



J.P. Rushton's contributions to the study of altruism

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes Rushton's work on altruism over the past 40 years. During his academic career, he changed his theoretical approach from social learning theory to trait theory to sociobiology. My essay includes five sections. The first gives an overview of Rushton's work on altruism. The second reviews his early work based on social learning theory. His laboratory and naturalistic experiments led him to conclude that altruism could be increased by exposure to models exemplifying the behavior, and that, once engaged in, the behavior could be durable over months and generalizable across situations. The third section discusses his work on the genetic foundation of altruism with social biology including his twin studies of prosocial behaviors using different age groups of both western and Asian samples. He concluded that about 50% of the variance in prosocial behaviors is heritable. The fourth section will describe altruism as part of the general factor of personality, the apex of the personality hierarchy. The last section summarizes my review of Rushton's work on altruism.

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1. Introduction

I am honored to be a contributor to this Special Issue for J.P. Rushton. I have been fortunate to work with Rushton on papers about genetic influences on prosocial behaviors in South Korean children and other research on personality. His contributions to knowledge have become well-known over the past four decades. Like other eminent psychologists, Rushton has boldly challenged conventional views. As a result, he had to endure strong opposition from critics in the field of psychology and public opinion. However, his work has also been acknowledged with much admiration and made him one of the most provocative and controversial figures in psychology.

Altruism has been a central focus for Rushton's research during his entire career. It began with his doctoral dissertation at the University of London (Rushton, 1973). During the 1970s and 1980s, many psychologists focused on negative traits such as aggression and delinquency. However, Rushton maintained the importance of also studying positive aspects of human nature. With conviction that human beings are helpful, cooperative, empathic, loving, kind and considerate, he asserted that altruism is a universal value in all human societies (Rushton, 1982). He defined altruism as "social behavior carried out to achieve positive outcomes for another rather than for self (Rushton, 1980, p. 8)". He proposed egoism to be the opposite of altruism. In defining altruism, Rushton emphasized the behavioral component, although he did not preclude motivations activating the behavior. He considered these

motivations mainly as "empathy" and "moral judgment" (Rushton, 1980, 1982).

Rushton's work on altruism has spanned a considerable range of methodologies. Early in his career (1970–1980), he performed laboratory and naturalistic field experiments to study altruism from the social learning perspective. He examined data on altruism to join the "consistency vs. specificity" debate over whether behavior was consistent enough across situations to warrant being called a trait (Mischel, 1968). By applying the *principle of aggregation* to measure altruistic and other behaviors, Rushton concluded that there was enough consistency (e.g., .50 to .60 vs. .20 to .30) to warrant a "trait" of altruism on which people differed more or less consistently.

Rushton later became interested in the theory of evolution and in social biology and how these applied to altruism. In this paper I review Rushton's early work on altruism from a social learning theory perspective, discuss his more recent work on the genetic foundation of altruism using the empirical evidence he provided, and then briefly describe his work on altruism in the context of the general factor of personality (GFP). I will use the terms 'prosocial behaviors' and 'altruism' interchangeably throughout this paper.

2. Early work: a social learning perspective

Rushton (1976, 1980) contended that the extent to which a person engages in altruistic behavior and the motivations underlying the behavior are the results of the person's social learning experiences. In other words, a person is honest, generous, helpful, and kind to the degree to which he has learned to be. Rushton emphasized that families, educational systems, and the mass media were

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the major agencies of socialization in society. Rushton (1982) also raised the problem of “under-socialization” in society. He argued that the family was becoming ineffectual due to the break-up of the traditional extended family, and that TV was often socializing children in an antisocial direction. Rushton provided constructive solutions to the problem of under-socialization as well. Rushton (1980, 1982) suggested that people should increase the frequency of parent–child interactions, introduce stronger regulatory guidelines to stop the pervasiveness of antisocial socialization on TV, and develop disciplined programs of prosocial education in schools.

During the 1970s, Rushton conducted many laboratory studies and naturalistic field experiments to demonstrate the effects of observational learning, reinforcement learning, and learning from direct verbal procedures such as instructions and preaching. For example, Emler and Rushton (1974) found that 7- to 13-year-old children gave more valuable tokens to a charity after listening to stories concerned with distributive justice. The number of tokens the children gave was significantly related to their level of moral judgment measured as responses to the stories. In a related experiment, Rushton (1975) demonstrated that children exposed to a generous model, who donated tokens to the charity, themselves donated significantly more prized tokens (exchangeable for gifts) than children exposed to a selfish model. These modeling effects lasted several weeks. Models who preached selfishness produced less giving than models who preached generosity or neutral messages. Other studies showed that positive reinforcement following model induced altruistic behavior led to increased generosity in children, while punishment of altruism (e.g., using ridicule) led to its decrement (Grusec, Kuczynski, Rushton, & Simutis, 1978). Rushton and Campbell (1977) examined the modeling of prosocial behavior in adults on blood donating. In that field experiment, Rushton showed that observing a model not only affected an immediate test of volunteering to donate blood but also affected whether blood was actually donated in a different naturalistic setting six weeks later.

