# The SELF in SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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# Preface

Have you ever wondered why people read books on psychology? Judging by the popularity of such books, it seems that many people—perhaps yourself included—look to psychology to provide insights into the principles underlying their emotions, motives, thoughts, and actions. The fact that people are interested in these matters suggests that a concern with self-understanding is itself a very important principle of psychology. Of course, the public's interest in psychology is not the only indication that self-reflection is an important human preoccupation; indeed, an interest in our assets and liabilities, our values and desires, and even our thought processes is evident in much of our everyday behavior. It should come as no surprise, then, that psychologists have developed and tested theories about how people come to know and evaluate themselves. This book is intended to acquaint you with what experimental social psychology—the science of interpersonal thought and behavior—has to say about these processes.

You should not expect, though, to come away from this book with one perfectly integrated theory of the self in social psychology. This might have been possible a dozen years ago when social psychologists still looked primarily to a few theoretical masters—C. H. Cooley (1902), G. H. Mead (1934), or William James (1890)—for enlightenment on the key aspects of self-reflection. But in the recent history of social psychology, a curious event has taken place. Researchers and theorists in a variety of distinct areas of inquiry, working separately on different problems, have all found it useful to invoke ideas about the self to explain what they have found. These ideas often have strong connections with the writings of the early theorists, but more often than not, they go

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# The Self in Prosocial Action

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The topic of this chapter is a paradox. To be self-centered, self-interested, or just plain selfish, you see, is to hold the concerns of other people in callous disregard. But *prosocial action* means precisely those behaviors such as helping, kindness, and generosity that have in common a strong regard for the interests of others. How, then, could the self be involved in prosocial action? When is it selfish to share your last cookie, to comb a knee-deep carpet for someone's contact lens, or at the extreme, to risk your life for a stranger's safety? Although such "selfless" actions seem almost impossible to reconcile with the common conception of "selfish" motivation, several streams of social psychological research indicate that there are remarkable links between these apparent opposites. This chapter presents four current views of this curious connection.

In the first section, the possibility that we may consider others as though they were ourselves is introduced; the operation of *empathy* is one way in which positive forms of social behavior may be motivated by selfish desires. Another wellspring of prosocial action is our *experience* of ourselves; that self-perceptions and social feedback suggesting we are helpful may lead us to continuing helpful behavior is the topic of the second section. The third section develops the idea that each person is sensi-

tive to certain *standards* for the self; some of these ideals or expectations incorporate concern for others and thus may serve as guides to altruistic behavior. Finally, a fourth section explores the relationship between *attention* to the self and action that benefits others; as it turns out, self-focused attention provides a common theme for understanding empathy, experience, and standards, and so furnishes a useful way of thinking about the topic as a whole.

Imagine a child on a snowy sidewalk in a big city. It is early evening, and people are hurrying by as she stands alone, bundled against the weather, her small face illuminated by the shop window that holds a baby doll. She has been there for many minutes, gaze fixed on the tiny toy, and she shivers ever so slightly as she rubs her mittenless hands on her coat sleeves. Do you feel the slightest bit uneasy about the child? Want her to have the doll? Relax. Her family is in a Winnebago parked at the curb, and right now they are foreclosing the mortgage on the shopkeeper as well as on the owner of a mitten market just down the street. The point here is not that the child is in distress, but that you might be—as a result of your empathy with her.

In general, empathy is the feeling of distress or elation that comes when a person observes the suffering or good fortune of another (Stotland, 1969). Shedding a tear at a sad movie or feeling all warm and cuddly at one that ends happily are both examples of empathic emotional responses. Since these responses arise not from our own immediate experiences but rather from the observation of others' experiences, they seem to represent "extensions" of ourselves to include others. That the sharing of emotions in this way can lead to the sharing of favors, kindness, and prosocial action generally, is the assumption held by a number of theorists (e.g., Hoffman, 1976; Staub, 1978) and serves as the theme of this section.



## ORIGINS OF EMPATHY

It would be easy to explain the phenomenon of empathy if everyone in the world shared one big body. Emotions would be shared, too, because of the physical connection, and we would just have to be careful not to let anyone hiccup. Since we are separate beings, however, it is necessary to understand how one person may experience the plight of another as though it were a personal experience. It seems that there are two sources of information that allow us to do this. First, we may perceive directly the *emotional expression* of a person and react empathically to it. Second, we may perceive the *emotion-producing situation* a person is in and, by understanding its impact on people generally, develop an empathic response.

Reacting to the emotional expressions of others (crying when they cry, laughing when they laugh) is a form of imitation, and it appears to develop very early in life. There is recent evidence that imitation of facial expression and hand movement occurs in newborn infants (Meltzoff & Moore, 1977), and it probably comes as no surprise to nursery attendants that newborns cry more often when another infant is crying (Simner, 1971). We seem predisposed by our biological inheritance to respond to the behavior of others with similar behavior of our own. It is interesting to note, though, that this tendency may stem in part from a basic confusion between ourselves and others. Hoffman (1976) has proposed, in line with the ideas of Piaget (1965), that the infant's reactions to others' emotions occur because the infant cannot yet distinguish self from other.

A good example of this apparent confusion is found in the research by Simner (1971) on the newborn's crying response. It has frequently been observed that infants engage in repetitive actions —grasping a rattle over and over, kicking the same way several times in succession, and so on. Piaget (1963) calls such repetition a "primary circular reaction" and suggests that it has an important function in the development of complex actions. According to Simner, the infant's tendency to chime in when another infant is crying is traceable to a simple error in this process. The infant

mistakes the cries of another for his or her own and then joins in, thinking that the cries are merely being repeated. To test this idea, Simner played a variety of tape-recorded cries and noises to newborns; he found that they were most likely to cry when the recording most nearly resembled their own cry. Empathy at this early age comes from accepting the emotional expressions of others as those of the self.

