapproval of the acts of persecution,
moral contempt for the oppressors). Although quite common
among the subjects from our control group, these reactions did not
lead to the formation of a prosocial goal, and thus had practically
no consequence as far as helping activity was concerned.

The third type of reaction was typical of those who rescued Jews.
It consisted of interpretation of the situation as a kind of demand—
recognition that other people are in need. It was the basis for the
formation of a goal image—that is, a mental representation (or a
concept) of a possible (not yet existing) state of affairs that is de-
sirable for the subject, for example, recognition that a Jew needs
a hiding place, false documents, food, or knowledge of a Catholic
prayer. Since in this case the goals involve protection of other
people’s basic interests, we may call them prosocial.

The construction of a prosocial goal clearly requires certain in-
tellectual capabilities. First, it requires the ability cognitively to
transform the existing situation into another one. There were many
people who, for different reasons, apparently were incapable of making such transformations. For them, the situation of persecuted Jews was a kind of horrifying spectacle: they were deeply moved by it, but they were not instigated to action. To be moved to action, they would have had to transform mentally the situation into one with action possibilities (i.e., they would have had to generate a goal image).

In some cases the formation of a prosocial goal was facilitated when the would-be rescuer was approached by a victim or his or her intermediaries who defined the need. Since the need was usually described in terms of the desired end state, the potential rescuer's task was reduced to finding concrete solutions for practical questions. It became, therefore, a problem-solving task (how to attain the end state) rather than a task that involved the generation of a goal image (providing, of course, that the individual accepted the goal).

Assuming an individual develops a cognitive representation of a possible state of affairs—an image of the situation in which the needs of a persecuted person are satisfied—the question arises, under what conditions can such an image acquire the potential for action control? We postulate that the action-control potential of the goal image stems from its affective content—from the fact that the goal image is charged with valence. But that raised another question—namely, where did the affective qualities of the goal image come from? Why did rescuers attach an affective meaning to outcomes oriented toward satisfying the needs of other people? Putting this question in other terms—what were the motives of rescuers?

**THE MOTIVES OF RESCUERS**

The fact that another's misfortune can evoke affective reactions among witnesses is not at all surprising. It can be observed quite often in everyday life, and it has been documented by empirical research (Piliavin et al. 1981). It is, however, less obvious why and under what conditions such reactions can be transformed into action aimed at helping those in distress, especially if the action entails stress or grave threat to the actor, and requires great effort or other forms of self-sacrifice over extended periods of time.

In an attempt to get at the motivation of rescuers, we examined the following data: (a) self-reports of motives (answers to the ques-
tion, "Now, can you summarize for me the main reasons why you became involved in this activity?"); (b) information about the conditions surrounding the initiation of rescuing, the forms of rescuing activity, and their termination; (c) the attitudes and behavior of rescuers' reference groups; (d) types of arguments the rescuers used when they met with opposition to or criticism of their activity; (e) forms of contact between rescuers and rescued persons; (f) the focus of attention of rescuers (as revealed in their account of their action and their relationships with other people, especially with rescued persons); (g) the role of other people in undertaking and sustaining the rescuing activity; and (h) behavior in various situations in which the interests of different people (including the rescuer, his or her close ones, the rescued persons, and other victims) were at stake. It should be emphasized that this set of data contains different kinds of information: self-report statements, information about situational factors that could instigate, facilitate, or inhibit altruistic behavior, information about cognitive and affective concomitants of rescuers' activities (especially in their crucial stages, such as during initiation, upon termination, and in encounter with major obstacles), and information about relationships with people who were involved in the activity.

We acknowledge that our data are insufficient to provide us in every case with information concerning all the above-mentioned issues. Nevertheless, all in all, our analysis of the data has convinced us that we have obtained a sufficient amount of information to reconstruct, in hypothetical form, the motivational structure underlying the rescue behavior of most of our subjects. On this basis, we were able to identify three major classes of motives that apparently instigated the rescuing—allocentric, normocentric, and axiological (Hoffman 1977, 1989; Reykowski 1982b, 1989).

