Embracing the Other
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INTRODUCTION

Samuel P. Oliner

This section of the book addresses the factors and processes that help promote a more altruistic and caring society. In these introductory remarks, we shall describe the connectedness and the central message contained in the five chapters.

It is clear that each of the chapters deals with the promotion of prosocial behavior and concern for the other. The Oliners address the theoretical concept called extensivity, which was introduced in their book *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1988). Extensivity implies attachment and commitment to one's family as well as including diverse others and feeling responsible for them. The questions that this chapter raises are, What kind of human beings are more likely to be altruistic? What are some of the major processes that could explain their concern for others and putting the interest of others before their own?

In their study on rescuers of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, the Oliners found that rescuers have a propensity to be more attached and committed to people in their relationships, and that they have a propensity to assume obligations and social responsibility for all other human beings, perceiving them as worthy and deserving of help, as well as empathy.

The Oliners offer eight processes that they deem to be helpful in promoting a more altruistic individual. Four processes are related to forming attachment to people in the immediate environment, which include bonding, empathizing, learning caring norms, and participating in caring behavior. And four processes are related to inclusiveness, which involves diversifying, network-
ing, reasoning, and forming global connections. By “bonding,” the Oliners mean forming enduring emotional attachment to people and places. These are objects—human and nonhuman—with which individuals feel intensely interconnected, related, affiliated, and identified. “Empathizing” implies understanding others’ thoughts and feelings, and in some cases even feeling what others feel. Like bonding, empathy encourages caring behavior, particularly in situations where others are in difficulty or in pain. A more caring society can come about as a result of individuals learning caring norms. Included among these norms are ethical rules and guidelines by which to live. Parents, for example, model caring norms when they treat their children with dignity. In order to effect a more caring society, one should also strongly encourage participation in caring behavior. This means that one should be involved in the processes of helping and develop competencies in order to be able to help. Among these skills, or competencies, should be listening, advocating, caring, and intervening directly on behalf of other people who are in pain. The Oliners suggest that these processes can be inculcated not only by parents and peers, but by schools and various other institutions as well.

The other four processes involve creating linkages, diversifying, networking, reasoning, and making global connections. By “diversifying,” the Oliners mean enlarging the group of people and objects with which one ordinarily interacts, eliminating the tendency to divide the world into “us” and “them.” “Networking” denotes another way of making linkages to other, broader societies. Unlike diversifying, which is getting to know someone or something different, networking implies joining with others for the purpose of achieving some common goal or objective. By “reasoning,” the Oliners mean forming rational solutions to problems based upon logic and empirical evidence, because such solutions have an important role to play in bringing about a more caring society. Making global connections connotes realizing the commonality of all humanity, and becoming aware of the shared problems and issues that concern us. Institutions of higher education have a major part to play in expanding global horizons for people.

Staub’s chapter addresses the issues of what makes for a more caring, helping, and nonaggressive society. He suggests that child socialization, cultural values and ideals, moral rules, empathy, and attachment are processes that help develop a better understanding
of others, and thereby lead to nonaggression while helping to connect people with each other.

Positive socialization and the experience of parental role models and how they cope with moral issues will affect the prosocial orientation of a child. Staub stresses the importance of warmth, affection, and interaction. Interaction with a child, even if it only lasts for ten minutes at a time, is a vitally important aspect of the development of a prosocial and empathic person. Staub stresses the importance of natural socialization, which consists of a child actually experiencing helping and caring for others. He puts heavy emphasis on child-rearing practices, which are strongly associated with prosocial or antisocial behavior. Connected with this is the development of positive self-identity, and the importance of emotional independence and the capacity for independent judgment. Staub emphasizes the role of the family in raising caring children. The family has to model justice and stress the connectedness with the rest of humanity.

Teachers and schools, however, also have an important role in the moral development of children; they should teach caring skills and give the student the opportunity to help others. Role playing is important in shaping morality. The type of personality that schools will turn out will depend upon its philosophy and its makeup. Schools can turn out authoritarian-type individuals or democratic-type individuals. Children in a democratic school can engage in moral discourse, be able to have a broader view of the world, and be able to take perspective of others more easily, while students who are educated in authoritarian schools will become more rigid, authoritarian-type individuals who may blindly obey malevolent authority.

Staub also addresses the important role that universities have to play. Teaching the subjects of history, sociology, anthropology, art, and literature are important because the student will gain information about diversity and other people's perspectives, views, and ideologies. This would help create a more nonviolent society.

Boland's chapter focuses on two points. He discusses the connection between altruism and beneficence. Then he uses the example of Alcoholics Anonymous as an institution actively engaged in altruistic behavior.