Unfortunately, this form of empathy with which we are genetically endowed does not really lead us to become concerned for others. If we are concerned, it is for ourselves. Young children who become distressed at the sight of another in trouble often seek out their own mothers rather than trying to find comfort for the person in need. Hoffman (1976) has observed that it is only through an appreciation of the difference between self and others that empathic distress can be translated into action aimed at the other's relief. So, while empathic emotions may occur early in life as primitive extensions of the self, they are not sufficient alone to produce prosocial action.

Developing children come to understand a number of interrelated facts that eventually allow them to grasp the meaning of others' emotional expressions and emotion-producing situations. The facts that self and other are different, that they may have different thoughts, and that they may experience different emotional states, for example, are all understood with increasing age and experience. All of this knowledge can be summarized in terms of what Flavell and his colleagues (1968) call *role-taking ability* —the capacity to understand situations from the perspective of another person. The child who can take the role of his babysitter, then, may understand the sobs coming from behind the refrigerator and loosen the ropes on her wrists. Seeing a situation from the perspective of a person in distress clarifies the nature of the person's emotional expression and often also suggests how the situation might be modified to reduce its discomforting qualities. Instead of seeking solace for the self, the person who has developed the ability to construct a reasonable mental representation of others' emotion-producing situations can be motivated by empathic arousal to provide solace for others.



### OPERATION OF EMPATHY

Among adults—who generally have developed the facility to take the perspective of others—the influence of others' emotional experiences can be very dramatic. Experiments in which adults have been exposed to the severe suffering of others—watching a film on sawmill accidents, for example (Lazarus et al., 1965)—show that strong physiological reactions such as increased heart rate and perspiration are often the result. Why, then, don't adults always offer help in situations that allow it? Research on this issue has suggested two possible mechanisms that can short-circuit the "empathic emotion + role taking = prosocial action" relationship.

One process that can dissipate the positive effects of empathy involves the misattribution of emotion. As noted in Chapter 4, there are many cases in which individuals may misinterpret their own emotions, attributing them to causes that are not the real ones. A person may become aroused in anticipation of speaking before a large group, for instance, and then, on meeting an old flame, misinterpret the arousal as rekindled love. In the same way, the arousal that comes from an empathic reaction to another's misfortune may be misattributed to a variety of other potentially arousing events (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977). The empathic emotion that could arise on seeing an accident victim, for example, might be mistaken for a quite different kind of emotion if Braniff flight 27 roared close overhead just as the victim was encountered. The victim would be less likely to receive help as a result. In the turmoil and potential danger that accompany emergencies and other occasions for prosocial action, there are many distractions that may dampen the influence of empathic arousal in just this way.

Another variable that has special consequences for the effects of emotion on prosocial action is the extent to which the potential helper takes the perspective of the person in need; the fact that adults are capable of role taking does not mean they always do it. In fact, research by Stotland (1969) has shown that people can be instructed to take the role of another and can also be

instructed not to. Individuals asked to imagine how a person feels show unusually strong physiological reactions when the person suffers, whereas those who are asked merely to observe the person, noting how he or she reacts, are less likely to evidence such strong empathic responses. Failure to take the role of a suffering person suppresses not only the understanding of the person's situation but also the actual experience of empathic emotion.

When you are walking down the street on a Sunday afternoon and find yourself in a position to offer aid—say, to a person in a wheelchair who needs help to negotiate a curb—no one runs up to you with a freshly mimeographed page of instructions on how to take the role of the person in need or how to avoid it. The variations in role taking studied by Stotland tend to occur naturally in these settings. With close friends, with people you see as very similar to you, or with people in situations you yourself have encountered, it is quite easy to take their roles and to empathize. On the other hand, you might find it easier to take the roles of certain tree stumps than to adopt the perspectives of enemies, people you think are strange, or people whose situations are entirely foreign to your experience. As a rule, you probably understand the perspectives, and hence the predicaments, of only a limited number of people in your life. For this reason, it is likely that the sorrows of many people simply will not move you to action.

What happens in this case, when a person observes the suffering of another but fails to adopt the other's point of view? A study by Aderman, Brehm, and Katz (1974) has shown that those people who are instructed merely to observe a person suffering unpleasant electric shocks, as compared with those who are asked to empathize, are more likely to *derogate* the sufferer. They hold the sufferer personally responsible for the unpleasant experience and conclude that the sufferer is the kind of person who deserves to be shocked. Even when the person being observed experiences no pain, empathy and nonempathy instructions have a similar effect. Asked to report why a person engaging in a conversation behaved in a particular way, observers given empathy instructions answer by pointing out *situational factors* such as the conversation



setting or partner, while observers given no empathy instructions more often emphasize *personal factors* such as the person's style and character (Regan & Totten, 1975). With empathy, then, we come to appreciate the situations that impinge on others, both subtle (a conversation partner) and unsubtle (a shock). Without empathy, we see others' experiences as their own doing and view their misfortunes with scorn.

