

# Is altruism dead?

Studies indicate the desire to help others is deep-rooted but often masked or misunderstood

by Robert J. Trotter

In 1964 most Americans were shocked to hear that Kitty Genovese, a young New York City girl, had been murdered within sight and sound of 38 of her neighbors. Not one of them came to her rescue or even called the police. Since then similar cases have been reported. Some doctors fearing malpractice suits no longer stop to help accident victims and Americans in general often just walk on by.

Many persons feel that apathy and dehumanization are emerging as dominant characteristics of society because of today's sprawling urban civilization. Psychiatrists and psychologists are attempting to find out if these characteristics are replacing altruism and, if so, why.

One reason they may be is that altruistic motives are often looked upon with distrust and suspicion. The medical profession, for instance, sometimes tends to suspect living organ donors of being mentally ill or emotionally unbalanced and therefore excludes them from donation. "Experience indicates," says Dr. Jean Hamburger, a respected transplant pioneer and professor of medicine at the University of Paris, "that individuals who write to a transplant center in order to donate a kidney to a prospective recipient to whom they are not connected by any kind of emotional tie are frequently pathologic by psychiatric criteria." This type of thinking has become evident with the increase in human kidney transplants.

**Kidney transplants** are becoming more and more successful. Since survival rates are higher when the kidney comes from a living donor rather than a cadaver, the number of living transplants increases yearly. So do the associated behavioral and ethical problems.

Drs. Carl H. Hellner and Shalom H. Schwartz of the University of Wisconsin in Madison have tried to answer some of these problems. They feel that altruism and moral concern, rather than psychopathology, account for a person's willingness to be a donor. They have conducted a study indicating that the bias against living donors by the medical profession may be out of step with public opinion and that altruism still exists.

Written questionnaires were com-

pleted by 116 adults in a Midwestern city. Results published in the March 18, 1971 *NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE* show that "75 percent of respondents thought that success with unrelated donors was adequate to justify expanded use of the procedure." Sixty-three percent considered the continued use of live donors justified. Only 24 percent definitely ruled out donation of one of their kidneys to a stranger. The doctors also pointed out that the more schooling a person had the more likely he was to approve the use of unrelated and live donors. And the younger a respondent was, the more willing he was to personally donate a kidney.

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In discussing these findings the researchers admitted that their results might be called hypothetical because they do not reflect what a person would do when faced with the real question. In an effort to get around this type of problem and to put altruism in a more scientific light, researchers at the University of Oklahoma in Norman have developed experiments to prove altruism actually exists as a part of human nature.

Robert Frank Weiss, William Buchanan, Lynne Altstatt and John P. Lombardo report in the March 29, 1971 *SCIENCE* that recent laboratory experiments on altruistic behavior indicate that, under certain circumstances, people will help others despite the absence of an externally administered reward. They have found that "people will actually learn an instrumental conditioned response, the sole reward for which is to deliver another human being from suffering." These findings were based on an experiment in instrumental escape conditioning.

In these experiments a subject learns

to terminate a noxious stimulus (often an electric shock) by making an instrumental response. Termination of the shock is the reward, and the subject learns to increase the speed of his response in order to shorten the duration of the shock. In the Oklahoma experiment the shock was administered to another person and the learning results indicated that cessation of the other person's suffering (altruistic reward) has the same characteristics as conventional rewards of escape conditioning. The researchers conclude that "the roots of altruistic behavior are so deep that people not only help others, but find it rewarding as well."

The University of Wisconsin questionnaire and the University of Oklahoma experiments indicate that altruism does exist and that it may even be a deeply ingrained part of human nature. In the final analysis, however, a good Samaritan is sometimes hard to find.

**In an attempt** to find out why this is so in our hectic, mechanized society, Drs. John M. Darley of Princeton University and C. Daniel Batson, a theologian doing graduate work in psychology at Princeton, conducted an experiment that gives an interesting answer to the problem.

They recruited 40 volunteers from the Princeton Theological Seminary and attempted to find if they practice what they preach. Each seminarian was asked to prepare a brief talk. Then one by one in 15-minute intervals they were sent to another building to record their talk.

Lying in an alley between the two buildings was a young man coughing and groaning and possibly in pain. Of the 40 seminarians only 16 stopped to help. Twenty-four did not swerve from their path and one even stepped over the planted victim.

Some of the volunteers had been told that they would be early for the recording and that they should take their time. A second group had been told that it was time to go and that they would have to hurry. Those in a third group had been told that they were late and that they should rush. Of those in the first group 63 percent stopped to help. In the second group 45 percent stopped, and in the third group only 10 percent stopped.

Drs. Darley and Batson conclude that altruism exists but is demonstrated only under certain circumstances. The seminarians stopped to help not because of personality or character but because they had time to spare.

The experiment again shows that altruism, as a human condition, does exist. Americans are not being dehumanized by urbanization; they are often just in too much of a hurry to help their fellow man. □