Allocentric motives originate when attention is focused on the persecuted person or persons and his or her situation: under certain conditions (especially when directly exposed to the need of another person), there may be a kind of cognitive and/or affective "centration" on the fate of the person in need. Such centration seems to facilitate perspective taking and affective reactions such as empathy and compassion. It may lead to the arousal of a desire to do something to protect the needy person. Subjects to whom this motivational state was attributed tended to report, first, information related to the needs, situations, and emotional states of those they rescued. For example, when asked for their main reason
for helping, they gave answers such as, “I knew they needed help. It was the most important” (R.101); “Those Jews came and cried, so what could we do? We didn’t have a choice” (R.102); “Because we wanted to rescue her. We did not want her to be caught. We were sorry for her. We knew that if we sent her away she did not know where to go” (R.231); and, “When I saw a mother with a child, how could I refuse? The child made up my mind” (R.258).

Normocentric motives originate from the activation of a norm of helping. For some people, the mistreatment of Jews was relevant to the norms of “helpfulness,” solidarity, etc. The norm could be interpreted in religious terms (e.g., the Christian prescription “love your neighbor”) or in secular terms. The activation of such norms evokes a feeling of obligation to act: individuals are more or less aware that inaction will evoke feelings of guilt and remorse.

Feelings of obligation to observe a norm may be rooted in one of three sources: (a) the normative expectations of a reference group (e.g., family, church, political organizations), (b) an internalized sense of commitment to norms of the main socializing institutions (rescuers tended to refer either to religious institutions [to church] or to secular ones such as parental teachings and political organizations), or (c) the self-concept—some rescuers attributed feelings of obligations to their own “nature”—that is, the helping norm was regarded as the part of their self-identity; other rescuers defined themselves in terms of their social role or social belongingness, and believed that the role or social category assumes a particular form of conduct.

Note that the three sources of norms mentioned above differ with respect to the degree of internalization. In the first case, people seem to be directly dependent upon social definitions of the situation—their helping behavior depends upon social support (requests, approval, more or less continuous contact with others who do the same, or at least express their solidarity). In the second case, people act more or less independently, as long as they believe that the institution with which they are associated is approving their action. Hence, rescuing was more prevalent among church members who met in churches with appropriate spiritual reinforcement and among members of political parties that were against racial persecution. In the third case, people seem to be highly independent from any specific authority—their “normative compass” lies within themselves.

Good examples of normocentric motives are reflected in the fol-
Motivations of Rescuers

Following answers to questions about reasons for helping: “Because I was a Christian. It was our duty” (R.005); “I am a Christian and I want to do for Jesus what He wants us to do for the needy” (R.015); “I was raised with the philosophy that I should always help” (R.025).

Axiological motives originate from the actualization of moral principles such as “justice,” “sanctity of human life,” and so on. When an individual notices that his or her basic values are impinged upon, he or she may feel aroused in their defense. The reactions of such an individual are independent from the reactions of other people or any authority, since they are based upon his or her moral convictions. Axiological motives sensitize people to discrepancies between their principles and reality. The main goal of action is to reaffirm the principles. One cannot expect that his or her individual activity can stop injustice or prevent killing, but one can insure that the principles are kept alive as long as there are people who reaffirm them by their deeds.

It seems feasible to differentiate between two kinds of moral principles. One kind relates to the rules of distribution of goods, rights, and responsibilities—that is, to the rules of justice. The second kind pertains to concern for the well-being of others—that is, to the principle of care. There are major differences in the emotional consequences of these two kinds of motive. Justice motives tend to be associated with more impersonal, sometimes even cold, reactions. The person is likely to react with strong emotions (anger, hate) against those who attack the principle, but is less inclined to experience feelings toward the victim as an individual—rescuing or helping is a task the person imposes upon himself or herself as a natural implication of his or her principles. On the other hand, if the caring principle is operating, the person is likely to focus on the subjective states and reactions of the particular victim, and feelings of pity and solidarity with the needy are likely to be evoked. In this case, the tendency for kindness is dominant, while hate and indignation are less likely.