The research summarized in this section indicates that the connection between empathy and prosocial action is a very fragile one. Developing only slowly from the rudiments of empathic emotion present in the infant, the capacity to extend the self to others and thereby to become mindful of their fate can be undermined in many ways. Even if developed properly, empathy can be ravaged by distracting emotional events and is rarely channeled toward those persons whose perspectives are difficult to understand. For this reason, it is fortunate that empathy is not the only path from selfishness to prosocial action. People often engage in kindly and helpful behavior without the strong emotional provocation that is essential to empathic arousal. Thus, although some measure of empathic role taking is necessary for individuals to recognize the needs of others in any setting, there are additional forms of selfishness that may motivate positive social acts when empathic emotion is absent or inoperative.

## EXPERIENCE UNDERSTANDING OF SELF

What if you woke up one morning and found yourself squeezing an otter? Since no one asked you to do this, offering rewards or threatening your life, and since there are few other good reasons for such behavior, you would probably have some explaining to do should people notice. "Why are you squeezing that otter?" they might ask. Because you would look even more ridiculous if you couldn't explain, your response might be to suggest that you like it. You go in for that sort of thing. You are the kind of person who squeezes any otter that becomes available. While this example is somewhat extreme, the fact is that we are often

induced to behave in certain ways by causes that we cannot decipher; rather than waking in the morning engaged in an inexplicable activity, we may find ourselves performing it for mysterious reasons at high noon. When this happens, we may attribute characteristics to ourselves as a means of understanding our own actions. This is the process of *self-perception* discussed in Chapter 3.

At the same time, other people may also be baffled by our actions (perhaps even more than we are) and find it necessary to explain things for themselves in a similar way; they attribute a characteristic to us ("This person is obviously an otter squeezer"). When they tell us what we are like, this *social feedback* adds even more to our experience of ourselves. Both self-perception and social feedback, then, are processes by which we come to understand what kinds of people we are, what we like and dislike, and what goals motivate us to action. These processes can contribute to prosocial behavior. When people engage in behaviors that produce no apparent benefits for themselves but have positive effects on others, they may become more likely to engage in similar behaviors on future occasions—either because they perceive themselves as helpful or because others have pointed this out for them. Once a person has experienced the self as a saint, a hero, or a philanthropist, it seems natural to go on doing good deeds.

## SELF-PERCEPTION OF HELPFULNESS

A classic experiment by Freedman and Fraser (1966) was the first to suggest that prosocial action might be produced through self-perception. In a study of what they called the "foot-in-the-door technique," these researchers arranged for 156 Palo Alto housewives to receive a phone call from an experimenter who identified himself as a representative of the "California Consumers Group." He asked each woman if she would be willing to allow five or six men from the group's staff to come into her home for two hours one morning to enumerate and classify all her household products; they would need full freedom to go through all the cupboards and storage spaces in the house. As you might



expect, the housewives were not too thrilled at this, and when the phone call was the only contact made, only 22 percent agreed to allow it. However, some of the women had been called three days in advance by the same experimenter and asked to perform a relatively less demanding favor. He had requested their help in conducting a survey and had obtained their responses to eight brief questions (e.g., "What brand of soap do you use in your kitchen sink?"). Among these women, the response to the large second request was much more favorable; almost 53 percent agreed to have the squad of nosy men descend on their house. Since this might be explained by suggesting that the housewives had merely become familiar with the caller, Freedman and Fraser also arranged for some of their subjects to receive an initial contact in which the caller only introduced the name of his group and its purpose. The finding that less than 28 percent of these women agreed to the later large request indicates that the act of answering the questions was critical for the occurrence of the "foot-in-the-door" effect.

In a second experiment, Freedman and Fraser demonstrated that it doesn't matter what foot is in the door. When different experimenters made the first and second requests, when they did so on behalf of different organizations, and even when they asked for very different favors, the phenomenon was still observed. Those subjects who granted a small initial favor (of any kind, to anyone, and for any good cause) were more inclined to do a big favor later on. Freedman and Fraser argued that the only satisfactory way to explain such a general phenomenon was to suggest that a change in an individual's understanding of the self followed the granting of a small favor. In essence, the person comes to see the self as one who does that sort of thing; when a later request comes along, the person acts on this new self-view and thus may grant an even larger favor.

Though Bem's (1967) self-perception theory (see Chapter 3) was published after Freedman and Fraser's work, quite a bit of evidence has accumulated to suggest that the foot-in-the-door phenomenon is consistent with the theory. One idea suggested by the theory, for example, is that an initial favor granted for a

strong reason should not result in later helpfulness. When one gives help because of a threat or an offer of reward, such reasons alone justify the action and no self-attribution of helpfulness is called for. In fact, research by Batson and his colleagues (1978) shows that when people are paid for helping someone do a task, they see themselves as less helpful and cooperative than when they do it for nothing. Doctors, nurses, police, Red Cross workers, and other professional helpers probably see themselves as "good Samaritans" only when they are underpaid.

Self-perception theory would also predict that the *failure* to give aid the first time, especially if such failure did not seem attributable to strong reward or cost considerations, would lead people to see themselves as *non*helpers and thus to avoid offering assistance at the next opportunity. Precisely this effect has been observed by Snyder and Cunningham (1975). However, Cialdini and his coworkers (1975) have observed an even stronger effect in the opposite direction under the conditions of their own study. What happened was this. These researchers first guaranteed that subjects would fail to help on the initial request by having the experimenter ask each subject to volunteer two hours of time per week for a minimum of two years as a counselor for the County Juvenile Detention Center. Of course, everyone said no. Then, the experimenter made another request, asking subjects to act as chaperones for a group of young people from the center on a trip to the zoo. As compared with a group of subjects who received only the appeal for help with the zoo trip, those subjects who initially rejected the absurdly large request were *more* likely to volunteer. Additional experiments by the Cialdini group and by Cann, Sherman, and Elkes (1975) have shown that this exception to the self-perception reasoning occurs because of an even stronger tendency that appears only under certain conditions—the tendency to bargain. When the same person makes the first and second requests, and when they are separated by only a short time interval, the second request is taken as a concession ("Well, if you won't do that, maybe you'll do this") and therefore is more likely to be accepted. So, if you need to borrow a friend's car for the evening, you might first ask to use it for the harvesting season.