For Boland, altruism is a kind of benevolence that involves moral intuitions and a kind of spirituality. Altruism must be taught be-
cause one cannot innately acquire it. Teaching love and sensitivity to children involves risk. One has to stick one's neck out, because sometimes the norms of society are not prepared for such teaching. Some people believe that altruism might even be self-destructive. Caring for someone else may jeopardize one's own survival. Benevolence, for Boland, is a principle of love on a higher order, which may go unrecognized by the other person. A benevolent person seeks the very best for others, regardless of their personal merit or appeal.

Love, caring, understanding the troubles of alcoholics, helping them restore sobriety, creating an interdependent healing power, helping alcoholics to confront the destructiveness of alcoholism, providing the opportunity for self-revelation, and helping alcoholics to stay sober by providing them with a “sponsor,” an experienced recovering alcoholic, are some of the methods employed in the teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Heller and Mahmoudi chapter addresses the issue of the existence of altruism and extensivity in the Bahá'í religion. They call the Bahá'í religion a social movement whose aims are to develop an altruistically oriented, global society. Its members' aim is to transform civilization, but to transform themselves as well as their own social institutions. This is, in essence, the teaching of the Bahá'í faith, which is found in 205 different countries around the world.

The Bahá'í faith, as a matter of course, teaches peace. It is other oriented, and includes all people within its universe of social responsibility. It teaches spirituality, and the recognition that all people of both sexes are equal, as well as that all faiths are of great and equal value. Love, justice, and equality are crucial elements within the Bahá'í faith, and vital to its prosocial orientation is that it is a democratic kind of social movement. Caring and equity are powerful elements of the Bahá'í faith: "Let them at all times concern themselves with doing a kind thing for one of their fellows, offering to someone love, consideration, thoughtful help. Let them see no one as their enemy or as wishing them ill, but think of all human kind as their friend; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudices, drawing no lines."

Osiatyński, in his chapter, asks some timely questions dealing with whether a collectivist society such as the USSR is more altruistic than an individualistic society, and whether the current
transformation of Soviet society from collectivism to individualism will reduce prosocial orientation in the USSR. He assures us that, in his opinion, we shouldn’t be concerned because collectivism was never strongly associated with altruism in the USSR. Rather, he feels that altruism is associated with individualism. In Russia, and later in the Soviet Union, individualism was never encouraged, and it was difficult to transform people so that they act and behave as individuals with free will, personal freedom, and choices. In the balance of the chapter Osiatynski looks at individualism and collectivism and the kind of help rendered to the needy in Russian society. The Russian Orthodox Church is noted for the lack of affirmation of individualism. The church encourages the notion that a person who is in pain, poor, disabled, blind, and even mentally ill must suffer just like Jesus Christ did, and therefore it constitutes a moral obligation for the individual to help those people. This help was regarded as a moral self-improvement for the helper. The duty to help, to take pity, to give charity, was deeply embedded in Russian religious teachings. The Russian concept of altruism was propagated by the philosopher Vladimir Solovyev, who believed that all morality was based on three emotions: shame, pity, and pious adoration. For him, love of God, not of one’s fellow man, is the principle of charity. The principle of charity was hence well developed in Russian culture. For Marxism or Leninism, however, there was no place for charity, because for them, charity/altruism was merely a mask for capitalist selfishness and paternalism. The Soviet system was a substitute for charity, pity, philanthropy, and altruism. The new Soviet man or woman, by becoming a member of the Soviet system, no longer had need of charity and altruism, because the Marxist/Leninist system will provide all of their needs—the state will help, care, be concerned, and become responsible for all people. There is no need for paternalism of one group of people towards the other through the degrading action of giving somebody a handout.

More recently, there is a resurgence of charity in the Soviet system, because the population has come to realize that there is a need to help the unfortunate people at the bottom. The author Granin calls for the old-fashioned tradition of pity and “love for the fallen,” which was strongly advocated by Pushkin and Sholokhov. The state can no longer be a substitute for individual and private altruism. Since the state could not effect help for “the fallen,” Osiatynski feels that only through a successful transfor-
mation from collectivism to individualism will there be a foundation laid for individualistic altruism.

In sum, the Oliners and Staub offer empirically derived processes that are correlated with helping. Boland sees the AA as an institution actively engaged in helping victims of alcoholism, Heller and Mahmoudi inform us that the Bahá'í faith encourages the ethic of care and responsibility for all, and Osiatynski claims that only when the USSR can instill individualism in the Soviet person, with free will and the possibility of choices, will altruism take shape in the USSR.