From a review of experimental studies conducted by himself and others, Rushton (1976, 1980) drew three main conclusions about modeling effects. First, exposing people to altruistic models affected the amount and direction of subsequent behaviors. Secondly, these model-induced behaviors lasted over several weeks. Finally, modeling effects were found across different age groups and situations.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a major debate took place in the area of personality assessment over the “consistency vs. specificity” of behavior. Mischel (1968) had fervently denied the existence of personality traits, arguing that the coefficient of behavior across different instances and situations was only about $\pm .30$. Many personality psychologists had a pessimistic view of finding a stable trait of altruism higher than that. However, Rushton and colleagues (e.g., Rushton, 1980, 1981; Rushton, Brainerd, & Pressley, 1983; Rushton, Jackson, & Paunonen, 1981) carefully reviewed the literature on personality, developmental and social psychology, and concluded that consistent patterns of individual differences were to be found when composite measures of the traits were used. Significant correlations were found among the measures of altruism using self-reports, peer-ratings, and behavioral intentions such as whether people had completed an organ-donor card attached to their driver license. These observations led Rushton to conclude that a broad-based ‘altruistic personality’ did exist and that altruism could be validly and reliably measured by self-report as well as by objective methods. He and his students constructed a 20-item Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRA) with which they (and others) conducted research, including a twin and testosterone study (to be described; Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981).

3. The genetic foundation of altruism

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Rushton underwent a paradigm shift from social learning to sociobiology. He began to think that altruistic behaviors like helping, protecting, and nurturing could occur in the absence of previous learning. He sought the origin of altruism in evolution, suggesting that altruism is an inborn-part of many species-typical repertoires. Sociobiology explains altruistic behaviors by the principle of ‘inclusive fitness’ and ‘kin selection’ (Hamilton, 1964). If the net result of an altruistic act helped more of the altruist’s genes to survive (e.g., in kin) and was transmitted to future generations, then the altruistic act is adaptive even if it results in the death of the altruist. Moreover, to replicate their own genes more effectively, organisms act to benefit relatives depending on how closely related they are. Paradoxically, then, altruism has a ‘selfish’ purpose.

Altruism is found in many nonhuman animals as well as in humans. In nonhuman animals, altruism includes parental care, warning calls, cooperative defense, rescue behavior, food sharing, and self-sacrifice. Rushton (1980) gave the good example of altruism in a honeybee: The poisonous sting of the bee is an adaptation against hive robbers. The recurved barbs facing backward from the sharp tip cause the whole sting to be wrenched out of the bee’s body, along with some of the bee’s vital internal organs. These barbs have been described as instruments of altruistic self-sacrifice. Although the individual bee dies, the bee’s genes survive.

Parenting has evolved through differential reproductive success. In a population of social animals, those that protect their offspring will successfully raise more progeny than those who do not. Any genes associated with parenting behavior will, thereby, out-produce the selfish alternatives. Rushton (1991) hypothesized that empathy in humans is a disposition that might have evolved from parental care. Numerous twin studies have documented that genes influence individual differences in empathy (Bouchard & McGue, 2003; Hur & Rushton, 2007; Rushton, Fulker, Neale, Nias, & Eysenck, 1986).

Rushton (1989) proposed genetic similarity theory to extend the idea of kin selection to human beings who are also altruistic to non-kin such as to spouses and friends. In a twin study Rushton and Bons (2005) found the amount of genetic similarity between spouses and friends on personality and attitude questions (measured by the magnitude of the correlation between them on each item). The overall correlations were .53 for monozygotic (MZ) twin pairs, .32 for dizygotic (DZ) twin pairs, .32 for spouse pairs, and .20 for pairs of friends. As mentioned, partner similarity was more pronounced on the more heritable items. Rushton and Bons (2005) concluded that people are *genetically inclined* to choose as social partners those who resemble themselves. However, not all studies have found the evidence of positive assortative mating strong (Lykken and Tellegen (1993). A review of the literature shows an average correlation of social assortment of about .20 (Rushton, 2009). Although low, the magnitude of the correlations between spouses and friends on each item predict the level of partner satisfaction and liking on those more heritable.

Rushton (2009) also explained ethnic nepotism from the point of view of genetic similarity. He proposed that people help members of their own race or ethnic group more than members of other races or foreigners because they share more genes in common. Individuals within an ethnic group are genetically more similar to each other than they are to individuals from different ethnic groups.

Rushton and colleagues conducted several twin studies and found that altruism is heritable. In one early study, Rushton et al. (1986) found that 50% of the variance in altruism, nurturance,

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