A different kind of variation on the rules of self-perception has been detected by Crano and Sivacek (1978). These researchers conducted a typical foot-in-the-door study by calling people and asking for a small favor—responses to ten questions. While one set of subjects received a simple, courteous call and thanks for their help afterward, another set of subjects got a much more pleasant treatment. They were met by a barrage of compliments as they answered the questions, and on ending the call, the experimenter said, "Thank you very much for your time. Your responses will really help our survey. Thank you again, and have a nice day." Needless to say, the responses of subjects in this second group to a later phone request were more positive than those of subjects in the "neutral" group. At first glance, these findings appear to contradict self-perception theory; presumably a large reward encountered in the initial incident should undermine a subject's tendency to infer that he or she is a helpful person, and hence should lead to decreased aid in the second incident. But, as pointed out by self-perception theorists (e.g., Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973), an *unanticipated* reward cannot be seen as a good reason for acting, and so does not detract from a self-attribution. In this study, the pleasant first episode probably increased later helping because the unusually thankful experimenter made subjects feel they were exceptionally helpful people.

### SOCIAL FEEDBACK

In addition to perceiving ourselves, we often find out about our qualities from communications with others. Such communications may offer us a self-label in a very direct way ("You are helpful"), or they may offer indirect information (like the thankfulness and gratitude of Crano and Sivacek's experimenter) that leaves it up to us to infer our qualities. Whether obvious or subtle, the social feedback we receive acts as another source of self-knowledge and understanding, and therefore may have profound effects on our future behaviors. In one sense, social feedback is merely a supplement to self-perception. Other people observe our actions and may make some of the inferences about us that we fail to draw for ourselves. But since other people can exaggerate, ignore, or

even invent information about us, social feedback is not tied as strictly to our observable behavior as is self-perception. Self-labels obtained through feedback from others, because they can be somewhat independent of our previous behaviors, can instill radically new action tendencies. While some of these secondhand labels could have disastrous behavioral consequences ("Mommy, Freddy says I'm the type of person who can eat light bulbs!"), others may plant the seed of prosocial action ("Mommy, Lulu says I'm a good helper").

Studies of the impact of direct social feedback on prosocial behavior have generally shown its effectiveness. Miller, Brickman, and Bolen (1975), for instance, found that children in a fifth grade class who were told that they *were* neat and tidy—by their teacher, the principal, and the school janitor—actually littered less and cleaned up more than children who were told *to be* neat and tidy. In research along the same lines, Jensen and Moore (1977) gave social feedback to boys suggesting either that they were highly competitive ("You don't settle for second best but climb right to the top") or highly cooperative ("You play fair, are willing to share, and don't get pushy with others"). When pairs of boys were later asked to build towers of blocks together, a task in which competition usually leads to a pile of rubble, the pairs in which both boys had received cooperative labels built much taller towers.

The labels others apply to us apparently can be quite sticky, and it is interesting to consider why this is so. In part, the acceptance of social feedback can be explained in terms of self-presentation (see Chapter 7); we find it convenient to present ourselves to others as they would have us be. But since people may accept a label from one person and later behave in accord with it in the presence of others, it appears that social feedback can become a stable feature of self-understanding and is therefore more than a momentary ploy to gain approval. This stability derives from a number of processes, two of which are of special interest. First, social feedback can become internalized because it leads to biased processing of self-information. Because labels are typically very general and abstract ("You are generous"), there



are probably several instances of one's behavior that can be brought to mind that are consistent with any label. The label may be accepted over time, then, because the labeled person makes a biased search of self information, both in memory and in ongoing experience, looking for facts that are consistent with the label (see Chapter 5). Told that you are generous, you may agree only casually at the time. But given some time to observe yourself with that label in mind, and to remember past behaviors that could fit, you might adopt the label quite strongly because of all the confirming evidence that becomes available. A second process that tends to multiply the force of social feedback occurs when others behave toward you on the basis of their labels for you. If the people around you believe that you are a helpful and generous person, for example, they may more often ask you for help, and thereby give you more frequent opportunities to observe yourself in prosocial action (Snyder & Swann, 1978).

Despite these processes that encourage the incorporation of social feedback, self-labels are often rejected. Imagine, for example, that the next time your upstairs neighbors organize a roller derby in the bedroom over yours, you decide to use labeling tactics. You take them aside and comment on their unusual quietness and consideration. Unless they take this as a sign of your impending mental collapse and cooperate just to pacify you, it is likely that your strategy will fail. When people hold very definite ideas about themselves, as these neighbors probably do, such assumptions (see Chapter 1) or schemas (see Chapter 5) can lead them to reject contradictory social feedback. It is primarily when people have only vaguely formulated conceptions of their qualities in an area that social feedback about that area is effective.