A defining characteristic of principles is their independence from external opinions and evaluations. Hence, actions guided by principles can be executed individually, on their own initiative. If other persons are involved, it is mainly for instrumental reasons rather than for psychological support or guidance. Principles also seem to differ from internalized norms in their origin: while internalized norms can be traced directly back to particular groups (authorities)
who were the source of the norm, principles seem to develop, to a
great extent, on the basis of individuals' own intellectual and moral
efforts. Another difference between principles and internalized
norms is related to the fact that, in the case of norms, there is a
reference to certain groups or categories of people, such as religious
groups, nations, professional groups or organizations and friends
who, allegedly, espouse the same norms (normative system),
whereas in the case of axiological motives, such a reference is
lacking. If there were such a reference, it would comprise people
who support (or adhere to) the same principles—in other words,
adherence to the principles may play the primary role in deter-
mining association with others (while in the case of the normative
orientation, it seems the other way around).

The following answers to the question about reasons for aiding
Jews serve as examples of axiological motives—mainly those based
on moral principles related to justice: "The reason is because each
man is equal. We should all live....It was plain murder and I
couldn't stand that. I would help a Mohammedan just as well as
I did a Jew" (R.006); "The main reason is that I was a patriot. I
was for my country. I was for law and order—the Germans robbed
the people of their freedom....They took innocent people and I
wanted to help" (R.201).

Summing up what was said about the three main categories of
motives of altruistic helping, we can point out that they differ from
each other with respect to the following characteristics:

*Instigating factors* (the aspects of the situation that tend to in-
stigate the given motives). In the case of allocentric motives, direct
exposure to a needy person, especially to his or her emotional
reactions, is the most effective factor. In the case of normative
motives, an appreciation of the fact that there is a normative de-
mand appropriate to the given situation and that the demand is
addressed to the subject is the strongest instigating factor. In the
case of axiological motives, the primary factor is an interpretation
of the situation as a violation of a principle espoused by the
individual.

*Facilitating factors* (the conditions that contribute to or are nec-
essary for sustaining an action controlled by the given motives).
In the case of normocentric motives, an important role in the sus-
taining of rescuing action is played by moral support from other
people, at least in the form of example. Such support is unnecessary
in the case of axiological and allocentric motives. In the case of
the latter, personal contacts with the needy person seem to play an important role in supporting the action.

**Affective concomitants of the helping action.** In the case of allocentric motives, a personal feeling for the rescued people is typical, whereas in axiological and normocentric behavior, the feelings are more likely to be rather impersonal, focused on a norm or a principle (e.g., bad feelings that there is such injustice in the world).

**Typical forms of action.** In the case of allocentric motives, the action is most likely aimed at helping a particular person or group of people with whom an individual is in direct contact. In the case of axiological motives, the action may be directed toward a group of people with whom the individual has not had any direct contact. In the case of normocentric motives, the action of the rescuer is, very often, a kind of group task. The rescuer participates in an organization or in part of a social network involved in helping.

**RELATION AMONG MOTIVES**

The three main categories of motives we have recognized in rescuers can be regarded as abstract (or ideal) types in the sense of the term proposed by Weber. We do not claim that the motives of any particular person fall exclusively in any of the three categories, but rather, we assume they fit to varying degrees. There are several reasons why we rarely come across motives of only one type—“pure” forms. First, rescuers may be guided by various mixtures of motives. Second, the motives of rescuers may change over time. For example, rescuing activity may begin under the influence of normative motives, but over time personal ties may develop between the rescuer and people who are rescued, and the latter may become important for their own sake. Personal contact appears to lead to the activation of allocentric motives, which supplement (or even replace) the original normative ones. The change might also affect the characteristics of the particular motive. Helping might stem originally from an emotional, empathic reaction to a direct cue, for example, seeing that someone is standing in the door begging for help. The initial reaction might be aimed only at the immediate needs of the person (for example, providing food and temporary shelter); however, following extended interaction, the rescuer might develop a much deeper insight into the fate of the victim and a much deeper appreciation for his or her basic needs.
Thus, the initial, simple sympathetic response might become transformed into a much more stable and much stronger motive.

