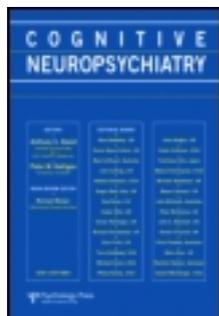


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### Pathological altruism isn't pathological or altruistic

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## Book Review

### Pathological altruism isn't pathological or altruistic

Oakley, B., Knafo, A., Madhavan, G., & Wilson, D. (Eds.). (2012). *Pathological altruism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. pp. 496. ISBN-10: 0199738572. £33.25

The objective of the edited volume *Pathological Altruism* (Oakley, Knafo, Madhavan, & Wilson, 2012) is ill defined. The editors don't do what would seem obvious in any psychological or philosophical text (especially one with evolutionary minded editors and contributors). They take it as a given that altruism exists and never discuss in depth the evolutionary origins of altruism or "pathological altruism" in nonhuman animals. They lament that the dark side of altruism hasn't received previous scrutiny and claim that altruism can be "the back door to hell" (p. 4). They see this volume as setting a foundation for what they hope will be a "focal point for a new field-pathological altruism-providing a nuanced counterbalance to the study of altruism" (p. 8).

Does altruism exist? From the perspective of evolutionary biology, altruism is defined as the phenomenon of an organism behaving in a way that helps other organisms at a cost to itself. This "cost" is what often trips up evolutionary scientists because when you scratch the surface of altruism there is, more often than not, a genetic or other downstream benefit which makes acts not truly altruistic. The two main explanations of altruism are kin selection, that is, helping others because they carry copies of your genes (Hamilton, 1964) and reciprocal altruism, helping others because there is some likelihood that they will help you in the future (Trivers, 1971). Kin selection is represented well by the answer that J. B. S Haldane gave when asked if he would give his life to save his drowning brother. He said "No, but I would to save two brothers or eight cousins" (McElreath & Boyd, 2007, p. 82). The inaptly named reciprocal altruism is "not really altruism at all; it could more accurately be described as enlightened self interest. One might be a fully reciprocating partner . . . without having the slightest concern for the welfare of the person one helps" (Singer, 2011, p. 42).

"If there is no altruism how can that which does not exist be pathological?" (Krueger, 2011, p. 396). The book's chapters cover everything

from the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (will aliens be altruistic?), Williams Syndrome (a disorder characterised by friendliness and empathy), genocide, and foreign aid. There is also anecdotal evidence about pathological altruists including Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (Chap. 11) and Mohandas Gandhi. In this volume, we are told that phenomena as various as gang violence, anorexia, and animal hoarding are examples of pathological altruism. With 31 chapters altogether, there was some good—even *great*—material; however, much of what I found most interesting really had nothing to do with pathological altruism. A couple of the most intriguing examples put forth are codependency and being battered or abused by one's spouse.

Codependency is said to share “roots with pathological altruism” and is defined as “behavior . . . that enables another's highly dysfunctional behavior” (McGrath & Oakley, 2012, p. 49). McGrath and Oakley (Chap. 4) posit that codependency is the result of individuals being unable to modulate their empathic response. They mostly explain codependency at a descriptive or proximate level by describing mirror neuron and oxytocin and vasopressin systems but never really get at the root of how and why codependency might have evolved. They connect codependency with battered women and make a case that this is consistent with the “Savanna Principle” (Kanazawa, 2004), otherwise known as mismatch theory. This idea posits that our evolved psychology is not ideally suited for problems in the modern environment and these mismatches may be at the root of certain pathologies (e.g., the fact that we fear snakes and spiders more than cars and cheeseburgers). Given an environment in which human violence is common, a violent mate could be an adaptive choice. “If a cave woman were in danger, she would probably prefer a brutal Stanley Kowalski between her and the threat, as opposed to a dweebish Barney Fife” (McGrath & Oakley, 2012, p. 56).

To his credit, Kanazawa's chapter, entitled “Battered Women, Happy Genes: There Is No Such Thing as Altruism, Pathological or Otherwise” (2012) calls out the premise of the book. He briefly explains how altruism is commonly understood amongst evolutionary biologists and delves into the ways that women who are in abusive relationships might be benefitting indirectly. His argument boils down to some evidence that battered women have significantly more sons, although this isn't that compelling as the difference between this group and the general population is just 1.6%. These results may be skewed by modern birth control practices and the possibility that intimate partner violence is a factor in women choosing to terminate pregnancies; perhaps if more babies were born to these couples, greater differences would emerge.