The self-perception and social feedback processes addressed in this section, in sum, are ways in which people experience and understand themselves; appropriate experience and knowledge can bring about prosocial action. How is it, though, that people know when they are prosocial or antisocial, good or bad, in the first place? For someone confused about these qualities, even the most humanitarian actions could be fuel for antisocial self-labels ("I'm helping this accident victim because I'm the type who

loves a good moan"). The way we organize self-information into "good" and "bad" categories, and the way such *self-evaluation* contributes to prosocial action, are treated in the sections to come.

## STANDARDS: EVALUATION OF SELF

Do you have a scrapbook? A box of memorabilia? A desk drawer that holds all those snapshots, newspaper clippings, certificates, merit badges, valentines, report cards, ID cards, and other things that your mother began collecting for you? In the years since you first became aware of yourself as an object of thought and evaluation, you have collected much more than just these trinkets. You have accumulated a tremendous store of self-information —facts, ideas, behaviors, labels, interpretations, and very likely, memories of how well or how poorly you thought of yourself in many different episodes. No doubt, you draw on this bank of information in deciding on how to behave in each situation you encounter. Faced with the decision of whether to visit a friend in the hospital or to work on your latest cheese sculpture, you may reflect on particular past events or on general themes in your past self, and end up choosing the activity that this information suggests would produce the most positive future self-evaluation (see Vallacher & Solodky, 1979). But merely saying that people want to be good—to obtain positive self-evaluations —does not tell us whether they will behave in prosocial ways in a particular new situation. It is necessary to know what *standards* of self-evaluation they are using in this instance, and also what behavior would bring the self in line with the standard.

### POTENTIAL STANDARDS

When are you pleased with yourself? Clearly, many of the choice pieces in your memorabilia collection represent such moments of self-congratulation, joy, and contentment. That is why you have kept them. The wide variety of objects you may have collected,



however, suggests that there are many sources of positive self-views. Your self-concept has surpassed many different standards. Though you probably do not keep mementos of failure (old body casts, photos of people who hate you, etc.), there are many broken standards as well. As an aid in exploring these many standards, it is useful to consider them in terms of a few broad categories. So, based on the work of several theorists (most notably, Kohlberg, 1976; but also, French & Raven, 1959; Haan, 1977; Kelman, 1961; Loevinger, 1966; Wegner, 1975), a handy list is presented in Table 6.1. Although the list is relatively complete, and could therefore be used to evaluate many different qualities and activities of the self, it is designed to be specifically useful in considering the *moral* self-evaluation that underlies prosocial actions.

TABLE 6.1. Standards of Self-Evaluation

1. *The pain standard.* A person views the self more positively when the self is successful in avoiding physical pain, punishment, loss, or other unpleasant experience.
2. *The pleasure standard.* A person views the self more positively when the self is successful in obtaining pleasure, rewards, the gratification of physical needs, or other enjoyable experience.
3. *The approval standard.* A person views the self more positively when the self is liked by others, given approval by them, or incorporated into their group.
4. *The normative standard.* A person views the self more positively when the self compares favorably to others or to tokens of normal, typical behavior such as rules, conventions, and laws.
5. *The justice standard.* A person views the self more positively when the self participates in fair, balanced, and reciprocal relations with others.

One unusual feature of the list is that any one standard could serve as the basis for a prosocial action. Consider, for example, a prosocial act like washing your family's dinner dishes. The pain standard could induce you to do this if everyone in the household filed into your room brandishing weapons while your mother explained that it was your job. The pleasure standard might come

into play if your family withheld your dessert until you had put in time at the sink. If you thought they might dislike you because you avoided the dishes, the approval standard would be operating, whereas if you were concerned with breaking the family rules, the normative standard would be involved. Finally, if you realized that it would only be fair to take your turn, you would be accepting the justice standard as a means of evaluating yourself. It is possible that any standard, any combination of standards, or even all the standards could be present and operating in the production of a single prosocial act.

Several additional features of these self-standards deserve comment. First, it should be pointed out that any standard could also serve as grounds for *avoiding* prosocial action. Probably one of the strongest reasons why people fail to help the victims of ongoing violent crimes like robbery, assault, and rape, for example, is that the pain standard guides them to retreat from personal danger. Second, the standards are listed in an important sequence. Those standards near the top of the list are generally more likely to engage a person in activity that benefits the person alone, and are therefore only infrequently sources of prosocial action. Those standards near the end of the list, in comparison, are more often the bases of prosocial action. In this sense, the list represents a sequence arranged in order from personal to prosocial standards. A third feature of the list is that the sequence from personal to prosocial involves a series of steps of increasingly complex thought about the self. Reactions to pain, at the simplest level, seem to require no self-reflection at all. Anticipating pleasure, however, requires some planning and thus depends on the person's ability to extend thoughts of the self into the future. Gaining approval entails realizing that both pain and pleasure can be associated with certain sources—other people—and that others' evaluations of the self are therefore important. Sensitivity to norms and rules, in turn, can occur only when the individual becomes capable of comparing the self and others along a common dimension. Justice, the most complex self-evaluation process, requires the added ability to calculate a balance of resources among the self and others. With increasing complexity in thought about the self, then, the person becomes responsive to standards of self-evaluation that are more likely to result in prosocial action.



### STANDARD SALIENCE

When a person enters a particular situation, both the person and the situation determine what standards are most important for self-evaluation. The person enters into the equation because people differ in the importance they attach to each standard. You probably know people who are unusually pleasure oriented, for instance, or others who thrive on "going by the rules." As a person grows up and develops moral maturity and a complex view of the self, he or she moves through stages of moral development that correspond to the sequence of self-standards. So, while young children may be sensitive only to pain or pleasure, moral adults are capable of evaluating themselves in terms of their adherence to more prosocial standards. As people move up through the stages, they become more and more likely to help, share, and become concerned for others (see, e.g., Gunzburger, Wegner, & Anooshian, 1977).