Third, we must acknowledge that differences between motives are in certain cases not very clear, especially when motivational mechanisms achieve a high degree of generality. Two cases in point are worth considering. The first one concerns the similarity between a generalized allocentric orientation and axiological motives based upon the principle of caring. It is difficult to discriminate between people who have an all-embracing attitude toward other human beings—friends and strangers alike—based upon recognition and appreciation of their needs and interests, and those who develop an abstract principle of caring, in a sense defined by Gilligan as “the self-chosen principle of judgment that remains psychological in its concern with relationship and response but becomes universal in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt” (Gilligan 1982).

The second case of unclear demarcation between motives involves norms embedded in self-identity. Such norms, which are strongly internalized and have no apparent relationship to group membership, share many characteristics with principles. For example, both may generate motives that, apparently, can function without social support. However, norms embedded in self-identity seem to differ from principles because they are less abstract, they are not universal, and they are more closely connected to self-concept. One could argue that principles can function as superordinate concepts that prevail over the self.

There is an additional problem related to the classification of motives, a methodological one. In communication about motives and reasons for action, people use a limited repertoire of terms, which may differ enormously in meaning. Such differences may not be apparent because they stem from the deep structure of meaning. Thus, for example, a person who says that he or she behaved in a certain way for “God and country” may be using the phrase as a cliché for decorative purposes, as a kind of symbol that indicates the person’s allegiance to a particular orientation (“God and country” was once a slogan of certain political groups in Poland), or to reflect an abstract principle that occupied a high position in the person’s belief system. The same can be said about other concepts. For example, the term “justice” may be invoked to give a moral justification for an individual’s or group’s claim;
it may justify certain kinds of norms, such as harsh treatment to criminals or feeding the poor, or it may refer to a higher-order principle coordinating various perspectives and claims. Clearly, the words used by rescuers must be interpreted in the context of all that is known about them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In closing, we would like to make two additional remarks. One concerns the relationship between the formation of a prosocial goal and undertaking the prosocial action. It should be stressed that the formation of a prosocial goal is not always a sufficient condition for helping. Analyzing our data, we have noticed that there were specific personal qualities that seemed to facilitate (or inhibit) helping action: one of them was ego strength, as manifested in a capability to withstand the stress related to dealing with the highly threatening and burdensome situations. Another personal quality was a kind of self-efficacy. Many, if not most of the rescuers were people who apparently believed in their own capability to cope with difficult life problems. Such beliefs appeared to help them assume responsibilities that were perceived by many others as overwhelming. We should stress, therefore, that one may not explain rescuing action by referring to the motivational processes alone.

Another remark concerns the motives of rescuers. Although we identified three major classes of other-oriented (prosocial) motives, we are not asserting that motives related to the personal needs of rescuers were completely absent. In fact, there are some indications that motives such as a desire for fame, need for excitement, need for nurturance, or need to establish a dominant position with respect to the helped person played some role. Taking into consideration all the circumstances surrounding the rescuing behavior, we claim that in most cases it was a secondary role. It is not possible to account for all the contingencies of rescuing actions by referring to self-oriented motives. The extensive body of data that may uphold this position can be found in the Oliners' book (Oliner and Oliner 1988). Our purpose here was simply to describe different patterns of motives intrinsically related to helping as they emerged from our analysis of the behavior of rescuers. We believe that they played a major role in undertaking the altruistic action.
REFERENCES