This apparently passive reaction to abuse isn't restricted to humans; scientists have been studying why females of many species don't fight against male coercive tactics. In scorpion flies, males bring females a nuptial gift or a protein globule in exchange for a mating (Thornhill, 1992). However, males

who cannot gain either of these enticements have a pincer on the ends of their tails with which they can force a mating, an adaptation for which females have no counteradaptation. In the majority of cases of species in which a male possesses such an adaptation females have no physiological countermeasure (Miller, 2003). These females may not have developed countermeasures to these grasping adaptations because the indirect genetic benefits of having coercive male offspring are greater than the lost direct benefits of mate choice or nuptial gift. This may be similar to the mechanism posited by Kanazawa where women “win by losing”, suffering direct costs but potentially gaining indirect benefits through their offspring. However, a more direct potential benefit may exist. Recently it has been found that women’s fear of crime predicts their preferences for a mate who is aggressively dominant and physically formidable, a man who is going to be more likely to engage in intimate partner violence (Snyder et al., 2011). Thus, McGrath and Oakley’s (2012) comment about a cave woman preferring Stanley Kowalski might have some merit.

In my opinion, the book contains no convincing case of a phenomenon that one could reasonably call pathological altruism. However, the perception of the phenomenon of pathological altruism existing might have to do with a combination of factors: (1) societal encouragement to engage in genetically selfish or other indirectly selfish behaviour by labelling it “altruism”; (2) mental modularity that causes people to espouse altruistic motives for their actions when these motives are not “true”; and (3) low dominance/status (perceived or real) that makes the social niche of being overly deferential and giving the most adaptive option. I’ll take these each in turn.

Singer asks:

Why is it that in almost every human society concern for one’s family is a mark of moral excellence? Why do societies . . . go out of their way to praise parents who put the interests of their children ahead of the interests of other members of the community? (2011, p. 36)

The answer he arrives at is that some acts in society that aren’t “really” altruistic are praised as such. Given that family members are more motivated by kin selection to take care of their own, there is greater utility to the group when this natural motivation is encouraged. The word “altruism” itself has been hijacked to reinforce people for doing things that are often in their own genetic self-interest as long as such things are also in the group’s best interests. Soldiers are praised as altruistic even if they enlisted when there was no war on the horizon and when given great incentives to do so.

Pathological altruism may have more to do with how people present their behavioural objectives than with their true motivation. Bernard Berofsky

(Chap. 20) writes the only chapter that deals deeply with the question of the existence of pathological altruism. He argues that one has to redefine altruism as “the motivation to be altruistic” to make the concept of pathological altruism work:

If we characterize altruistic behaviour in terms of motivation—and we have argued that we should—what becomes of pathological altruism if there is such a thing as normal altruism? If we look at the motives of the pathological altruist—guilt, the avoidance of pain (or the confronting of painful realities), the avoidance of conflict, the desire to control others, the desire to punish others—it turns out that pathological altruism is not altruism at all.... Perhaps then “pathological altruism” is an oxymoron. It is related to altruism in the way that fool’s gold is related to gold. (p. 269)

Thus, pathological altruism represents the self-deception involved in doing things that are really in our own self-interest. I use “self-deception” loosely. From the perspective of massive modularity, that is, the idea that our minds are composed of a huge number of problem-solving mechanisms, there really isn’t a self to deceive. The whole subjective feeling of behaving altruistically could be due to what Kurzban (2011) has called the “press secretary” module that represents your motivations to the outside world in a way that is most adaptive socially. Just as it may be in a press secretary’s best interests to be selectively ignorant of sinister motivations or corruption in a government, so may the press secretary module be kept in the dark about the true motives for altruistic actions. The book would have benefitted greatly from more of this perspective.

In many species, including many nonhuman primates, grooming is not given and received equitably. In rhesus macaques, males lower down in the hierarchy will even present and allow more dominant males to mount them (Vasey, 1995). Would we call this pathologically altruistic? Sometimes the most advantageous thing an organism can do is to allow others to take advantage. Daly and Wilson (1988) describe how men who are most likely to commit homicide are unmarried or mateless and unemployed, thus having less ability to attract a mate. At this potential reproductive dead end they can afford to take risks to ascend the status hierarchy because they have nothing to lose. There is an alternate strategy though, especially for those who are not violent or physically formidable, or for those in a society where aggression is not valued. Those low in dominance or social skills, and who receive cues that they are fundamentally lacking in social support, may find attempt to garner social capital by behaving selflessly. Certainly some of the chapters in the book—including animal hoarding, being victimised by those one is trying to help, and codependency—fit into this paradigm. However,

suicide bombings, genocide, and self-righteousness are likely more easily explained by straightforward personal incentives.

Given that at the time of writing this review the pregnancy of Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge, is making more news headlines than possible chemical warfare in Syria, one almost wishes that pathological altruism were a problem. Humans are mostly blind to ingroup prejudices and the suffering of those outside our circle of empathy. In the chapter on the failures of foreign aid (Madhavan & Oakley, 2012), the authors consider that altruistic motivation rather than a lack of commitment or the waning of state interest is at fault. Manipulating human selfishness for the greater good is a major focus of study for good reason. In building a whole book around the concept that altruism is a problem, the editors have ignored the fact that true motivation to help others is responsible for comparatively little suffering in the world.

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