The situation is also crucial in determining the relative impact of the five standards. Certain situations are loaded with opportunities to experience pain, while others may have in store unusual pleasures, strong approval, many rules, or a potential for the pursuit of justice. Although people in lower stages of moral development may have difficulty appreciating higher standards even when the situation makes them stand out, the average adult is probably capable of responding to most of the higher standards. For this reason, situational variations in the salience of standards are usually more important than personal variations in determining the overall importance to an adult in a particular situation. You, for example, could no doubt discern without great effort the likelihood that an act in a specific setting would result in change in self-evaluation on each of the five standards. As one case, consider the act of "clapping erasers" for a professor after class. A slight negative self-evaluation could be produced by this on the pain standard because of the trouble, the chalk dust on your navy sweater, and so on. Pleasure wouldn't enter in at all. Approval

could produce a very positive self-evaluation because the professor would like you. Unless your school had strange rules, or the professor had done something to deserve your "repayment," the importance of both the normative and justice standards would be minimal. In short, in deciding whether to do this, you would be deciding on whether the approval was worth the pain.

The salience of standards, as determined by both person and situation, enters into the production of prosocial action in two ways. First, in the self-perception process, a person makes inferences about the self in terms of the standards. Recall Bem's (1967) argument that the self is seen as prosocial when there are no strong reasons for prosocial action. Avoiding pain and approaching pleasure are the strong reasons Bem had in mind. So, when the salience of the pain and pleasure standards is low, but a person does a prosocial act nonetheless, the person infers that the behavior occurred so as to produce a positive self-evaluation on a higher, more prosocial standard. These self-inferences are often bolstered by social feedback, and over time, they make people more sensitive to the potential self-evaluations that could accrue from higher-level standards. In addition to shaping the processes of self-perception and social feedback, the salience of standards also shapes the processes whereby self-understanding is later transformed into action. A person who has observed the self frequently acting so as to produce positive self-evaluations on the approval standard, for instance, will later be most likely to behave prosocially in settings where the approval standard can be met through prosocial action.

This cyclic process leads people to move up from lower to higher standards for self-evaluation. Although people frequently act on an understanding of the self, acting so as to bring the self into line with a salient standard (see Chapter 2), they may occasionally behave in such a way that the sought-after self-evaluation is unclear. When this happens, self-perception and social feedback processes can suggest to them that a positive self-evaluation has been achieved on some new, previously unencountered standard. One who is already sensitive to the pain, pleasure, and approval standards, for example, may find the self behaving in a prosocial way in a situation where none of these standards is salient. The person might then discover, through self-perception or the comments of others, that normative standards underlie positive self-views in this setting. Appreciation of such standards, and behavior designed to meet them, would be the result. We find new standards for the self when the ones we already hold are insufficient to explain our actions.



Standards of self-evaluation, in summary, are implicated in every phase of prosocial action. Beginning with simple standards—pain and pleasure—that are shared with our animal friends in farmyards and forests, we as human beings develop the capacity to view ourselves in terms of progressively more complex standards. These higher-level ideals can then motivate us to behave in more prosocial ways. The standards that are salient in a particular setting, both because of our personal sensitivity to them and because of their prominence in the situation, motivate us toward action. Actions are more likely to be prosocial, in turn, when higher-level standards are salient.

## ATTENTION: AWARENESS OF SELF

Suppose you have just finished lunch in a small restaurant. Your party has headed toward the cashier, no one is seated nearby, and the waitress has excused herself to go home because her shift is over. You are alone at the table, and though the service was fine, you hesitate as you count out change for the tip. Why do it? If no one sees, no one cares, right? Just walk away and keep the change. But wait—there *is* someone there. It's you. If, for whatever reason, you are reminded of yourself, you will probably do the right thing and leave the tip. Seeing yourself in a mirror might be enough to remind you; noticing that the local TV news team is crouched under your table, cameras rolling, would do it for sure. That self-focused attention can make people aware of themselves and thus move them to behave in accord with prosocial standards is a possibility suggested by the theory of self awareness (see

Chapter 2) The research devoted to this idea is the topic of this section.

### SELF-FOCUS AND HELPING

The notion that people may experience variations in self-awareness is the central principle of self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975). As the theory has it, when people become self-aware (because of self-focusing stimuli such as mirrors, cameras, other people, or symbols of the self), they become extraordinarily concerned with the discrepancy between their present selves and their ideal selves. They become more likely to evaluate themselves in terms of the salient standards for self-evaluation, and thus they more often behave in prosocial ways when prosocial standards are available.

Several studies of helping behavior published in the last few years have hinted at this connection. Schwartz and Gottlieb (1976), for instance, found that the victim of a violent theft was more often aided when bystanders knew that someone was aware of their response. Enzle and Harvey (1977) showed that people were more likely to give help to another when a third party was to be aware of whether or not help was given, and also when the potential recipient of help was to be aware that a request for assistance had been made on her behalf. These studies are relevant to the relationship between self-focus and helping because, as the theory suggests, people often become self-aware when they know others are watching them. Yet the fact that another person's awareness was the vehicle by which the potential helper was made self-aware in these studies allows for an alternate interpretation. It could be that subjects were merely trying to look good to the others because the awareness of others made the approval standard salient in the situation (see Reis & Gruzen, 1976). Though the effects of self-presentation strategies are interesting in their own right (see Chapter 7), the crucial question of whether prosocial action tendencies are increased when people try to look good to *themselves* cannot be answered by such research.

A study by Duval, Duval, and Neely (1978), however, makes this point quite nicely. In each of two experiments, subjects' attention was guided toward themselves without the aid of others' awareness. One study used the tactic of showing the subject his or her image on a video monitor; if you've ever seen yourself on TV, you know what a powerful self-focusing stimulus this is. Each subject was made self-aware in this way during a session in which a videotape about the epidemic proportions of venereal disease was also shown. But while some subjects saw their video image either immediately before or after the VD tape, others saw it either four minutes before or four minutes after. When subjects in these groups were later asked to indicate the degree to which they, as members of an apathetic general public, were responsible for failing to stop the epidemic, and also whether they would be willing to assist in the prevention program by donating money and time, striking differences arose between groups. Those subjects who saw their images immediately before or after the tape were more likely to say they were responsible and would help. The subjects who saw their images either four minutes before or four minutes after, in contrast, were less likely to accept responsibility or offer aid; their responses resembled those of a control group that did not see themselves on TV at all. Since the second experiment by these researchers showed a similar effect using a different manipulation of self-focus (subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire about themselves), it seems fair to say that an awareness of self close in time to an awareness of the needs of others is conducive to prosocial action.



Now, before you decide to solve the problems of the world by outfitting all the needy with cameras and mirrors, it should be recognized that the relationship between self-focus and helping can be aborted or modified in several ways. For the same reason that it is difficult to keep track of activities in all three rings at the circus, for instance, it is often impossible to focus simultaneously on the self and on the other in need. Attention toward the self, aside from bringing standards into view, may make it less likely that the needs of others will be recognized. And, in addition to this "divided focus" problem, there is yet another complication. A recurrent theme in this chapter has been the idea that prosocial

action, especially in emergencies, entails some direct danger to the self. Making someone self-aware during such an emergency could cause him or her to burst into flame—in a psychological sense. Extreme self-concern and fear for one's own well-being could often be the result of self-focus because lower-level self-standards are salient in the situation. Needless to say, this would interfere with prosocial action.

Experiments by Gibbons and his colleagues (1978) and by Gotay (1978) have provided clear evidence in support of this possibility. In the five studies Gibbons and his associates conducted, self-focus was often found to *reduce* the likelihood of helping; in the study by Gotay, a similar consequence was observed under certain conditions. Whether self-focus increased or decreased the incidence of aiding behavior in these investigations was a matter of the salience of self-evaluation standards. When Gibbons et al. made the justice standard salient by making subjects feel they had been unfairly overpaid for doing a task, self-focus increased helping; when Gotay highlighted the normative standard by placing signs advocating helping all over the walls of her laboratory, helping was also enhanced by self-focus. But when prosocial standards were not emphasized in these studies, or when more personal standards were featured (as when Gibbons et al. arranged for subjects to fail an exam just before being asked to help), subjects exposed to mirrors became less likely to lend a hand. These studies, in sum, show the central importance of the salience of standards in the link between self-focus and helping.

### GROUP SIZE EFFECTS

How can a mugging in a big city go on apparently unnoticed and usually undeterred in the presence of tens and sometimes hundreds of people? Concerned with the all-too-frequent lack of helping in incidents where helping would seem to be a natural activity, Latané and Darley (1968) embarked on a series of now-classic studies designed to find out why. They staged a variety of "emergencies"—apparent fires, possible injuries, and even robberies—both in the lab and in natural settings, and found that the presence of



all those potential helpers was itself the root of the problem. The likelihood that any individual would help regularly *decreased* with increases in the number of potential helpers present in the situation.

Latané and Darley argued that increasing the number of bystanders present in an emergency probably did not make each bystander less likely to notice that an emergency had occurred. Rather, everyone noticed, but because others were present who shared responsibility for offering aid, each person took a little less responsibility for self. This *diffusion of responsibility* effect has been interpreted in terms of self-focused attention by Wegner and Schaefer (1978). They point out that the level of self-focused attention experienced by each potential helper in such a setting should decrease with increasing numbers of bystanders. In a typical helping situation, it is the victim who is the focus of attention; bystanders make up an "audience" and spend most of their time staring at the victim. One result of this is that the victim becomes painfully self-aware; the other result, however, is that bystanders in large groups fail to focus on themselves and so fail to offer assistance.

Wegner and Schaefer also suggest that the diffusion of responsibility has a complement—the *concentration of responsibility*. According to this idea, increasing the number of *victims* should increase the likelihood of helping. To illustrate why this should occur, consider what the focus of attention would be if you and several other people saw a man fall to his knees and call out for help. The man, right? Now, consider the focus if you and those same people were standing in the middle as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir fell to its knees and called out. You and your cohorts would be on the spot, the focus of your own attention because the victims were now *your* audience. It is likely that you would try to gather your wits and offer aid immediately.

In an experiment designed to test the self-focus explanation of diffusion and concentration effects, Wegner and Schaefer arranged for subjects to enter a situation in which prosocial standards would be salient. The subject was fitted with an eyepatch and sunglasses, was asked to do an editing task for money, and then was con-

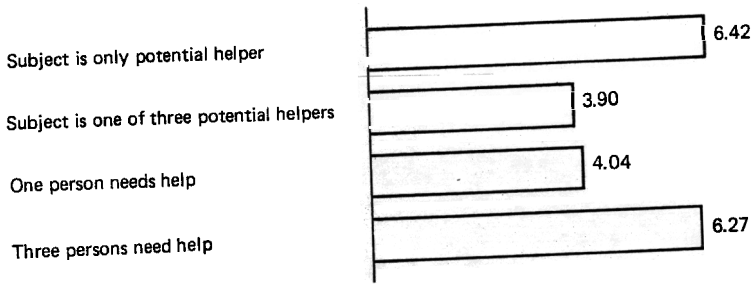


FIGURE 6.1. Average number of "work credits" a subject donated to others. (Based on data from Wegner and Schaefer, 1978)

fronted with the information that a fellow subject had failed to complete the task under an even more severe handicap (tiny print to edit) and would not be paid. Some subjects were led to believe that they were the only person who could solve this problem, while others were under the impression that they were one of three potential helpers. Additionally, the plight of either one victim or of three victims was presented to each potential helper. As can be seen in Figure 6.1, each subject was more likely to donate part of his or her own production in the editing task to others under conditions that tended to increase self-focus. Aiding was enhanced with more victims and with fewer potential helpers, so both the concentration and diffusion effects were observed.

In general, group size has striking effects on the self-awareness of individuals in the group, and consequently has similar effects for prosocial action. Zimbardo (1969) and others have noted the *deindividuation* that is often part of membership in large, unstructured groups, arguing that lacking a sense of self, individuals in such groups may not only fail in prosocial action but also succeed in *anti*social action. The finding of Diener and his colleagues (1976), that Halloween trick-or-treaters in large groups are more likely to steal extra candy than those in small groups or alone, is just a mild indication of the thoughtlessness, violence, and anarchy that can result from losing one's self-awareness in a crowd. It is ironic, perhaps, that the only thing that saves us from the extremes of selfishness is an awareness of ourselves.



## THE COMMON THEME

No, it's not ironic, it's the theme of this chapter. If there is a unifying thread running through the different research traditions and theories, it is that the person's capacity for self-reflection is uniquely responsible for prosocial action. In the relationship between self-awareness and standards of self-evaluation, this link is quite clear; self-focus makes it more likely that a person will evaluate the self on the salient standards. As a way of tying the chapter together, it is interesting to consider the nature of empathy and of experience (self-perception and social feedback) in terms of self-awareness as well. Although research has not yet been conducted to examine these connections explicitly, there are some findings that hint at what could be discovered.

With regard to empathy, for instance, some recent studies suggest that self-awareness could be involved in the way empathic emotions bring about prosocial acts. Recall that empathic emotional *arousal*—strong emotion similar to that of the person in need—underlies the operation of empathy in the production of prosocial behavior. Research carried out by Wegner and Giuliano (1979) indicates that arousal can cause self-awareness. Subjects in this study who were asked to run in place for a few minutes (as a means of increasing arousal) were more likely than relaxed subjects to refer to themselves (using "I" and "me") when they were asked to supply pronouns to complete sentences. It could be, then, that the arousal that comes from seeing another person in distress acts to produce self-awareness, and so brings on self-evaluation and prosocial action. Although a good start has been made (see, e.g., Hormuth, 1978), more research is needed to determine the extent of the connection between emotional arousal and self-awareness before this conjecture can be accepted.

The influence of self-awareness on the processes by which people experience themselves—self-perception and social feedback—will no doubt also be a topic for future study. However, there is already some consensus among findings to suggest that an important relationship exists. Very simply, it seems that self-awareness is necessary for these processes to take place (see Chapters 2 and 3); for a person to make inferences about the self, it is essential that

attention be focused on the self. As an illustration of this, consider a person who does a favor for another—the bag boy at a grocery who stops to help an elderly man pick up some change that has dropped. If the bag boy rushes on to other tasks, taking this incident quickly in stride, he will probably never engage in self-perception. Only if something happens to make him reflect on himself will the correspondent self-inference be made. Someone could ask him a reflective question ("Why did you do that?"); someone could give him a self-label ("I wish my son was as helpful as you"); he could simply come in contact with a self-focusing stimulus (like the group of checkout clerks who gather to watch him help). In these or other ways, the behaviors a person enacts are registered in the store of self-information to become food for thought about the self. An awareness of the self, in sum, is implicated in every phase of prosocial action.

## SUMMARY

According to the ideas presented in this chapter, the self is not all that selfish. In the first section, the notion that we may extend ourselves to include others through processes of emotional empathy was considered. It was pointed out that while feeling emotions similar to those of a distressed person is a capacity people develop very early in infancy, the ability to understand the emotion-producing situations of others by taking their perspectives develops with age and experience; this mature form of empathy can then lead to prosocial action. In the second section, self-perception and social feedback processes were examined for their contribution to the development of prosocial action. It was shown that people induced to perform prosocial acts for nonobvious reasons will often repeat such behavior in the future because they have perceived themselves as people who behave in prosocial ways. A parallel process of self-labeling and later positive social behavior can occur when people are given social feedback indicating that they possess prosocial qualities. The third section treated the various standards of self-evaluation that people develop as a means



of understanding whether they are good or bad. Self-standards regarding pain, pleasure, approval, normative comparison, and justice were introduced, and the importance of the salience of standards for prosocial action was discussed. The fourth section, both summing up and extending the others, showed that self-focused attention is linked in many ways to prosocial action. Self-awareness increases the likelihood that people will behave in accord with salient standards; self-awareness underlies the diffusion and concentration of responsibility observed in helping and emergency settings; and self-awareness may also be involved in the operation of emotional empathy, self-perception, and social feedback.